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Public Sector Innovation

Case Study on Tools for modernising the Romanian Public Administration

Framework Service Contract 151364-2009 A08-BE - Specific Contract "Lessons from ten years of innovation policies and of public sector innovations in Europe"



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Tools for modernising the Romanian Public Administration

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Introduction

Today, the public sector has to innovate itself if it wants to raise its efficiency, to provide solutions for societal challenges and to meet the increasing demands from businesses and citizens in a rapidly changing and technologically evolving environment.

With the objective to deepen knowledge and understanding of public sector innovations, 6 case studies will present a specific case in the most inspirational manner evidenced in Europe or in third countries keeping in mind its replicability to other EU Member States.

The public sector includes all organisations in the field of the public administration, irrespective of their funding source and the legal form of the supplier. The type of innovation can be a product, a process, an organisational innovation, or an innovation on communication.

For the purposed of the case studies, public sector innovation is defined as the following:

- *Product innovation*: the introduction of a good or service that is new or significantly improved with respect to its characteristics or intended uses. This includes significant improvements in technical specifications, components and materials, incorporated software, user friendliness or other functional characteristics.
- *Process innovation*: the implementation of a new or significantly improved production or delivery method. This includes significant changes in techniques, equipment and/or software.
- *Organisational innovation*: the implementation of a new organisational method in the public service's practices, workplace organisation or external relations.

This definition encompasses new innovations as well as the adoption or diffusion of innovations (innovations developed elsewhere). The innovation can directly or indirectly affect the public administration itself, other parts of the sector or a dedicated public sector (such as health, transport, security), and/or the private sector in general or a dedicated group within the private sector (e.g., SMEs, the self-employed, a NACE sector) and/or end users such as citizens.

1. Strategic management as a solution for change

Strategic management for public administrations has been defined as “linking strategic planning to implementation by adding ongoing attention to budgeting, to performance measurement, management and evaluation, and to feedback relationships” (Bryson, 2003). Strategic performance management can be regarded as a framework for improving the accountability and effectiveness, as the use of performance data can provide the decision-makers as well as the citizens better evidence for finding solutions to tackle socio-economic problems (see Peters, 2007, p. 16). The engagement in such processes has taken different forms especially in advanced economies such as the EU15, the United States, Australia or New Zealand.¹ They are part of a wave of New Public Management measures that were introduced throughout the ‘90s and 2000s, with the aims of instilling the principles of *economy*, *efficiency* and *effectiveness* in the public sector. While this trend was thought to have stalled in the mid-2000s, as countries were taking a further leap towards “digital era governance” (Dunleavy et al., 2006), New Public Management measures actually keep being introduced in Europe and elsewhere in different shapes, as governments are under the pressure to deliver (see Pollitt, Dan, 2011).

In Romania, the Central Unit for Public Administration Reform (CUPAR), founded in 2002, has been the main promoter of this type of new thinking, with the aim of contributing to the transformation of the central and local public administration into an “efficient, European” one. One of CUPAR’s recent initiatives dealt with providing technical assistance to local institutions making the crossover to strategic management. The project provided an integrated framework for assessing performance in the public sector and instruments for improving the management practices in the local administration. The initiative aimed to set six pilot institutions on a thorough transformation path and provided a stepping-stone for further local organisations to follow. However, as CUPAR and the pilot institutions are still in the process of collecting evidence of the initiative’s results, it is too early to provide a clear assessment of the initiative’s effects and further improvements of CUPAR’s monitoring and evaluation system are needed.

2. The institutional context

The idea of using strategic management instruments was introduced in the Romanian public administration through CUPAR, following the acknowledgement of the lack of strategic steering in Romanian institutions. This happened in incremental steps since 2002. Back then, the unit benefited from Twinning programmes with institutions in France and Italy that provided expertise in introducing measures for modernising the public administration. In 2004, the Romanian Government launched the National Strategy for Reforming the Public Administration 2004-2007. CUPAR was at the core of designing the strategy and provided technical advice in the implementation process. The strategy introduced some of the first elements of strategic management in Romania, such as the Multi-annual Modernisation Programmes (MMP). The latter implied the identification of strategic reform priorities and planning their implementation on a 3-year timeframe at the level of local and central public institutions. A National Modernisers Network was also created then, in order to support the coordination of the implementation and monitoring of Modernisation Programmes. In addition, the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) started to be implemented in Romania since 2005. CUPAR has also been promoting the use of this

¹ See The Bertelsmann Foundation, 2007: *Strategic Management for the State. International Approaches for Comparison*.

instrument and has been coordinating the National Modernisers Network and the CAF process since then.

From the onset, Multi-annual Modernisation Programmes were mandatory. However, they were performed in a rather formal manner by the local organisations, which translated itself into the low quality of the MMPs. This is one of the reasons why, since 2008, the MMPs have no longer been required by the new public administration reform strategy from the local institutions, but are performed on a voluntary basis. The political priorities shifted from introducing strategic management as a top-down measure to encouraging a more bottom-up approach. CUPAR noted that this way, the quality of the performed MMPs increased, as this ensured a more realistic commitment from the local administrations that choose to participate. In general, having ownership of the reform initiatives is a critical condition for the success. However, this also meant that less local authorities engaged in this process, as pointed by CUPAR representatives.² It can be said that the 2008 new approach to reform maintained the framework for reform-minded public authorities to act, but did not provide strong incentives for the majority of local and central actors to implement performance management.

On this background, CUPAR's efforts were streamlined towards providing guidance to the local public administration on how to integrate the modern management instruments into their management system and use them more efficiently. Over time, it was noted that demands for assistance from the local authorities have been increasing. Given the reduced resources of CUPAR, the unit needed to find a new way to steer the modernisation process and reduce costs at the same time. The cost reduction aspect was especially important in the context of the economic crisis, as central and local administrations had fewer resources at their disposal. Thus, CUPAR initiated the project "*Modern mechanisms for an efficient administration*" in 2009, in order to be able to pursue its modernisation activities in a more comprehensive way.

3. Aspects of innovation

The initiative "*Modern mechanisms for an efficient administration*" was developed to bring more coherence to the modernisation tools available in the Romanian public administration by designing a step-wise approach to three main pillars of modernisation: 1) implementing CAF and Multi-annual Modernisation Plans (MMP), 2) adopting more advanced performance management tools such as the Balanced Scorecard (BSC) to bring more efficiency to the local administration, and 3) promoting a methodology for continuous improvement in the public sector– Bench-learning. In order to implement the project, the Unit also attracted European funds from the European Social Fund, amounting to over €0.66 million (around RON 3 million).

The creation of **a coherent performance management system** at the level of the central and local authorities was a new approach in the context of the Romanian public administration. It was based on the continuous improvement cycle: "Plan-Do-Check-Act," which is an established strategic management mechanism. This cycle has been translated into a package of guidelines provided to local authorities, consisting of a set of instruments that needed to be closely linked to each other as follows:

1. Diagnosing the performance of the institution through the Common Assessment Framework;

² At the moment, there are no publicly available data on the extent at which the local authorities are engaged in implementing performance management instruments. The lack of performance monitoring is a systemic problem at the local level that is highlighted as a key area of improvement in the Ministry of Internal Affairs' analysis that lays the ground for post-2013 reform priorities (see CUPAR, 2012, p. 6).

2. The CAF analysis taken as the basis for the Multi-annual Modernisation Programme, which sets the medium and long-term improvement goals of the organisation;
3. Operationalisation of the MMP into the Balanced Scorecard, which is then closely monitored and constantly updated;
4. Sharing experience and learning from other similar institutions through the Bench-learning instrument.

The performance management package was piloted in six institutions selected within a national competition based on more than 100 received applications. The six public organisations selected were two city halls, two county administrations and two county councils from different regions of Romania. See Figure 1 for a snapshot of the experience and results obtained within one pilot city hall in Northeast Romania.

One innovative element of the project was the introduction of the **CAF Online** instrument, which allows local authorities to start the process of self-evaluation at their own initiative online. This has been further improved by introducing the features of an automatic processing of the evaluation questionnaires and the production of a more standardised implementation report that better highlights both deficiencies and good results in several areas of the local organisations' activities. Importantly, the CAF Online application has enabled a more efficient assessment process, saved time for both CUPAR and the local authorities, as well as **reduced CUPAR's costs** of providing technical assistance. This answered to CUPAR's prior lack of resources to continue supporting the implementation of CAF at the local level had it not been for the change of the process. Now, as the demand for CAF is growing, CUPAR can support several local authorities simultaneously.

One further novel aspect was the development of an **integrated information system** that allows better communication between CUPAR and its stakeholders, supporting the information-sharing on issues such as CUPAR's and the local authorities' activities, project initiatives and performance. The system is composed of CUPAR's website³, an Intranet section for internal administration of CUPAR's activities, and an Extranet facility, where CUPAR manages the communication with the National Modernisers' Network. The Extranet allows the sharing of information from the central administration to the local level on news and issues related to decentralisation, administrative simplification, regulating and monitoring the reform process and the modernisation of public administration.

Last, but not least, through this project, CUPAR also intended to introduce the spirit of competition among the central and local administrations, by organising annual award ceremonies where the most innovative and best performing local institutions present their solutions for improving local services in Romania. So far, 24 initiatives have been collected in a database that is available online⁴ together with contacts of the managers. The initiatives belong to different categories of management practices, such as information management, partnerships, institutional management, or involving the citizens in decision-making.

³ See <http://modernizare.mai.gov.ro>

⁴ See http://modernizare.mai.gov.ro/BPDB/faces/authenticated/BPDB/bdbp.jspx?_adf.ctrl-state=13ju8e5ywn_4&_afzLoop=434352175412961 (Romanian only).

Figure 1 Embedding strategic management in the City Hall of Botoşani

Botoşani is a city of 115,070 people in Northeast Romania, in a county bordering Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova. The City Hall was selected by CUPAR to be a pilot institution implementing the strategic management package and was very pro-active in obtaining results. The leadership of the institution was engaged in the process from the beginning, including the mayor and directors, while the Public Administrator coordinated and put the new management system in practice.⁵

Prior to starting the project, the City Hall employees had little experience with strategic management, with monitoring and evaluating their activities and defining action plans for the different departments. There was also little information on the degree of satisfaction of the local stakeholders (citizens, NGOs or companies). Since 2009, the City Hall was engaged in the project and implemented the Common Assessment Framework and produced a thorough diagnosis of the organisation. Based on the results, the MMP and action plans for improving the weak points were drafted. They were integrated into the internal control management system with the help of the Balanced Scorecard approach, which is currently under implementation. The City Hall team has defined over 170 procedures and identified risks attached to each activity, which lead to a better streamlining of the internal processes and a more conscious engagement of all the employees in the activities of the departments. As a consequence, the civil servants were able to be more efficient in completing their tasks against concrete deadlines. Moreover, the knowledge transfer to new employees is facilitated, as activities can be followed up in the system more easily.

The management mechanisms were developed in close link to the local development strategy of the city for the period of 2008-2015. The BSC supported the better connection between strategic initiatives of the City Hall and the available budget resources, as well as setting milestones and responsibilities.

Though it is early to assess, one important evolution is the fact that the City Hall is now more aware of the stakeholders' needs and understands their positions better. As such, the use of the management mechanisms is starting to impact the citizens, as the new management mechanisms enabled the City Hall to be more responsive to their needs. For instance, Botoşani has been experiencing difficulties with the street lighting for several years. The response time for solving requests for fixing the street lighting was reduced to one or two days for such issues after the participation in the project. In addition, the general satisfaction level of the local stakeholders is evaluated at the end of the year, and their feedback is taken into account with the aim of constantly improving the local public services. The city hall of Botoşani has also started a re-organisation process of the Direction for Public Services, Sports and Leisure Facilities, also based on the results of the newly implemented internal management and control system.⁶ The measure was taken to improve the efficiency of dealing with specific public services.

The success of the project depended on the good project management of the CUPAR team, who was appraised as very well organised and motivated, according to the feedback received from the project stakeholders. The CUPAR team includes civil servants, mainly members of an EU-funded Young Professionals Scheme Project⁷ that was available during the pre-accession stage. The team's openness and knowledge of new practices, and their experience with accessing European funds mattered in the implementation of the project.

At the level of the local institutions, success factors for implementing the strategic management instruments were considered the practical experience in public administration, training in management and possibly also business administration. The experience with writing European projects and applying for pre-accession funds (PHARE) was considered a concrete asset that ensured that the representative of the local administration understood the need for working with indicators and setting objectives.

⁵ The function of a Public Administrator has been created also at the initiative of CUPAR in Romania through the Law nr. 286/2006. This created the framework for professional economic management and efficient backstopping and controlling of internal procedures and activities at the level of local public institutions.

⁶ See the Decision regarding the organigramme and the Regulation for Organisation and Functioning of the Direction for Public Services, Sports and Leisure Facilities, 16.10.2012. <http://www.primariabt.ro/index.php?load=dispozitii> (in Romanian).

⁷ The Young Professional Scheme was a training programme funded through pre-accession funds (PHARE) that prepared young leaders to become public managers. The beneficiaries also performed traineeships public administrations in EU15 Member States and were afterwards immersed in the Romanian public administration to further pursue the modernisation process.

4. Obstacles and solutions

As the initiative deals with the diffusion of performance management instruments to the local level, it is important to learn from the obstacles encountered.

The representatives of CUPAR noted specific factors that affected the achievement of the project's goals. On the one hand, the political environment at the central and local level mattered for implementing the project in a timely manner. The engagement of the local organisations differed according to the priorities set by the incumbent organisation leader and also depended on local political changes. One difficulty in this process is thus the rapid change in the leadership at the local level, based on political grounds. The lack of continuity in management is therefore considered an impediment to stepping towards the next level of performance management at a larger scale. On the other hand, one of the most frequent obstacles was the fact that the priorities of the local level changed due to the revised budgets that the institutions had to work with during the economic crisis. The lack of resources shifted the attention of the local leaders from engaging in a long-term performance improvement process, to a short-term focus on stringent needs for maintaining the same level of public services to the local stakeholders. It was noted that this risk existed from the beginning of the measure, as well as during and after the implementation phase, and it is indeed one of the pitfalls of such management tools when implemented under severe resource constraints (see Peters, 2007, p. 23). There is thus **a need for finding better mechanisms for ensuring the sustainability of performance management instruments** in the local public administration.

The six pilot organisations that benefited from the complete project package including the software for administering the Balanced Scorecard were voluntarily engaging in the transition to a more results-oriented type of management. However, due to the short time-span of the project, some of the project stakeholders noted that not all of the participating institutions had enough time to go through the analysis stage of the CAF and the Multi-annual Modernisation Plan as thoroughly as needed before they engaged in setting objectives at an operational level with the Balanced Scorecard. Another reason is the organisations' lack of experience with total quality management and the Common Assessment Framework. It is also important to take into account the fact that such management instruments are generally hard to implement in a system that is close to the political environment. It was a challenge for the local institutions to find ways of prioritising their objectives and setting realistic targets that reconcile conflicting stakeholder needs. In this respect, with the help of the training sessions offered by experienced consultants, the local institutions had the opportunity to increase their capacity in how to be strategic in modernising their institutions.

Several interviewees mentioned the cultural dimension as an important aspect that needs to be taken into account when pursuing the ambitious goal of making the local administrations more performance-oriented. According to the feedback from the local administration, the adoption of the management instruments by the local administrations is a lengthy process that takes time to be embedded in the common practice of the institutions.

In a broader perspective, as shown, the process of introducing strategic and performance management tools in Romania has depended on contextual factors such as the politico-administrative culture and openness towards reform, the administrative capacity of the central and local institutions, but also the wider political system. One element that was not mentioned by the interviewees, but which the literature in the field finds significant in influencing the results of New Public Management reforms, is the level of corruption as an aspect of the culture in which such mechanisms are implemented. As recommended in a meta-analysis of the impacts of over 500 NPM initiatives implemented across EU Member States, it is better to tackle the corruption culture first, before NPM reforms can be fully implemented (see Pollitt, Dan, 2011, p. 8). However, other scholars note that integrating the information on performance and quality of public services into public

decision-making by means of such management tools can help to embed **a more constructive approach to accountability in the public sector** and thus support efforts for tackling corruption (see Peters, 2007, p. 23). It can provide the means for shifting to more pro-activity in the public sector, where identification of problems and their improvement comes first, as organizations, and not only individuals, are held accountable for their actions.

CUPAR's efforts, even in several other initiatives, have been met with resistance to change from the local level. In order to deal with this resistance, CUPAR has attempted to engage the local authorities as much as possible in designing by themselves the process of change, and has put high emphasis on providing clear explanations of the benefits of the new tools. Stakeholders also stated that there are more chances of success if the process is started by local political leaders who buy-in their staff to engage in the modernisation process. However, the leaders also need to make sure that their role remains at the policy and targets-setting level i.e. "to steer, but not to row" and allow the public officials to pursue the actual implementation (McCourt, 2007, p.41). In practice, this process has been sometimes pushed from the bottom-up by local public servants, who were the one who persuaded the leaders to engage.

Overall, change has thus happened incrementally at the local level. Peters (2007, p. 27) notes that understanding the benefits of the new management tools is a crucial factor for the public sector to accept the need for performance management, as these types of tools can actually improve the image of government towards citizens, as far as results are made more visible. Several stakeholders highlighted **the role of the Modernisers' Network** as a driver in promoting the innovative practices and sharing experiences of modernisation. This network's role could be further enhanced as a hub for collecting and promoting the clear benefits of transforming the public institutions and for contributing to pushing this innovation process further. It can also become more prominent in the efforts to further build critical mass for promoting innovation in the local administration.

5. Lessons learnt

Through the project "Modern mechanisms for an efficient administration", CUPAR made a leap forward towards promoting performance management in the Romanian public administration and towards a more fundamental re-shuffle to the way local authorities get things done. The initiative's broad results consist in:

- The development of new methods for implementing the Common Assessment Framework at the national level, such as the online technical assistance tool
- Improved methodology for the Multi-annual Modernisation Plans that can be adopted at the local level
- Piloting the Balanced Scorecard as an instrument for strategic management and results oriented steering at the level of the local public administration
- Introducing the Bench-learning instrument as a framework for adopting and promoting solutions that work for improving public services at the local level

The six pilot institutions put in practice the guidelines developed by CUPAR and realised six CAF diagnosis analyses, Multi-annual Management Plans, as well as elaborated the Balanced Scorecards. However, the implementation of these instruments is currently monitored by CUPAR in follow-up of the project, and further results and lessons learnt can only be drawn in several years. For this, CUPAR needs to become more engaged in collecting evidence of the impact of its initiatives, as the data on the short-term changes triggered by the pilot initiatives and further chain reactions to them was not available even one year after finalising the project.

It is also important to trace down the benefits for the local stakeholders after the introduction of the management tools, which could be obtained through engaging in a more thorough evaluation in the future. It is crucial to **maintain the commitment of the local administrations to implement these instruments**. Moreover, the progress of this process needs to be communicated better to the public, so that the citizens and businesses are informed of the results and are engaged in improving it.

In summary, there are several important messages that were captured in the discussions with the stakeholders:

- In the early stages of the process, many local actors acknowledged the difficulties in selecting the strategic initiatives and the most relevant performance indicators for their organisations. This is understandable, given the fact that public institutions operate in a political environment and need to cater to conflicting stakeholder demands. One lesson learned is the need for further initiatives to **incorporate a more comprehensive follow-up mechanism as part of the project**. In general, the implementation of the BSC needs constant updating and thorough guidance. Experts should ideally provide this guidance at least three to four times per year in the initial phase, to support the implementation process and refine the design of the management system.
- The **higher level of the organisation needs to be involved in the strategy-building process**. The experience of the City Hall of Botoşani shows that the active engagement of the representatives in higher-level positions (the Public Administrator in that case) are key to ensuring the buy-in of the entire body of civil servants and to obtaining results. One suggestion was that it is useful to clearly specify the level of commitment needed from high-level administrators or political leaders when selecting participants in initiatives that involve bringing considerable change to the status quo.
- There is a perceived trade-off between stringent short-term goals and long-term objectives. While the switch to performance measurement and strategic management requires an investment from the local administrations, it is useful to **highlight the quick as well as slow wins that can fundament the decision to engage in such a process**. Nevertheless, it is important to note that strategic management tools are most useful for achieving long-term goals of the public administration, and do not always bring short-term results. The Balanced Scorecard is not only focussing on efficiency, but on improving the effectiveness of the organisations, helping to structure the way the activities of the institution and how to measure your progress. This needs a change of mindset from the short-term solutions to the long-term vision.

All in all, the merit of CUPAR is that it provided a comprehensive framework for the local institutions to engage in an in-depth process of re-thinking their strategies, and of making their goals and objectives better attuned to the resources they have at hand and in a closer connection to meeting the local stakeholders' needs. Initiating pilot programmes rather than a large-scale national programme has been a good re-start for a more feasible path towards performance management. The benefits of starting small are confirmed in the literature (see Peters, 2007, p. 27). There needs to be a clear plan and commitment for extending these instruments in further central and local government entities, nevertheless, in order for system-wide improvements to take place (ibid).⁸ Efforts need to continue for building a **critical mass of “innovators” in the Romanian public sector**. The Modernisers' Network seems to be well placed for pursuing this goal.

⁸ In a functional review of the Romanian central government undertaken in 2010, the World Bank's recommendations for the central government go along the same lines, as more evidence-based policy making and performance orientation need to be embedded in the Government's activities (see World Bank, 2010, p. X).

The experiences of the local organisations documented in this case study can be set as examples for further Romanian public administrations wishing to improve their processes and become better performers. As things stand, the scaling-up of the performance tools depends on the local leadership and vision. As seen, this is a necessary factor for success, but not sufficient for a larger-scale impact. Even if current central initiatives and support for modernisation are encouraging for the local administration, an improved incentive scheme for becoming more performance-oriented is needed throughout the Romanian public administration, from the central to local level. CUPAR, together with further central and local actors need to continue to raise awareness of the benefits of such mechanisms, collect more evidence of their impact and ensure top-level political buy-in and corresponding funding mechanisms for a systemic change to happen.

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Project Materials of the project “Modern mechanisms for an efficient public administration.”

Stakeholder Interviews:

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