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INTRODUCTION

The present volume of *Cluj University Journal. Interdisciplinary: Social Sciences and Humanities* brings together twelve contributions spanning public administration, human resource management, urban and rural governance, economic history, fiscal theory, criminology, sociology of sport, and higher education management. Despite the apparent diversity of their subject matter, the articles assembled here are united by a common intellectual concern: the relationship between institutional design and human capacity as a determinant of organizational and societal performance in an era of accelerating transformation.

Several contributions engage directly with digital governance. One article examines how inadequate digital competencies among public sector employees constitute a structural impediment to administrative modernization. This argument finds its urban counterpart in a study on post-COVID smart city management, which evaluates the reconfiguration of digital public services and public health data architectures while attending critically to risks of surveillance consolidation and digital exclusion. A case study of the commune of Apahida's DocuBox initiative demonstrates that meaningful digital innovation in local public administration is achievable well beyond major urban centers.

A second cluster addresses human resource management and institutional effectiveness. A comparative Euro-Arab analysis examines talent retention strategies in ministries of youth and sports across six jurisdictions. Three interrelated articles diagnose structural dysfunctions in the Romanian Police — personnel deficits, premature retirement, institutional fragmentation, and the dismantling of the community-level *sectorist* model — and advance concrete legislative proposals for reorganization. A further contribution applies Lean Management principles to curricular redesign in European universities.

The remaining articles engage Romanian political economy and social life: an interrogation of organized crime as a structural factor in Cluj-Napoca's real estate market; an economic-historical account of Romania's forced transition to a Soviet-type economy between 1945 and 1948; a comparative analysis of the contributory capacity principle in Central and Eastern European tax systems; and a theoretical contribution to the sociology of sport surveying its principal epistemological frameworks.

Taken together, these contributions reflect the editorial commitment of *Cluj University Journal* to interdisciplinary inquiry grounded in rigorous theoretical frameworks and attentive to the institutional realities of contemporary Romanian and European society.

Editorial Board

**DIGITALIZATION OF PUBLIC SERVICES AND ADMINISTRATIVE RESILIENCE:
THE ROLE OF EMPLOYEES' DIGITAL COMPETENCIES IN INSTITUTIONAL
MODERNIZATION**

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ABSTRACT

The digitalization of public services has emerged as one of the defining imperatives of contemporary public administration reform, yet the academic and policy literature has devoted comparatively limited attention to the human capital dimension of this transformation: the digital competencies of public sector employees, whose knowledge, skills, and attitudes toward digital tools constitute a decisive determinant of whether institutional modernization produces durable improvements in service quality, administrative resilience, and organizational performance. This article examines the relationship between employees' digital competencies and institutional modernization in public administration, drawing on the European DigComp and DigCompOrg frameworks, on the human capital theory of public sector reform, and on comparative evidence from European e-government implementations. It argues that digitalization projects in public administration systematically underperform relative to their technical potential when they are conceived and implemented as technological projects rather than as organizational transformation projects — that is, when they focus on the deployment of digital systems without commensurate investment in the development of the human competencies required to use those systems effectively, to adapt them to evolving organizational needs, and to sustain their operation under conditions of institutional stress. The article analyses four dimensions of the digital competency challenge in public administration: the structural gap between required and existing digital competencies in public sector workforces; the institutional barriers to digital competency development — including organizational culture, incentive structures, and procurement practices — that persist even where training investment is adequate; the relationship between individual digital competency and organizational resilience; and the governance of digital competency development as a strategic priority in public administration reform. The conclusion advances a framework for competency-driven digitalization that places the development of employees' digital

capacities at the centre of institutional modernization strategy, rather than treating it as an afterthought to technology deployment.

KEYWORDS: *administrative resilience, DigComp, digital competencies, digital transformation, e-government, human capital, institutional modernization, public administration, public sector employees*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The digitalization of public services — the systematic replacement of paper-based, in-person, and telephone-mediated administrative processes with digital alternatives that enable citizens and businesses to interact with public institutions through electronic channels — has become a defining priority of public administration reform across the European Union and the broader OECD world. Driven by fiscal pressures to reduce the cost of service delivery, by citizen expectations shaped by the quality of digital services in the private sector, and by the explicit policy commitments of the EU's Digital Decade framework and national e-government strategies, public administrations at all levels of government — national, regional, and local — have invested substantially in digital platforms, electronic identity systems, workflow automation, and data analytics infrastructures over the past two decades (European Commission, 2022a; OECD, 2020b).

The results of these investments have been, at best, mixed. The European Commission's Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) and the UN e-Government Survey consistently document significant variation in the quality and accessibility of digital public services across member states, with a persistent gap between the digital service delivery capabilities of leading countries — Estonia, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands — and those of lagging ones, including several Central and Eastern European member states where substantial investments in digital infrastructure have not translated into commensurate improvements in service quality or citizen uptake (European Commission, 2022b; United Nations, 2022). A substantial body of implementation research has sought to explain these performance gaps by reference to technical failures, funding inadequacies, interoperability deficits, and governance fragmentation — all real and important factors. What has received comparatively less systematic attention, however, is the

human capital dimension of digital transformation failure: the degree to which the underperformance of digital public administration initiatives reflects not technical but organizational deficits — specifically, the inadequate digital competencies of the public sector employees who are expected to design, operate, and continuously improve digital service delivery systems (Lember et al., 2018; Mergel et al., 2019).

This article addresses this gap. It examines the role of employees' digital competencies in the digitalization of public services and in the development of administrative resilience — the capacity of public institutions to absorb technological change, to adapt to shifting service demands, and to sustain high-quality service delivery under conditions of organizational stress. The argument, developed across the subsequent sections, is that digitalization projects in public administration systematically underperform relative to their technical potential when they are conceived as technological rather than organizational transformation projects — when the deployment of digital systems is not accompanied by commensurate investment in the development of the human competencies required to use those systems effectively, to adapt them to evolving needs, and to embed them sustainably within the organizational culture and routines of public institutions. Conversely, public institutions that invest strategically in the development of their employees' digital competencies develop a form of organizational resilience — an adaptive capacity — that makes them more capable of navigating future technological change than those that treat human capital development as an afterthought to technology procurement.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical frameworks — human capital theory, the DigComp and DigCompOrg frameworks, and the organizational resilience literature — that ground the analysis. Section 3 analyses the structural gap between required and existing digital competencies in public sector workforces across Europe, with particular attention to the Central and Eastern European context. Section 4 examines the institutional barriers to digital competency development that persist even in organizations that nominally prioritize training investment. Section 5 analyses the relationship between individual digital competency and organizational resilience. Section 6 addresses the governance of digital competency development as a strategic priority in public administration reform. The concluding section synthesizes the article's findings and advances a framework for competency-driven digitalization.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS: HUMAN CAPITAL, DIGITAL COMPETENCY, AND ADMINISTRATIVE RESILIENCE

2.1 HUMAN CAPITAL THEORY AND PUBLIC SECTOR DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Human capital theory — the foundational economic framework for the analysis of the relationship between knowledge, skills, and organizational and economic performance — holds that investments in the knowledge and skills of workers generate returns in the form of increased productivity, adaptability, and innovation capacity that are analogous to, and in many contexts more durable than, the returns generated by investments in physical capital (Becker, 1964; Mincer, 1974). In the context of public administration, human capital theory predicts that the productivity gains associated with the introduction of digital technologies will be realized only insofar as the workforce has the skills required to use those technologies effectively — and that the complementarity between digital technology and human skill is a key determinant of the organizational performance improvements that digitalization is designed to achieve (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014; Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2019).

The application of human capital theory to public sector digital transformation generates two specific and empirically testable predictions. First, it predicts that the returns to digital technology investment in public administration will be lower in organizations with weak digital competency profiles than in those with stronger ones — controlling for other determinants of organizational performance — because the capacity to use digital tools effectively, to troubleshoot problems, and to adapt digital workflows to new situations is a complement to, not a substitute for, the digital infrastructure itself. Second, it predicts that investments in the digital competency development of public sector employees will generate returns not only in the form of improved individual task performance but also in the form of enhanced organizational adaptability — the capacity to respond to technological change, to develop digital solutions to new administrative challenges, and to sustain digital service quality under conditions of staff turnover, system upgrades, and shifting citizen demands (Lember et al., 2018; Gasco-Hernandez et al., 2020).

A significant qualification to the straightforward application of human capital theory to the public sector context concerns the structural differences between public and private sector labour markets that affect both the incentives for and the returns to human capital investment. The relative job security of public sector employment — which reduces the risk of the 'poaching' of trained

employees by competitors that makes private firms reluctant to invest in general human capital development — should in principle make public sector employers more willing to invest in transferable digital skill development. In practice, however, the fragmentation of public sector training budgets, the short-term orientation of political decision-making cycles, the rigidity of public sector pay scales that limit the ability to reward digital competency with higher remuneration, and the cultural resistance to change that characterises many established bureaucratic organizations combine to produce patterns of digital competency investment that are systematically below the socially optimal level (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017; Hartley et al., 2019).

2.2 THE DIGCOMP AND DIGCOMPORG FRAMEWORKS

The European Commission's Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (DigComp), first published in 2013 and subsequently revised in versions 2.0 (2016), 2.1 (2017), and 2.2 (2022), provides the most widely adopted conceptual framework for the identification, assessment, and development of digital competencies in European educational and professional contexts. DigComp 2.2 identifies five principal competency areas — information and data literacy; communication and collaboration; digital content creation; safety (including cybersecurity, privacy, and digital wellbeing); and problem solving — and describes twenty-one specific competencies within these areas, each specified at eight proficiency levels ranging from foundational to highly specialised (Vuorikari et al., 2022). The DigComp framework has been adopted as a reference standard by numerous national governments, including Romania's National Authority for Management and Regulation in Communications (ANCOM), for the assessment and certification of digital competencies in the workforce and in public administration.

The companion framework DigCompOrg — the European Framework for Digitally Competent Educational Organisations, adapted more broadly to organizational digital competency — extends the individual-level competency analysis of DigComp to the organizational level, identifying the leadership, workforce development, content and curriculum, assessment, teaching and learning practices, and infrastructure dimensions of an organizationally digitally competent institution (Kampylis et al., 2015). Applied to the public administration context, the DigCompOrg dimensions map onto the key organizational capabilities that determine whether digital transformation produces durable improvements in institutional performance: digital leadership that sets clear strategic direction and models digital practices; workforce development that ensures

continuous upskilling aligned with evolving technological demands; data governance that enables effective use of digital information; and infrastructure management that balances capability investment with security and interoperability requirements.

The DigComp and DigCompOrg frameworks are particularly valuable for the analysis of public sector digitalization because they provide a structured, empirically grounded vocabulary for describing the human capital requirements of digital transformation that is more specific and actionable than the generic references to 'digital skills' or 'e-literacy' that characterise much of the policy discourse on public sector modernization. Rather than treating digital competency as a binary attribute — employees either have it or lack it — the DigComp framework's eight-level proficiency scale enables a differentiated analysis of where specific competency gaps are located, which competencies are most critical for particular administrative roles and tasks, and what training and development interventions are most likely to produce the desired competency improvements within specific organizational contexts (Castaño-Muñoz et al., 2022; Ferrari, 2012).

2.3 ADMINISTRATIVE RESILIENCE AND DIGITAL CAPACITY

The concept of administrative resilience — the capacity of public organizations to maintain adequate levels of service delivery and organizational functioning under conditions of stress, disruption, and change — has been increasingly applied in the public administration literature to the specific challenge of managing technological transformation (Boin & Lodge, 2016; Comfort et al., 2010). Administrative resilience in the digital context comprises at least three distinct but interrelated capacities: absorptive capacity — the ability to continue operating effectively when digital systems fail, are disrupted, or are subject to cyberattack; adaptive capacity — the ability to modify digital workflows, processes, and service delivery mechanisms in response to changing demands, technological developments, or regulatory requirements; and transformative capacity — the ability to develop fundamentally new digital service models rather than simply digitizing existing analogue processes (Walker et al., 2004; Béland & Howlett, 2016).

Each of these resilience capacities depends critically on the digital competency profile of the organization's workforce. Absorptive capacity requires that employees understand the digital systems they work with well enough to identify failures, implement workarounds, and maintain core service delivery through degraded system operation — a requirement that is not met by users who interact with digital interfaces without understanding the underlying systems and processes.

Adaptive capacity requires employees with sufficient digital literacy to evaluate new tools and platforms, to participate meaningfully in the configuration and customization of digital systems, and to develop new digital workflows without extensive external technical support — a requirement that goes well beyond basic digital literacy to encompass what the DigComp framework calls 'problem solving' and 'digital content creation' competencies. Transformative capacity requires a critical mass of employees with advanced digital competencies — including data literacy, digital project management, and the capacity to identify digital solutions to administrative problems — within a leadership culture that recognizes and rewards digital innovation (Mergel et al., 2019; Gasco-Hernandez et al., 2020).

3. THE DIGITAL COMPETENCY GAP IN EUROPEAN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATIONS: EVIDENCE AND DIMENSIONS

The evidence base on digital competency levels in European public sector workforces — while less comprehensive than one might wish, given the significance of the policy stakes — consistently documents a substantial gap between the digital competencies that effective digital public administration requires and those that public sector employees currently possess. Eurostat's survey data on digital skills across the EU labour force shows that public administration employees, as a sector, exhibit lower rates of above-basic digital skills than employees in comparably educated private sector sectors — a finding that is partly explained by the older age profile of public sector workforces but that cannot be fully attributed to demographic factors and that reflects genuine structural deficits in digital competency development within public institutions (Eurostat, 2023). The European Commission's DESI data indicates that in 2022, only 54% of EU citizens possessed at least basic digital skills, with significant variation across member states and educational groups — and that public sector employees, who interact with the most complex digital administrative systems, represent a diverse spectrum of the same underlying population from which this national average is drawn (European Commission, 2022b).

The digital competency gap in public administration has several distinct dimensions that require separate analysis. The first and most immediately visible is the basic operational competency gap: the proportion of public sector employees who lack the digital skills required to perform their existing job functions effectively as those functions are progressively digitized. This gap is most acute among employees in front-line service delivery roles — particularly those who

have spent long careers in paper-based administrative environments and who are confronted late in their working lives with the requirement to master digital workflows that are poorly designed for intuitive use and inadequately supported by training and technical assistance. The Eurostat data indicates that in Central and Eastern European member states — including Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia — between 30% and 45% of the working-age population lacks basic digital skills, suggesting that the proportion of public sector employees with significant basic competency gaps is likely to be substantial, particularly in local government units where recruitment has historically been less competitive than in national administrations (Eurostat, 2023; United Nations, 2022).

The second dimension of the digital competency gap is the strategic competency gap: the shortage of employees in public institutions who possess the advanced digital competencies — data literacy, digital project management, cybersecurity, user experience design, and digital service innovation — required to drive digitalization initiatives rather than merely to implement them. Strategic digital competencies are in high demand across the economy and command significant salary premiums in the private sector; the relative rigidity of public sector pay scales creates structural difficulties in recruiting and retaining employees with these competencies, generating a persistent strategic competency deficit that forces public institutions to rely heavily on external technology vendors and consultants for the design and management of digital transformation initiatives — a dependence that reduces institutional learning, increases costs, and limits the long-term digital capability development of the organization (Mergel et al., 2019; Lember et al., 2018).

The third dimension is the competency update gap: the speed at which the digital competency requirements of public administration are evolving — driven by rapid technological change in the platforms, tools, and regulatory frameworks relevant to public digital services — relative to the speed at which public institutions are updating the competencies of their workforces. The introduction of artificial intelligence tools in public administration, the expansion of cybersecurity requirements under the NIS2 Directive (European Parliament & Council, 2022a), the data governance obligations of the GDPR and the Data Governance Act, and the accessibility requirements of the Web Accessibility Directive all create new digital competency demands that existing workforce development programmes are not designed to address at the speed required. Closing the competency update gap requires not merely a one-time investment in digital training but a sustained institutional commitment to continuous professional development in digital

competencies — a commitment that is expensive, organizationally demanding, and frequently deprioritized under fiscal constraint (Vuorikari et al., 2022; Castaño-Muñoz et al., 2022).

4. INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS TO DIGITAL COMPETENCY DEVELOPMENT IN PUBLIC ORGANIZATIONS

4.1 ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND CHANGE RESISTANCE

The organizational culture of established public bureaucracies constitutes one of the most significant and most underappreciated barriers to digital competency development and to the effective use of digital tools in public administration. Max Weber's classical account of bureaucracy as a governance form organized around the principles of hierarchical authority, written rules, specialization of function, and separation of official from personal sphere — principles that, in their Weberian ideal-typical form, are associated with reliability, impartiality, and the rule of law — generates an organizational ethos that is, in important respects, resistant to the iterative, experimental, and failure-tolerant organizational culture that effective digital innovation requires (Weber, 1978; Du Gay, 2000). Public organizations that have been designed and socialized around the reliable application of established procedures find it institutionally difficult to develop the agility, the risk tolerance, and the learning orientation that continuous digital competency development and digital service innovation demand (Dunleavy et al., 2006; Mergel et al., 2019).

Empirical research on digital transformation in public administration consistently identifies organizational culture — and specifically the attitudes of middle management — as a more significant determinant of digital initiative success or failure than the technical characteristics of the digital systems deployed (Hartley et al., 2019; Osborne, 2018). Middle managers in public institutions play a critical role as mediators between strategic digitalization mandates from senior leadership and the operational realities of front-line service delivery; their attitudes toward digital change, their willingness to invest time and political capital in supporting staff through the competency development demands of digitalization, and their capacity to manage the organizational disruption that digital workflow changes generate are all decisive determinants of whether digital tools are effectively adopted and used or formally implemented but practically circumvented. The development of digital leadership competencies among middle managers — a

specific and often neglected component of the broader digital competency development challenge — is therefore a particularly high-leverage intervention for public organizations seeking to accelerate effective digitalization (Gasco-Hernandez et al., 2020; Dunleavy et al., 2006).

4.2 INCENTIVE STRUCTURES AND HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

The human resource management systems of most public sector organizations are poorly aligned with the requirements of digital competency development. Public sector pay scales, graded primarily by seniority and formal qualification rather than by the market value of specific skills, create limited direct financial incentives for employees to invest in digital upskilling — particularly when the digital competencies most valued by the digital economy (data science, cybersecurity, user experience design, artificial intelligence) command large salary premiums in the private sector that public sector pay systems cannot match. Performance appraisal systems that focus primarily on process compliance rather than on service quality outcomes provide limited incentives for the kind of digital experimentation and innovation that generates competency development through learning-by-doing. And promotion criteria that reward tenure and administrative experience over digital capability development create career incentive structures that are orthogonal to, rather than aligned with, the human capital requirements of digital transformation (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017; Hartley et al., 2019).

Several European public administrations have sought to address these structural misalignments through targeted human resource management reforms. The Estonian civil service framework — widely regarded as one of the most digitally capable in the world — incorporates explicit digital competency criteria into recruitment, performance appraisal, and promotion processes, and provides dedicated career development pathways for employees with advanced digital skills (Vassil, 2016). The Danish government's shared service model for digital competency development — in which specialized digital competency training resources are developed centrally and made available to all public institutions, reducing the per-institution cost of training investment — represents a structural solution to the financing constraints that limit digital training investment in smaller public organizations. And the European Commission's initiative to develop a common competency framework for the digital transformation of public administrations — embedded in the Digital Decade programme — provides a policy instrument for the standardization of digital

competency expectations across member state public services (European Commission, 2022a; Lember et al., 2018).

4.3 PROCUREMENT PRACTICES AND VENDOR DEPENDENCY

The procurement practices through which public institutions acquire digital systems and platforms constitute a third, structurally important barrier to digital competency development that is often overlooked in analyses that focus primarily on training and culture. When public institutions procure complex, proprietary digital systems from external technology vendors — as is the norm in most European public administrations — they create forms of vendor dependency that can actively inhibit the development of internal digital competencies. The typical large-scale public sector IT procurement model, in which a vendor delivers a complete, integrated system that public employees operate according to vendor-defined procedures, generates operational familiarity with a specific vendor's interface while simultaneously limiting the employees' understanding of the underlying data architecture, workflow logic, and configuration options that would enable them to adapt the system to evolving needs without continued vendor engagement (Morozov & Bria, 2018; Dunleavy et al., 2006).

The post-COVID acceleration of public sector digitalization has, in many cases, reinforced rather than reduced vendor dependency: the urgency of emergency procurement has led to the rapid deployment of proprietary platforms without adequate attention to interoperability, data portability, or the institutional knowledge transfer that would enable public organizations to manage and develop their digital systems independently. The emerging policy framework of the European Union — including the Interoperable Europe Act (2024), the Data Governance Act (2022), and the Public Procurement Directive's evolving provisions on open standards — reflects a growing recognition at the supranational level that vendor dependency constitutes a structural barrier to the development of public sector digital capability, and that procurement practices must be reformed to prioritize solutions that build rather than erode institutional digital competence (European Parliament & Council, 2022b; Barns, 2020).

5. DIGITAL COMPETENCY AND ORGANIZATIONAL RESILIENCE: TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED ACCOUNT

The relationship between individual digital competency and organizational resilience in public administration is neither simple nor linear: the possession of digital skills by individual employees does not automatically translate into organizational digital capability, any more than the possession of managerial skills by individual managers automatically translates into organizational management effectiveness. Organizational resilience in the digital context is an emergent property of the interaction between individual competencies, organizational routines, leadership practices, technological infrastructure, and governance frameworks — a sociotechnical configuration that must be actively designed and cultivated rather than assumed to emerge spontaneously from the sum of individual capabilities (Boin & Lodge, 2016; Geels, 2004).

The empirical literature on digital transformation success factors in public administration identifies several organizational-level conditions under which individual digital competencies aggregate into organizational digital resilience. First, knowledge-sharing routines — formal and informal mechanisms through which employees with digital expertise share their knowledge with colleagues and with the organization more broadly — are critical for converting individual competency into organizational capability. Organizations in which digital knowledge is concentrated in a small number of specialist 'digital champions' without robust knowledge-sharing mechanisms are highly vulnerable to competency loss through staff turnover, creating a form of digital brittleness that undermines organizational resilience even where individual competency levels are high (Mergel et al., 2019; Gasco-Hernandez et al., 2020). Second, psychological safety — the organizational climate in which employees feel safe to experiment with digital tools, to report digital failures and difficulties without fear of sanction, and to ask for help with digital tasks they do not fully understand — is a significant determinant of the rate at which individual digital competencies are developed and shared within an organization (Edmondson, 1999; Hartley et al., 2019). Third, digital leadership — the commitment of senior and middle management to modelling digital practices, championing digital investment, and integrating digital competency development into the organization's strategic priorities — is consistently identified in the literature as the single most important organizational-level determinant of digital transformation effectiveness (Mergel et al., 2019; Dunleavy et al., 2006).

The COVID-19 pandemic provided an unplanned natural experiment in the relationship between digital competency and organizational resilience in public administration. Public institutions with well-developed digital competency profiles — where substantial proportions of the workforce had the skills to work effectively with remote collaboration tools, digital document management systems, and electronic service delivery platforms — transitioned to emergency remote operation with substantially less service disruption than those where digital competency was concentrated in specialist IT departments while front-line service delivery remained organized around paper-based, in-person processes (OECD, 2020b; Kummitha, 2020). The pandemic evidence suggests that the absorptive resilience dimension — the ability to maintain service delivery under conditions of physical disruption — is particularly strongly correlated with the breadth of digital competency distribution across the workforce: it is not sufficient for some employees to be digitally capable if the majority lack the competencies required to maintain core functions through digital channels when in-person alternatives are unavailable.

The post-COVID consolidation of administrative digital resilience requires public institutions to draw explicit lessons from the pandemic experience about where their digital competency profiles proved adequate and where they proved insufficient. This retrospective organizational learning — supported by systematic assessment using the DigComp and DigCompOrg frameworks — provides the empirical foundation for targeted competency development interventions that address the specific gaps revealed by the pandemic stress test, rather than investing broadly in digital training without strategic prioritization. It also requires public institutions to move beyond the 'digital champion' model of digital capability — in which one or a few highly skilled individuals carry the burden of the organization's digital functioning — toward a more distributed model in which baseline digital competencies are widely shared across the workforce, advanced digital competencies are developed among a substantial proportion of employees in each functional area, and a small number of strategic digital competency specialists provide organizational leadership and innovation capacity (Mergel et al., 2019; Vuorikari et al., 2022).

6. GOVERNING DIGITAL COMPETENCY DEVELOPMENT: STRATEGIC FRAMEWORKS AND POLICY INSTRUMENTS

The governance of digital competency development in public administration — the institutional arrangements, policy instruments, and resource allocation decisions through which public sector organizations plan, finance, implement, and evaluate digital workforce development — is a domain of public administration practice that has received growing but still insufficient scholarly and policy attention. The dominant model of public sector digital training, in most European member states, remains a fragmented, demand-driven, and institutionally isolated activity: individual public organizations commission training courses in response to specific operational requirements, typically as a component of the implementation of a specific digital system, without reference to a systematic competency development strategy aligned with the organization's broader digital transformation priorities. This reactive, system-specific approach to digital training produces competency development that is too narrow in scope, too closely tied to specific vendor platforms, and too poorly integrated with broader workforce development and organizational design to generate the sustained digital capability improvements that institutional modernization requires (Lember et al., 2018; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017).

A more adequate governance framework for digital competency development in public administration requires, at minimum, four components. First, a systematic competency assessment architecture — built on the DigComp and DigCompOrg frameworks — that enables public institutions to map the current digital competency profile of their workforce against the competency requirements of their digital service delivery obligations, identifies priority gaps, and provides a baseline against which the impact of training investments can be evaluated. Romania's National Strategy for Digital Skills Development 2021–2027, adopted in the context of PNRR implementation commitments, provides a national framework for digital competency assessment that is explicitly referenced to the DigComp framework and that creates the institutional basis for more systematic competency gap analysis in Romanian public administrations at all levels of government (Government of Romania, 2021; ANCOM, 2022).

Second, a strategic workforce development planning process that integrates digital competency development with broader human resource management, organizational design, and digital service strategy — treating digital training not as a supplementary activity to be funded from residual budget allocations but as a core investment in the organizational capability that

determines the return on technology investment. Third, a collaborative governance model that enables smaller public institutions — which individually lack the scale to develop and maintain comprehensive digital training programmes — to access shared resources: shared training platforms, inter-institutional communities of digital practice, and centrally developed competency resources that reduce the per-institution cost of digital workforce development while maintaining the flexibility to address institution-specific competency needs. The model of shared digital training infrastructure developed by the Nordic countries — and particularly by Denmark's Agency for Digital Government (Digitaliseringsstyrelsen) — represents a highly effective example of this collaborative governance approach that has produced measurable improvements in the digital competency profile of Danish public sector employees over the past decade (Digitaliseringsstyrelsen, 2023; European Commission, 2022a).

Fourth, an evaluation and accountability framework that enables public institutions, oversight bodies, and policy-makers to assess the impact of digital competency development investments on organizational performance, service quality, and administrative resilience — rather than measuring training success by input metrics (number of training hours, number of employees trained) that provide limited information about whether competency development investments are generating the intended outcomes. The development of robust outcome evaluation frameworks for public sector digital training is a significant research and policy gap that the DigComp framework's proficiency-level architecture is well positioned to support, by providing a structured assessment instrument that can be used both before and after training interventions to measure competency progression in specific areas (Castaño-Muñoz et al., 2022; Ferrari, 2012).

7. CONCLUSIONS

This article has examined the role of employees' digital competencies in the digitalization of public services and in the development of administrative resilience, arguing that the persistent underperformance of digital transformation initiatives in public administration is more fundamentally a human capital problem than a technology problem. The deployment of sophisticated digital systems in organizations whose employees lack the competencies to use them effectively, to adapt them to evolving needs, and to sustain their operation under conditions of institutional stress generates, at best, modest and fragile performance improvements; at worst, it

generates organizational disruption, citizen service degradation, and a justified public cynicism about the real versus proclaimed benefits of administrative modernization.

The analysis has identified a three-dimensional digital competency gap — operational, strategic, and update dimensions — in European public sector workforces that constitutes a structural barrier to effective digitalization; a set of institutional barriers — organizational culture, misaligned incentive structures, and vendor-dependency-generating procurement practices — that inhibit digital competency development even in organizations where training investment is nominally adequate; a relationship between individual digital competency and organizational resilience that is mediated by knowledge-sharing routines, psychological safety, and digital leadership; and a governance deficit in the planning, financing, and evaluation of digital workforce development that reflects the treatment of training as an afterthought to technology deployment rather than as a strategic investment in the human capital that determines the return on that deployment.

The framework for competency-driven digitalization that emerges from this analysis places the development of employees' digital capacities at the centre of institutional modernization strategy rather than at its periphery. Concretely, this means: conducting systematic digital competency assessments using the DigComp framework before designing or procuring digital systems, to ensure that the human capability requirements of proposed digital solutions are understood and planned for; integrating digital competency development planning into digital service strategy as an explicit investment category with its own objectives, metrics, and budget allocation; designing procurement processes that prioritize solutions compatible with the development of internal institutional digital capability over those that generate vendor dependency; and developing collaborative inter-institutional governance models for digital training that enable smaller public organizations to access the scale economies in workforce development that individual institutions cannot achieve independently.

The post-COVID moment provides an exceptional opportunity to implement these commitments. The pandemic demonstrated, more vividly than any prior event, the dependence of administrative resilience on the digital competencies of public sector employees and the strategic cost of competency deficits that restrict an organization's ability to maintain service delivery under conditions of physical disruption. The national recovery and resilience plans of EU member states, which have allocated substantial funding to digital transformation of public administration,

represent a historic investment opportunity that will generate durable returns only if it is accompanied by an equally serious and equally funded commitment to the development of the human competencies that effective digital public administration requires. The technology is available, the funding is committed, and the policy intent is clear; what remains to be operationalized — in government after government, institution after institution — is the strategic and cultural reorientation that recognizes employees' digital competencies not as a training afterthought but as the foundational human capital of the digital public administration of the twenty-first century.

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A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF TALENT RETENTION STRATEGIES IN MINISTRIES OF YOUTH AND SPORTS: A EURO-ARAB PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Talent retention in public sector organizations has become an increasingly urgent strategic challenge across both European and Arab world governance contexts, as demographic pressures, private sector competition for skilled professionals, and the accelerating pace of institutional modernization create new demands on public human resource management systems. This article presents a comparative analysis of talent retention strategies in ministries responsible for youth and sports policy — a sector characterized by high mission-orientation, significant intersectionality with broader social policy agendas, and distinctive human capital requirements — across selected European and Arab-world jurisdictions. Drawing on comparative public administration theory, strategic human resource management literature, and primary documentary analysis of institutional frameworks in France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Jordan, the article examines how institutional context, administrative culture, and governance priorities shape the design and effectiveness of talent retention strategies in this specific ministerial domain. Four dimensions of comparative analysis are developed: compensation and non-monetary incentive structures; career development and professional learning pathways; organizational culture and mission alignment; and institutional governance frameworks for talent management. The article argues that while European and Arab-world ministries share certain common structural challenges — competition with the private sector for specialized talent, generational shifts in workforce expectations, and the need to build digital competencies alongside domain-specific expertise — they differ significantly in the institutional mechanisms through which they seek to address these challenges, and that each tradition offers insights and transferable lessons for the other. The conclusion advances a model of contextually adaptive talent retention that identifies the conditions under which specific retention strategies are most likely to generate durable organizational commitment in public institutions with strong social policy missions.

KEYWORDS: *Arab public administration, comparative HRM, Euro-Arab governance, human resource management, ministries of youth and sports, public sector talent management, talent retention*

J.E.L. Classifications: H11, H83, J24, J45, M51, M54

1. INTRODUCTION

The capacity of public sector organizations to attract, develop, and retain talented professionals — individuals with the knowledge, skills, motivation, and judgment required to design and implement effective public policy — is a foundational determinant of state effectiveness and institutional quality. In the contemporary governance environment, characterized by accelerating technological change, increasing policy complexity, demographic transitions in public sector workforces, and intensifying competition from the private and non-profit sectors for skilled labour, talent retention has emerged as one of the most pressing strategic challenges facing public human resource management (HRM) systems across the world (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Kravariti & Johnston, 2020; Thunnissen et al., 2013).

Ministries responsible for youth and sports policy occupy a distinctive position in the landscape of public sector talent management. They are, in terms of budgetary scale and institutional status, typically among the smaller central government departments in both European and Arab-world governance contexts; yet they carry significant social policy mandates — the development of youth engagement, active citizenship, physical health, sports excellence, and community cohesion — that require a combination of domain-specific expertise (in sports science, youth development, community organization, and event management), general public administration competency, and the motivational orientation toward public service and social impact that mission-driven public sector work demands. The talent retention challenge in these ministries is, accordingly, distinctive: they must compete for talent in specialized labour markets where the private sector — professional sports organizations, sports marketing firms, youth NGOs, and event management companies — offers compensation packages and career opportunities that most public sector pay scales cannot match, while simultaneously offering the non-monetary inducements — public service purpose, policy influence, and institutional stability — that are

among the most powerful retention factors for mission-aligned professionals (Pandey & Stazyk, 2008; Leisink & Steijn, 2009).

The comparative dimension of this analysis — the Euro-Arab perspective announced in the article's title — is motivated by the significant and growing importance of the Arab world as a site of public sector HRM innovation, particularly in the domain of sports and youth governance. The rapid development of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states — above all the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar — as major actors in global sports governance and youth policy, exemplified by Qatar's hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup, the UAE's extensive investment in sports infrastructure and youth programmes, and the Saudi Vision 2030's explicit prioritization of sports and youth as pillars of social transformation, has generated major institutional investments in the talent management systems of ministries responsible for these domains (Amara, 2012; Reiche, 2015; Henry, 2013). A comparative analysis that places European and Arab-world ministerial talent retention strategies in dialogue can illuminate both the commonalities that transcend institutional context and the divergences that reflect deeper differences in administrative culture, governance priorities, and social expectations about the relationship between public employment and personal career development.

This article is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical frameworks — strategic talent management, public service motivation, and comparative public administration — that ground the analysis. Section 3 profiles the institutional context of youth and sports ministries in the six jurisdictions examined: France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the UAE, Qatar, and Jordan. Section 4 conducts the comparative analysis across four dimensions: compensation and incentives, career development, organizational culture and mission alignment, and institutional governance of talent management. Section 5 identifies the principal convergences and divergences between European and Arab-world talent retention approaches and evaluates the transferability of specific strategies across contexts. The concluding section advances the model of contextually adaptive talent retention.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS: STRATEGIC TALENT MANAGEMENT, PUBLIC SERVICE MOTIVATION, AND COMPARATIVE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

2.1 STRATEGIC TALENT MANAGEMENT IN PUBLIC ORGANIZATIONS

Strategic talent management (STM) — the systematic identification, development, engagement, and retention of individuals who make a disproportionate contribution to the achievement of organizational objectives — emerged as a distinct field of HRM scholarship in the early 2000s, initially in the context of private sector multinational corporations confronting global talent scarcity (Michaels et al., 2001). Its subsequent extension to the public sector context has been gradual and, in some respects, contested: the underlying STM logic of selectively investing in a subset of high-potential employees sits in tension with the public sector values of equal treatment, transparency, and merit-based HRM that characterize the Weberian bureaucratic tradition (Thunnissen et al., 2013; Kravariti & Johnston, 2020).

Nonetheless, the adoption of STM frameworks in public sector HRM has accelerated significantly since the early 2010s, driven by the convergence of several pressures: fiscal austerity measures that have reduced public sector headcount while maintaining or increasing service demands, thereby increasing the marginal value of high-performing employees; the competitive pressure from private sector talent markets that makes the retention of trained public sector professionals increasingly difficult; and the recognition that certain categories of policy expertise — data science, digital transformation, regulatory economics, and specialized domain knowledge — are genuinely scarce in the labour market and require deliberate strategic investment to develop and retain within public institutions (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Vaiman et al., 2012). The application of STM to ministries of youth and sports is additionally motivated by the sector's specific talent landscape: the supply of professionals with the combination of sports administration expertise, youth development experience, policy knowledge, and digital competency that modern youth and sports ministries require is genuinely limited, making retention a strategic rather than merely administrative HRM priority.

The dominant models of talent retention in the strategic HRM literature identify three principal categories of retention drivers: extrinsic factors, which include compensation, benefits, job security, and working conditions that are materially tangible and directly comparable across

employers; intrinsic factors, which include the meaningfulness of work, opportunities for skill development, autonomy, and the quality of interpersonal relationships in the workplace; and relational factors, which include the quality of management, perceived organizational support, and the degree of fit between individual values and organizational culture (Allen et al., 2010; Mitchell et al., 2001). The relative weight of these three categories in determining employee retention varies significantly across individuals, occupational groups, and organizational and cultural contexts — a variation that is central to the comparative analysis developed in this article.

2.2 PUBLIC SERVICE MOTIVATION AND MISSION ALIGNMENT

The concept of public service motivation (PSM) — the intrinsic motivation to contribute to the public good that characterizes many public sector employees and that constitutes a distinctive and organizationally significant feature of public sector work — has been one of the most productive areas of public administration scholarship over the past three decades (Perry & Wise, 1990; Perry et al., 2010; Van Loon et al., 2015). PSM theory holds that individuals with high public service motivation are more likely to be attracted to public sector employment, more likely to remain in it despite lower compensation than the private sector might offer, and more likely to perform effectively in mission-driven organizational contexts — making PSM a particularly important concept for the analysis of talent retention in organizations whose missions are explicitly oriented toward social welfare, public health, and community development (Leisink & Steijn, 2009; Ritz et al., 2016).

In the context of ministries of youth and sports, PSM has a specific and potentially powerful form: the alignment between individual motivations — a genuine passion for sport, a commitment to youth development, a conviction of the social value of physical activity and community engagement — and institutional mission creates a foundation for organizational commitment that is qualitatively different from the commitment generated by extrinsic reward structures alone. Research on PSM in sport administration contexts has consistently found that mission alignment is among the most significant predictors of retention intention among professionals in national sports organizations and government sport agencies, and that perceived opportunities to contribute meaningfully to mission objectives are a more powerful retention factor than compensation comparisons in this population (Kim, 2012; Cuskelly et al., 2006; Bang & Ross, 2009).

The Arab-world governance context adds a further dimension to the PSM analysis: the strong collectivist cultural values that characterize most Arab societies, and the significant role of national pride, collective identity, and contribution to national development as motivational forces in the public sector workforce, create a version of PSM that is grounded in community and national orientation rather than in the individualist conception of public service contribution that dominates the Western PSM literature (Al Yahya & Nafei, 2016; Rashid, 2021). Understanding the culturally specific forms of mission alignment that operate in Arab-world public administrations is essential for a comparative analysis that does not simply apply Western HRM frameworks to non-Western institutional contexts without attention to the ways in which cultural variation shapes the motivational dynamics of public employment.

2.3 COMPARATIVE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

The comparative public administration literature provides the methodological and theoretical framework for the cross-national analysis of HRM practices and institutional contexts that this article undertakes. The foundational insight of comparative public administration — that administrative systems are embedded in and shaped by broader political, cultural, legal, and social contexts that cannot be abstracted away without distorting the analysis — is of particular importance for the Euro-Arab comparison, where the institutional and cultural differences between the jurisdictions examined are significant and require explicit theoretical acknowledgment rather than implicit assumption of comparability (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017; Peters, 2018).

The principal theoretical axis along which European and Arab-world public administrations differ for the purposes of this analysis is the Weberian versus neo-patrimonial characterization of administrative culture. European public administrations — particularly those of France, Germany, and the United Kingdom — are characterized, at least at the ideal-typical level, by the Weberian features of merit-based recruitment, career security, rule-bound procedure, and the separation of official from personal role. Arab-world public administrations exhibit more varied institutional profiles: the GCC states have invested significantly in the development of merit-based, performance-oriented HRM systems as part of their broader modernization agendas (exemplified by the UAE's Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre and Qatar's National Vision 2030), while administrations in other Arab states, including Jordan, maintain features of patrimonial governance — including the significance of personal connections in recruitment and

advancement — alongside more formalized HRM frameworks (Hertog, 2010; Reiche, 2015; Lust & Ndegwa, 2012). These differences shape the conditions under which specific talent retention strategies can be effectively designed and implemented.

3. INSTITUTIONAL PROFILES: YOUTH AND SPORTS MINISTRIES IN SIX JURISDICTIONS

3.1 THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT: FRANCE, GERMANY, AND THE UNITED KINGDOM

France's Ministry of National Education and Youth (Ministère de l'Éducation nationale et de la Jeunesse), together with the Ministry of Sports and the Olympic and Paralympic Games (Ministère des Sports et des Jeux Olympiques et Paralympiques) — separated from each other in organizational terms, though frequently coordinated — represents one of Europe's most institutionally developed and resource-intensive public youth and sports governance systems. The French civil service tradition — characterized by the *grandes écoles* system of elite administrative training, the strong career protections of the *statut de la fonction publique*, and a highly centralized policy-making structure — creates distinctive conditions for talent management: initial recruitment of high-potential staff through competitive *concours* (examinations) ensures a technically skilled entry cohort, while the rigidity of the *fonctionnaire* career system limits the flexibility to reward outstanding performance through variable compensation and makes lateral career moves between public and private sector roles structurally complex (Rouban, 2014; Dahlström & Lapuente, 2017).

Germany's federal structure creates a more fragmented youth and sports governance architecture, in which the Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community (Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat) exercises limited competence over sports policy — largely through the Deutsche Olympische Sportbund (DOSB) and the Federal Institute for Sports Science (BISp) — while the *Länder* (states) retain primary constitutional competence over youth and sports administration. The resulting governance structure is characterized by significant variation in institutional capacity and HRM practices across the sixteen *Länder*, with larger and wealthier states such as Bavaria and North Rhine-Westphalia maintaining more developed talent management frameworks than smaller ones. Germany's dual-track civil service system — which distinguishes between *Beamte* (officials with full civil service status and significant career protections) and

Angestellte (employees on employment contracts more analogous to private sector arrangements) — creates differentiated retention dynamics within the same organizational context (Lhotta & von Blumenthal, 2015; OECD, 2017).

The United Kingdom's approach to youth and sports governance — primarily through the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the arm's-length bodies UK Sport and Sport England — reflects the distinctive features of the British public administration tradition: relatively limited formal career protection, significant movement between public and private sector roles, strong emphasis on performance management and outcome accountability, and a recent history of New Public Management reforms that have introduced private sector HRM practices — including pay-for-performance, flexible working arrangements, and talent pipeline programmes — into public sector organizations at a scale and pace that most continental European systems have not matched (Painter & Peters, 2010; Hood & Dixon, 2015). The arm's-length model of sports governance — in which UK Sport and Sport England operate as quasi-autonomous public bodies with greater HRM flexibility than direct government departments — provides important lessons for the design of talent retention strategies in mission-intensive public organizations, as it enables more competitive compensation structures and faster promotion pathways than the civil service proper.

3.2 THE ARAB-WORLD CONTEXT: UAE, QATAR, AND JORDAN

The United Arab Emirates' approach to youth and sports governance reflects the UAE's broader public sector modernization strategy, which has positioned the country as a regional and global leader in government innovation and talent management. The Ministry of Culture and Youth and the Ministry of Community Development, operating alongside the Abu Dhabi Sports Council and the Dubai Sports Council, manage youth and sports policy within an institutional framework explicitly designed to attract, develop, and retain high-quality talent through competitive compensation, performance-based rewards, and rapid career advancement opportunities that are unusual by regional standards. The Emirati Nationalization policy (Emiratisation), which sets targets for the proportion of UAE nationals in public sector roles — including in sports and youth governance — creates a specific talent management challenge: the development of Emirati nationals with the specialized skills required for leadership roles in these

domains, at a speed that outpaces the natural development of the relevant human capital through conventional educational and career pathways (Forstenlechner & Rutledge, 2010; Reiche, 2015).

Qatar's youth and sports governance has been shaped to an exceptional degree by the country's hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup — the most significant global sports event hosted in the Arab world — and by the strategic development priorities articulated in Qatar National Vision 2030, which identifies sports, youth, and community development as key dimensions of the country's social and human capital development agenda. The Ministry of Sports and Youth, operating alongside the Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy (responsible for World Cup infrastructure), the Qatar Olympic Committee, and Aspire Academy — the country's elite sports talent development institution — constitutes a complex governance ecosystem that has generated substantial investment in talent attraction, development, and retention at both the professional and the elite athlete levels. The World Cup legacy has created organizational capacity and institutional knowledge that presents both a retention challenge (the post-event risk of talent dispersal) and an opportunity (the development of a recognized cadre of internationally experienced sports governance professionals) that is unique to the Qatari context (Amara, 2012; Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015; Henry, 2013).

Jordan's Ministry of Youth represents a significantly different institutional profile from those of the GCC states: operating in a context of more limited financial resources, a larger and younger population, and a regional geopolitical environment characterized by significant instability, the Jordanian Ministry has developed talent retention strategies that rely more heavily on mission alignment, non-monetary incentives, and career development opportunities than on competitive compensation. Jordan's youth sector benefits from a vibrant civil society ecosystem of youth NGOs and development organizations — partly supported by international development partners including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the EU — that creates both a competitive talent market for youth development professionals and a collaborative network within which government and civil society exchange expertise and talent. The challenge of retaining experienced youth development professionals against the attraction of better-compensated roles in international development organizations and NGOs is a persistent feature of the Jordanian institutional landscape (Al-Bdour et al., 2010; Lust & Ndegwa, 2012).

4. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: FOUR DIMENSIONS OF TALENT RETENTION

4.1 COMPENSATION AND NON-MONETARY INCENTIVE STRUCTURES

Compensation structures in ministries of youth and sports across the six jurisdictions examined reflect the broader parameters of each country's civil service pay system, with significant implications for the competitive position of these ministries in their respective talent markets. In France and Germany, the dominant feature of public sector compensation is the seniority-based progression embedded in civil service pay scales: employees advance through pay grades primarily on the basis of tenure rather than performance, with limited scope for variable compensation or accelerated advancement based on exceptional contribution. This structure provides strong retention incentives for employees who have accumulated significant seniority — the foregone seniority premium constitutes a substantial switching cost — but weak retention incentives for high-performing early-career professionals, who may find that comparable private sector roles offer significantly superior compensation without the lengthy waiting period that seniority-based progression entails (Rouban, 2014; OECD, 2017).

The United Kingdom's approach is more varied: core civil service pay scales remain constrained by public sector pay norms, but arm's-length bodies such as UK Sport operate with significantly greater compensation flexibility, including the capacity to offer market-rate salaries for specialized roles and performance-related pay linked to organizational outcome metrics. This flexibility has enabled UK Sport, in particular, to recruit and retain professionals with the combination of elite sports experience, performance management expertise, and public sector values that its mission requires — a talent profile that the core civil service pay system could not attract at comparable compensation levels (Hood & Dixon, 2015; Painter & Peters, 2010). The lesson — that greater institutional autonomy in compensation design, within appropriate public accountability frameworks, can significantly improve talent retention in mission-intensive public organizations — is among the most clearly supported findings of the comparative analysis.

The GCC states present a fundamentally different compensation environment: both the UAE and Qatar offer public sector compensation packages — including base salary, housing allowance, transport allowance, and performance bonuses — that are competitive with or superior to private sector equivalents for many professional roles, and that are significantly more attractive

than the compensation available in most European public sector comparators, particularly for senior and specialized positions. The resource-intensive talent attraction and retention strategy of GCC public administrations is explicitly designed to compete with international private sector employers for talent — a competitive orientation that reflects both the urgent pace of institutional development in these relatively young states and the recognition that human capital is the binding constraint on the realization of their ambitious social and economic development visions (Forstenlechner & Rutledge, 2010; Hertog, 2010). Jordan, by contrast, faces the compensation challenge of retaining talent against better-resourced competitors — international organizations, NGOs, and Gulf state employers — with a public sector pay system that is structurally unable to match competing offers in financial terms, making non-monetary retention strategies correspondingly more important.

4.2 CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING PATHWAYS

Career development opportunities constitute one of the most consistently identified retention drivers across the talent management literature, particularly for the younger and more highly educated cohorts that increasingly dominate the workforce in professionally specialized public organizations (Mitchell et al., 2001; Allen et al., 2010). In the youth and sports sector, career development encompasses several distinct dimensions: vertical advancement within the ministry through promotion to senior management and leadership roles; horizontal development through rotation across different policy domains, functional roles, and organizational units; and external development through secondments to sports organizations, international bodies, and relevant private sector or civil society organizations that build the breadth of experience and professional network that senior sports governance roles require.

France's grandes écoles system provides an elite career development pathway for the most senior civil servants in youth and sports ministries — graduates of the École Nationale d'Administration (ENA, now Institut National du Service Public, INSP) and Sciences Po are systematically developed for senior leadership roles — but this pathway is narrow, accessible to a small proportion of ministry staff, and poorly adapted to the development of the domain-specific sports and youth expertise that the ministry's operational functions require. The Corps de l'Inspection Générale de la Jeunesse et des Sports (IGJS) provides a specialized career track for youth and sports policy professionals, but the overall career development architecture of the

French ministry reflects the broader French civil service tendency to prioritize generalist administrative competency over domain specialization — a tendency that creates specific retention risks for highly specialized sports science, performance analysis, and sports governance professionals (Rouban, 2014; Dahlström & Lapuente, 2017).

Qatar's Aspire Academy represents one of the most systematically developed talent development ecosystems in the Arab world for the sports and youth domain: combining elite athlete development with a growing programme of sports science, sports management, and sports governance professional development, Aspire has created a pipeline of locally trained talent with internationally recognized credentials in sport-related fields. The integration of Aspire's alumni into Qatar's sports governance institutions — including the Ministry of Sports and Youth, the Qatar Olympic Committee, and the Supreme Committee's legacy programmes — reflects a long-term talent development and retention strategy whose sophistication and resource intensity exceed that of most comparable European national sports governance systems. The lesson for European ministries — that sustained investment in domain-specific professional development, through dedicated institutions rather than generic civil service training programmes, generates significant retention advantages — is one of the most clearly transferable insights from the Qatari experience (Henry, 2013; Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015).

4.3 ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND MISSION ALIGNMENT

Organizational culture — the shared values, assumptions, behavioural norms, and informal practices that characterize an institution's internal social life — is among the most powerful and most difficult to change determinants of employee retention and organizational commitment. In ministries of youth and sports, the potential for strong mission alignment between individual and organizational values — the shared passion for sport, youth development, and social impact — creates a distinctive cultural retention resource that most other government ministries cannot replicate. The extent to which this cultural potential is realized in practice, however, varies significantly across the six jurisdictions examined, and reflects both the institutional culture of the broader civil service tradition within which each ministry is embedded and the specific organizational choices made by ministry leadership about how to cultivate and sustain the mission-aligned culture that maximizes organizational commitment among its professional staff (Perry & Wise, 1990; Leisink & Steijn, 2009).

The United Kingdom's arm's-length sports governance bodies — particularly UK Sport, with its explicit mission focus on supporting Great Britain's elite Olympic and Paralympic programme — exhibit the clearest example of strong mission-aligned organizational culture among the European comparators: the shared commitment to supporting elite athlete success creates a powerful common purpose that pervades the organization's culture and that constitutes, according to both qualitative case study evidence and employee survey data, a major retention factor for many UK Sport employees who could command higher compensation in comparable private sector roles (Bang & Ross, 2009; Cuskelly et al., 2006). The lesson — that organizational design choices that maximize mission clarity and the visibility of individual contribution to mission outcomes can generate significant retention benefits even in organizations unable to match private sector compensation — is broadly supported across the comparative evidence.

In the Arab-world context, the alignment between individual and institutional mission in youth and sports ministries takes a distinctive form that reflects the collectivist cultural orientation and the strong national identity investment that characterize public life in these societies. For Emirati and Qatari public sector professionals, participation in the development of their countries' sports governance systems — and particularly in the hosting and legacy of major international events — carries a dimension of national pride and collective purpose that constitutes a powerful motivational and retention force that has no direct equivalent in the European context. The cultural specificity of this form of mission alignment — its dependence on the particular combination of national identity, collective pride, and shared development project that characterizes the GCC states at this moment in their institutional history — is an important qualification on the transferability of GCC retention strategies to other contexts (Al Yahya & Nafei, 2016; Rashid, 2021; Amara, 2012).

4.4 INSTITUTIONAL GOVERNANCE OF TALENT MANAGEMENT

The governance of talent management — the institutional arrangements through which strategic HRM priorities are set, talent management programmes are designed and funded, and the effectiveness of retention strategies is monitored and evaluated — differs substantially across the six jurisdictions in ways that reflect both broader public sector HRM governance traditions and the specific organizational status and resource endowment of youth and sports ministries. The critical governance dimension for talent retention is the degree of strategic integration between

talent management activities and broader organizational strategy: organizations in which talent management is treated as a strategic function, embedded in senior leadership decision-making and linked explicitly to organizational capability requirements, consistently outperform those in which it is treated as an operational function, delegated to HR departments and disconnected from strategic planning (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Vaiman et al., 2012).

The UAE's Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre — responsible for overseeing the UAE government's talent management and Emiratisation programmes — represents one of the most institutionally developed examples of strategic talent management governance in the Arab world: it provides a cross-ministerial framework of talent identification, development, and retention standards that individual ministries, including sports and youth institutions, are required to implement within their own organizational contexts (Forstenlechner & Rutledge, 2010; Reiche, 2015). This centralized governance model — which sets strategic talent management standards at the whole-of-government level while allowing implementation flexibility at the ministerial level — represents a structural solution to the talent management governance challenge that European civil service systems, with their more fragmented HR governance architectures, have not consistently achieved. The World Bank's (2021) review of public sector HRM governance in the MENA region identifies the centralization of talent management standards with decentralized implementation flexibility as among the most effective governance designs for improving retention outcomes in the public sector, a finding that is consistent with the UAE experience.

5. CONVERGENCES, DIVERGENCES, AND THE TRANSFERABILITY OF RETENTION STRATEGIES

The comparative analysis developed in Section 4 reveals a pattern of significant convergences and equally significant divergences between European and Arab-world talent retention strategies in ministries of youth and sports. The principal convergences reflect common structural challenges that transcend institutional context: all six jurisdictions face competition from the private sector and from international organizations for specialized talent in sports administration, youth development, and digital governance; all face generational shifts in workforce expectations, with younger professionals placing greater weight on mission alignment, career development, flexible working, and organizational culture relative to compensation security and job tenure than their predecessors; and all face the challenge of building digital competencies

alongside domain-specific expertise in organizations whose institutional cultures and HRM systems were designed for a pre-digital operational environment.

The principal divergences reflect differences in institutional context that shape the feasibility and effectiveness of specific retention strategies. The resource intensity of GCC retention strategies — competitive compensation, performance bonuses, rapid advancement opportunities — is not replicable in European or Jordanian fiscal contexts without fundamental changes to civil service pay governance that fall outside the discretion of individual ministries. Conversely, the sophisticated career development ecosystems of the French *grandes écoles* tradition and the UK arm's-length body model — both of which generate strong retention incentives through credential development, network building, and reputation enhancement — require institutional architectures, professional communities, and labour market structures that do not exist in the current GCC context and that cannot be quickly created. And the cultural specificity of mission alignment as a retention driver — powerful in the GCC context as national development pride, differently powerful in the UK context as elite sport achievement culture, and complex in the Jordanian context as a combination of public service commitment and competitive displacement by international organizations — means that cultural retention strategies cannot be simply transposed across contexts without significant adaptation to the specific motivational landscape of the receiving institution.

Several specific retention strategy elements are, however, more clearly transferable across the Euro-Arab divide. The arm's-length model of institutional autonomy in HRM — providing mission-intensive public organizations with greater flexibility in compensation design, performance management, and talent development within an appropriate public accountability framework — is broadly applicable across different fiscal contexts, as it generates retention improvements through organizational design changes rather than through resource increases. Jordan's Sports City initiative and similar projects in GCC states demonstrate the potential for collaborative public-private-civil society talent development ecosystems that build domain-specific expertise through partnerships across sectors — a model that European ministries, constrained by public sector pay scales, could deploy more aggressively than most currently do. And the centralized talent management governance model of the UAE — setting whole-of-government standards while allowing ministerial implementation flexibility — addresses a structural weakness in the fragmented HR governance architectures of most European public

administrations that has been identified as a significant barrier to strategic talent management in the EU context (Kravariti & Johnston, 2020; OECD, 2017).

6. CONCLUSIONS

This article has presented a comparative analysis of talent retention strategies in ministries of youth and sports across six jurisdictions — France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the UAE, Qatar, and Jordan — from a Euro-Arab perspective, demonstrating that while these institutional contexts differ significantly in their administrative traditions, fiscal resources, and cultural orientations, they share common structural talent retention challenges and can learn from each other's strategic and institutional innovations.

The comparative analysis supports four principal conclusions. First, the most effective talent retention strategies in ministries of youth and sports are those that activate multiple retention drivers simultaneously — combining adequate compensation with strong mission alignment, career development pathways, and a positive organizational culture — rather than relying on any single retention mechanism. The evidence from the arm's-length model in the United Kingdom and from Qatar's Aspire Academy ecosystem demonstrates that strategic talent development investment, mission clarity, and organizational culture can compensate significantly for compensation gaps relative to private sector competitors, but only when all three are developed and maintained at high quality.

Second, institutional autonomy in HRM design — the freedom to make compensation, promotion, and career development decisions that are responsive to the specific talent market and organizational culture of the ministry, within appropriate public accountability frameworks — is a significant determinant of retention effectiveness across all six jurisdictions. The GCC states' willingness to grant their sports and youth governance institutions substantial HRM flexibility, and the UK's arm's-length body model, both demonstrate the retention benefits of institutional autonomy that the more rigid civil service systems of France and Germany constrain.

Third, the cultural dimension of talent retention — and specifically the relationship between mission alignment, national and collective identity, and organizational commitment — is context-specific in ways that require explicit attention in comparative analysis and that limit the direct transferability of retention strategies across cultural contexts. The national pride dimension of retention motivation in GCC states, the elite sport achievement culture of UK Sport, and the

development commitment of Jordanian youth ministry professionals represent culturally specific versions of public service motivation that must be understood on their own terms rather than reduced to a single universal model.

Fourth, and most broadly, the model of contextually adaptive talent retention that emerges from this comparative analysis holds that effective retention strategies in mission-intensive public organizations must be designed from a thorough understanding of the specific motivational landscape of the institution's professional community — including the relative weight of extrinsic, intrinsic, and relational retention drivers, the cultural specificity of mission alignment, the competitive dynamics of the relevant talent market, and the institutional constraints on HRM flexibility — rather than from the wholesale adoption of best-practice models developed in different institutional contexts. The Euro-Arab comparative perspective advances this understanding precisely because it places institutional contexts in dialogue that are sufficiently different from each other to reveal the contextual specificity of retention strategies that might otherwise appear universally applicable, while being sufficiently convergent in their mission orientations to make the comparison analytically productive.

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**SMART CITIES MANAGEMENT IN THE POST-COVID ERA: RESILIENCE,
DIGITAL GOVERNANCE, AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF URBAN PUBLIC
SERVICES**

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic constituted an unprecedented stress test for urban management systems worldwide, exposing the structural vulnerabilities of existing governance architectures while simultaneously accelerating the adoption of digital technologies and contactless service delivery mechanisms at a pace that would otherwise have required a decade or more to achieve. This article examines the reconfiguration of smart city management in the post-COVID era, arguing that the pandemic did not merely accelerate pre-existing digitalisation trends but fundamentally altered the conceptual and institutional priorities of smart urban governance. Drawing on the comparative literature on smart city resilience, digital public administration, and post-pandemic urban recovery, supplemented by case evidence from European and global cities, the article analyses four principal dimensions of post-COVID smart city management: the transformation of digital public service delivery and the consolidation of e-governance as a permanent, rather than emergency, administrative mode; the reconfiguration of urban mobility and public space in response to changed behavioural patterns and environmental imperatives; the integration of public health intelligence into smart city data architectures; and the governance challenges generated by the accelerated deployment of surveillance and data collection technologies in the pandemic context. The article situates these transformations within the theoretical frameworks of urban resilience, the smart city as a sociotechnical system, and the political economy of digital urban governance, engaging critically with the risk that post-COVID smart city management reproduces or intensifies existing urban inequalities under a technological veil. The conclusion argues that the post-COVID moment presents a strategic opportunity to reorient smart city management toward a more equitable, participatory, and genuinely citizen-centred governance model — but that realising this opportunity requires deliberate institutional choices that current policy trajectories do not always guarantee.

KEYWORDS: *COVID-19, digital governance, e-government, post-pandemic urbanism, smart city management, urban resilience, public health data, digital equity*

J.E.L. Classifications: H11, H70, O18, O33, R58

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged in late 2019 and within months had disrupted virtually every dimension of organised social life across the globe, constituted what urban scholars have characterised as a 'stress test of unprecedented scale' for cities and their management systems (Sharifi & Khavarian-Garmsir, 2020). Cities were the epicentres of the pandemic's human, economic, and institutional impact: high population density facilitated viral transmission; urban economic structures — heavily weighted toward services, hospitality, retail, and face-to-face interaction — were disproportionately disrupted by lockdown measures; and urban governance systems were confronted simultaneously with the immediate demands of public health emergency management and the longer-term challenge of maintaining essential services under conditions of unprecedented uncertainty and resource constraint.

For cities that had invested in smart city infrastructures and digital governance capabilities before the pandemic, the crisis exposed both the value and the limitations of those investments. On the positive side, cities with mature e-government platforms, digital payment systems, and data analytics capabilities were able to transition to remote service delivery more rapidly and more comprehensively than those relying on traditional in-person administrative models; digital mobility data enabled more targeted and evidence-based public health interventions; and smart infrastructure monitoring systems allowed essential services to continue functioning with reduced human presence (Allam & Jones, 2020; Kummitha, 2020). On the negative side, the pandemic revealed the fragility of smart city systems that had been designed for the optimisation of normal operating conditions rather than for robustness under crisis conditions, and it exposed the depth of the digital divide — the gap between digitally enabled and digitally excluded populations — as a structural barrier to equitable access to public services in the emergency context (Ogundele et al., 2023; van Dijk, 2020).

The post-COVID era — the period following the acute phase of the pandemic, characterised by the gradual relaxation of emergency measures, the consolidation of pandemic-accelerated changes, and the increasingly urgent need to address the long-term urban consequences of the crisis — presents a distinctive and historically significant moment for smart city management. It is a moment in which the investments, experiments, and improvisations of the pandemic period must be evaluated, institutionalised or abandoned, and integrated into coherent post-pandemic urban governance strategies. The choices made in this moment will shape the trajectory of smart city development for the next decade and will determine whether the post-COVID city is more or less equitable, more or less resilient, and more or less genuinely responsive to the needs of its citizens than its pre-pandemic predecessor.

This article examines the principal dimensions of this reconfiguration. Section 2 reviews the theoretical frameworks — urban resilience, the smart city as a sociotechnical system, and the political economy of digital urban governance — that are most relevant to the analysis of post-COVID smart city management. Section 3 analyses the transformation of digital public service delivery and e-governance in the post-COVID context. Section 4 examines the reconfiguration of urban mobility and public space. Section 5 addresses the integration of public health intelligence into smart city data architectures. Section 6 engages with the governance challenges generated by pandemic-era surveillance technologies and data collection practices. The concluding section advances the article's central argument about the strategic opportunity — and the institutional risks — of the post-COVID moment for smart city governance.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS: RESILIENCE, SOCIOTECHNICAL SYSTEMS, AND DIGITAL URBAN GOVERNANCE

2.1 URBAN RESILIENCE AND THE SMART CITY

The concept of urban resilience — the capacity of a city and its systems to absorb disturbances, adapt to changing conditions, and recover from shocks while maintaining essential functions and the ability to transform — has become one of the central organising concepts of contemporary urban studies and urban policy (Folke et al., 2010; Meerow et al., 2016). Prior to COVID-19, urban resilience scholarship focused primarily on the resilience of cities to climate change, natural disasters, and economic shocks; the pandemic extended and stress-tested the concept in the domain of public health emergency, revealing both its analytical utility and its

limitations as a practical guide to urban governance under conditions of radical uncertainty (Sharifi & Khavarian-Garmsir, 2020; Cheshmehzangi, 2021).

The relationship between smart city technologies and urban resilience is theoretically complex and empirically contested. A strong version of the smart city-resilience thesis holds that the data collection, real-time monitoring, predictive analytics, and networked infrastructure management capabilities that characterise mature smart city systems substantially enhance urban resilience by improving situational awareness, enabling faster and more targeted responses to disruptions, and facilitating the coordination of recovery efforts across multiple city systems simultaneously (Allam & Jones, 2020; Kitchin, 2014). A more critical version acknowledges these potential benefits while noting that the same networked, data-intensive infrastructure that enables smart city capabilities also introduces new vulnerabilities — to cybersecurity attacks, to system failures with cascading effects across interdependent urban systems, and to the social and political risks generated by the concentration of urban governance authority in technically opaque digital systems (Townsend, 2013; Hollands, 2008).

The COVID-19 pandemic provided empirical evidence for both perspectives. Cities with well-developed digital governance infrastructure — Seoul, Singapore, Tallinn, Barcelona — demonstrated the resilience benefits of smart city investment through rapid deployment of contact tracing applications, vaccine registration platforms, and real-time crowd management systems (Kummitha, 2020; Lee & Lee, 2014). At the same time, cities that had invested heavily in smart infrastructure without adequate attention to data governance, citizen engagement, or digital inclusion found that their systems generated new forms of exclusion and new governance controversies in the pandemic context, as the debates about surveillance applications and data privacy in numerous jurisdictions illustrated (Zuboff, 2019; Floridi et al., 2020).

2.2 THE SMART CITY AS SOCIOTECHNICAL SYSTEM

The framing of the smart city as a sociotechnical system — a configuration in which technical artefacts, organisational structures, regulatory frameworks, and social practices are mutually constitutive rather than independently determined — provides a more analytically adequate account of smart city dynamics than purely technocratic or purely social-constructivist approaches (Geels, 2004; Jasanoff, 2004). From a sociotechnical perspective, the introduction of a new digital technology into urban governance does not simply solve a technical problem; it

reconfigures the relationships among urban actors, redistributes authority and resources, creates new dependencies and vulnerabilities, and generates new social and political tensions alongside whatever efficiency gains it delivers. The pandemic accelerated this sociotechnical reconfiguration at a pace that outstripped the capacity of existing regulatory and governance frameworks to manage it — creating a post-COVID moment characterised by significant institutional uncertainty about the appropriate governance of pandemic-era digital innovations.

Particularly relevant to the post-COVID context is the concept of 'path dependence' in sociotechnical systems: the tendency of technological and institutional choices made under conditions of urgency or uncertainty to become locked in as permanent features of the system, even when the conditions that originally justified them have changed (David, 1985; Arthur, 1989). Many of the digital governance innovations deployed during the pandemic — remote service delivery platforms, digital identity systems, health data collection architectures — were implemented rapidly and at scale without the normal processes of pilot testing, stakeholder consultation, and democratic deliberation. The post-COVID challenge is to evaluate these emergency innovations systematically, to identify which of them represent genuine improvements that should be consolidated and institutionalised, and which of them embody trade-offs — between efficiency and privacy, between speed and inclusivity, between centralisation and democratic accountability — that the emergency context prevented from being adequately considered.

2.3 THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF DIGITAL URBAN GOVERNANCE

The political economy of digital urban governance — the analysis of how the economic interests of technology companies, the fiscal constraints of urban governments, and the power relations among different urban social groups shape the development and deployment of smart city technologies — provides a critical complement to the technical and institutional analyses of smart city management (Söderström et al., 2014; Coletta et al., 2019). The smart city market — estimated by various industry sources to be worth hundreds of billions of dollars globally by the mid-2020s — is dominated by a relatively small number of large technology corporations whose commercial interests in expanding the deployment of their platforms and products may not align perfectly with the public interest in equitable, accountable, and genuinely responsive urban governance. The risk of 'corporate capture' of smart city governance — in which the priorities and architectures of digital urban systems are determined primarily by vendor interests rather than by the needs and

preferences of citizens — was present before COVID-19 and was, in some respects, exacerbated by the pandemic, as emergency procurement procedures allowed technology companies to expand their presence in urban governance systems with reduced competitive tendering and democratic oversight (Zuboff, 2019; Morozov & Bria, 2018).

At the same time, the pandemic also generated counter-tendencies: fiscal pressures on urban governments created incentives to develop lower-cost, open-source, and interoperable digital governance solutions that reduce dependency on proprietary vendor ecosystems; the experience of digital exclusion during the pandemic strengthened the political salience of digital equity as a policy priority; and the public health emergency context demonstrated the potential value of city-owned, publicly governed data infrastructures for the coordination of emergency responses in ways that are not contingent on the commercial interests of private data intermediaries (Morozov & Bria, 2018; Barns, 2020). These counter-tendencies are fragile and context-dependent, but they represent genuine opportunities for the reorientation of smart city governance toward more equitable and publicly accountable models that the post-COVID moment makes available.

3. THE TRANSFORMATION OF DIGITAL PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY: FROM EMERGENCY MODE TO PERMANENT ARCHITECTURE

The most immediate and consequential smart city management transformation generated by the COVID-19 pandemic was the forced, rapid, and large-scale digitalisation of public service delivery. In cities across Europe, North America, Asia, and beyond, lockdown measures made in-person access to municipal services physically impossible, compelling urban administrations to deploy or accelerate digital service delivery mechanisms that had previously been available as optional alternatives to in-person interaction but had not been adopted at scale. The result was, in many cases, a decade's worth of e-government adoption compressed into a period of weeks or months: online payment systems, digital permit applications, virtual administrative appointments, electronic document exchange, and remote citizen advisory services were deployed at emergency speed, generating both significant operational successes and significant failures as systems that had been designed for low-volume optional use were suddenly subjected to high-volume mandatory operation (OECD, 2020; Twizeyimana & Andersson, 2019).

The post-COVID challenge for smart city management in the domain of digital public services is threefold. First, cities must evaluate the emergency digital service delivery mechanisms deployed

during the pandemic against criteria of quality, security, accessibility, and citizen satisfaction, distinguishing between those that represent genuine improvements in service delivery and those that were merely acceptable under emergency conditions but require significant refinement to serve as permanent administrative infrastructure. Second, cities must address the digital equity dimension of their pandemic-era service transformations: wherever the shift to digital service delivery created barriers for digitally excluded citizens — those without reliable internet access, digital devices, or the skills to use digital interfaces — post-COVID governance must develop hybrid service delivery models that preserve the efficiency gains of digitalisation without sacrificing the inclusivity of universal public service access (van Dijk, 2020; Mossberger et al., 2008). Third, cities must institutionalise the organisational and cultural changes that enabled rapid digital service deployment during the pandemic — including streamlined procurement procedures, cross-departmental data sharing, and the development of internal digital competence in municipal workforces — within regulatory frameworks and governance structures that ensure democratic accountability and data protection compliance in the non-emergency context (OECD, 2020; Janssen et al., 2004).

Several European cities provide instructive examples of the post-COVID consolidation of digital public service delivery. Tallinn, Estonia — long regarded as a global leader in digital government — expanded its already comprehensive e-government platform during the pandemic to incorporate new services including digital health certificates, remote notarisation, and AI-assisted administrative decision-making, and has used the post-COVID period to evaluate and refine these additions within its established data governance framework (Vassil, 2016; European Commission, 2022). Barcelona's Decidim platform — an open-source, participatory digital governance infrastructure — was adapted during the pandemic to enable remote citizen participation in urban planning and budget processes, and has since been consolidated as a permanent component of the city's democratic governance architecture, demonstrating that digital service transformation can extend beyond administrative efficiency to encompass participatory democratic innovation (Barandiaran et al., 2021). These examples illustrate that the post-COVID consolidation of digital public services is not merely a technical project of system improvement but a governance project of institutional redesign, requiring deliberate choices about the values — efficiency, equity, accountability, participation — that digital urban governance is designed to serve.

4. RECONFIGURING URBAN MOBILITY AND PUBLIC SPACE IN THE POST-COVID SMART CITY

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly altered the patterns of urban mobility and the use of public space in ways that have persisted, in modified form, into the post-COVID period and that have significant implications for the management of smart city mobility systems. The immediate pandemic-era changes — massive reductions in commuting as remote work became standard for large segments of the urban workforce; dramatic shifts in modal share away from public transit and toward walking, cycling, and private vehicle use; the temporary pedestrianisation of urban streets and the expansion of outdoor dining and public space; and the collapse of city-centre economies dependent on office worker foot traffic — generated a complex and still unfolding reconfiguration of urban spatial and economic geographies (Honey-Rosés et al., 2020; Mouratidis, 2021).

Smart city mobility management systems — which prior to COVID had been developed primarily for the optimisation of high-volume, predictable commuting flows in dense urban environments — were confronted during the pandemic with demand patterns that diverged radically from their training data and operational assumptions. The post-COVID period has required the recalibration of these systems for a more volatile, multimodal, and temporally irregular urban mobility landscape, in which the patterns of morning and evening peak demand that characterised pre-pandemic commuting have given way to more distributed, unpredictable trip generation (Jittrapirom et al., 2017; Shaheen & Cohen, 2020). This recalibration has in many cases prompted significant investments in micromobility infrastructure — cycling lanes, e-scooter and e-bike sharing systems, and pedestrian priority zones — that both respond to changed mobility preferences and contribute to the decarbonisation of urban transport systems, a policy priority that has been reinforced rather than weakened by the post-COVID recovery agenda.

The relationship between smart city data systems and the management of public space — which received unprecedented attention during the pandemic as cities deployed crowd monitoring technologies to enforce social distancing requirements and to manage the use of parks, beaches, and other public spaces under capacity restrictions — has generated some of the most significant governance controversies of the post-COVID period. The deployment of CCTV networks with AI-enhanced facial recognition, bluetooth-based crowd density monitoring, and drone surveillance for public space management during the pandemic established operational precedents and technical

capabilities that have subsequently been difficult to contain within the emergency context in which they were justified (Kitchin, 2020; Zuboff, 2019). The post-COVID management of urban public space requires cities to distinguish, with institutional clarity, between the monitoring capabilities that are legitimately required for routine urban management and safety — and that can be justified by reference to established legal frameworks and democratic oversight mechanisms — and those that were introduced as emergency measures and whose continuation in the non-emergency context raises disproportionate risks to civil liberties and privacy rights.

The reconfiguration of public space in the post-COVID smart city has also generated new opportunities for participatory urban design — the use of digital tools to engage citizens in decisions about the allocation and redesign of urban space. Several cities have used post-COVID public space reconfiguration as an occasion to deploy digital participatory platforms — enabling citizens to propose, discuss, and vote on temporary or permanent changes to street layouts, pedestrianisation schemes, and public space programming — that represent a significant advance in the democratisation of urban spatial governance. These digital participatory tools, when designed with adequate attention to inclusivity and accessibility, embody a model of smart city governance that prioritises citizen agency over technical optimisation and that treats digital infrastructure as a means to democratic ends rather than as an end in itself (Barandiaran et al., 2021; Foth et al., 2011).

5. PUBLIC HEALTH INTELLIGENCE IN SMART CITY DATA ARCHITECTURES: INTEGRATION, GOVERNANCE, AND ETHICS

One of the most consequential and contested developments in smart city management during and after the COVID-19 pandemic has been the integration of public health intelligence into smart city data architectures. Before COVID-19, the intersection of urban data systems and public health was a relatively underdeveloped area of smart city research and practice: most smart city data architectures focused on mobility, energy, environment, and governance domains, with public health data typically managed through separate national or regional health system frameworks that were poorly integrated with municipal data infrastructures (Kummitha, 2020; Allam & Jones, 2020). The pandemic forced a rapid and often improvised integration of public health data — infection rate maps, hospital capacity monitoring, contact tracing data, vaccine

registration and coverage statistics — into the operational data environments of city governments, creating both new analytical capabilities and new governance challenges.

The analytical capabilities generated by the integration of public health and urban data are significant and, in the post-COVID context, increasingly well-documented. Cities that developed robust integration between mobility data, demographic data, and epidemiological data during the pandemic were able to identify high-risk populations and locations more precisely, target public health interventions more effectively, and monitor the impact of non-pharmaceutical interventions on transmission dynamics with greater accuracy than cities relying on traditional epidemiological surveillance systems alone (Kummitha, 2020; Cheshmehzangi, 2021). The experience of cities such as Seoul, which deployed a comprehensive contact tracing and quarantine management system that drew on credit card transaction data, mobile phone location data, and CCTV footage to reconstruct the movements of confirmed cases, demonstrated the epidemiological effectiveness of integrated urban data systems while simultaneously raising fundamental questions about the proportionality, necessity, and legal basis of such data use (Lee & Lee, 2014; Floridi et al., 2020). The governance challenges generated by the pandemic-era integration of public health and urban data are at least as significant as the analytical opportunities it creates, and they have generated an extensive policy debate in the post-COVID period. The core challenge is the tension between the legitimate public health imperative to collect, share, and analyse health-relevant data at the population level and the privacy rights and data protection entitlements of individual citizens — a tension that the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the European context addresses through a framework of derogations for public health purposes that were widely invoked during the pandemic but that were applied inconsistently and sometimes in ways that raised serious proportionality concerns (European Data Protection Board, 2020; Morley et al., 2020). The post-COVID governance challenge is to develop durable, democratically legitimate frameworks for the integration of public health and urban data that can be deployed in future public health emergencies without requiring emergency derogations from normal data protection standards, by designing data architectures and governance structures that are sufficiently flexible to support emergency public health responses while maintaining robust privacy protections and democratic oversight in the non-emergency context.

The concept of the 'health-smart city' — a city whose data infrastructure incorporates public health intelligence as a routine dimension of urban management rather than as an emergency add-on —

has emerged in the post-COVID literature as a promising framework for the institutionalisation of pandemic-era data integration (Allam & Jones, 2020; Kummitha, 2020). Health-smart city architectures would embed environmental health monitoring (air quality, noise, green space access), social determinants of health data (poverty, housing quality, access to services), and epidemiological surveillance into the routine data management systems of city governments, enabling earlier detection of emerging health threats, more equitable allocation of public health resources, and more effective prevention and health promotion programming. The realisation of this vision requires significant investment in data infrastructure, inter-institutional data sharing agreements, and governance frameworks that ensure public trust — and it requires deliberate attention to the risk that health data integration amplifies existing patterns of surveillance and social control rather than advancing public health and equity.

6. SURVEILLANCE, DATA GOVERNANCE, AND THE DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY OF POST-COVID SMART CITY MANAGEMENT

The most politically contentious dimension of post-COVID smart city management concerns the governance of the surveillance and data collection capabilities that were rapidly expanded during the pandemic and that have proven difficult to contain or reverse in its aftermath. The pandemic created both the technical infrastructure and the political justification for a significant expansion of urban surveillance: contact tracing applications collected granular location and proximity data from tens of millions of users; smart city platforms integrated feeds from public CCTV networks, mobile phone operators, and social media platforms to monitor compliance with movement restrictions; and AI-enhanced analytics systems processed this data at a scale and resolution that had no precedent in non-emergency peacetime urban governance (Kitchin, 2020; Zuboff, 2019).

The post-COVID governance of these surveillance capabilities raises fundamental questions about the appropriate balance between security and liberty, between public health and privacy, and between the efficiency of centralised data management and the democratic accountability of distributed, citizen-controlled data governance. Shoshana Zuboff's concept of 'surveillance capitalism' — the economic logic by which behavioural data extracted from digital interactions is commodified and used to predict and influence human behaviour for commercial gain — provides a critical framework for analysing the risks that pandemic-era data collection creates for the

governance of post-COVID smart cities (Zuboff, 2019). Where the data collected for public health emergency purposes is retained, commercialised, or repurposed for non-health uses — whether by government agencies, technology vendors, or third-party data brokers — it creates the infrastructure for forms of social monitoring and control that are difficult to reconcile with democratic governance values (Floridi et al., 2020; Morley et al., 2020).

The emerging governance framework for post-COVID smart city data — exemplified by the European Union's Data Governance Act (2022), the AI Act (2024), and the Digital Services Act (2022), as well as by city-level initiatives such as Barcelona's City Data Commons and Amsterdam's Data Strategy (2021) — reflects an attempt to develop institutionally robust responses to these governance challenges that go beyond the emergency derogations and ad hoc arrangements of the pandemic period. These frameworks share several common commitments: the principle of data minimisation — collecting only the data strictly necessary for specified, legitimate purposes; the requirement of democratic oversight of algorithmic decision-making systems used in public administration; the priority of open, interoperable, and publicly governed data infrastructure over proprietary vendor-controlled alternatives; and the embedding of citizen rights — including rights of access, correction, and objection — into the design of urban data systems rather than treating them as post-hoc limitations on otherwise unlimited data collection (European Parliament & Council, 2022; Barns, 2020; Morozov & Bria, 2018).

The challenge for smart city management in the post-COVID period is to operationalise these governance commitments within the specific institutional, financial, and technical constraints that individual cities face — constraints that vary enormously across the diverse landscape of European and global urban governance. Small and medium-sized municipalities, in particular, may lack the in-house technical expertise, the legal capacity, and the financial resources to implement sophisticated data governance frameworks independently, creating a risk that the post-COVID consolidation of smart city data systems produces governance arrangements that are adequate for large, well-resourced cities but inadequate for the much larger number of smaller municipalities that constitute the majority of urban governance units. Addressing this governance capacity gap requires investment in shared digital governance infrastructure, inter-municipal cooperation frameworks, and national-level regulatory and technical support for local digital governance — investments that the European Union's Digital Decade targets and the national recovery and

resilience plans of member states have begun to support but that require sustained political commitment to be realised at the scale required.

7. CONCLUSIONS

This article has examined the principal dimensions of the reconfiguration of smart city management in the post-COVID era, arguing that the pandemic constituted a transformative moment for urban digital governance that simultaneously accelerated positive innovations and amplified existing risks in ways that require deliberate institutional responses rather than a simple return to the pre-pandemic status quo. The analysis has identified four major dimensions of post-COVID smart city transformation — digital public service delivery, urban mobility and public space, public health data integration, and surveillance governance — and has evaluated each in terms of its opportunities, its challenges, and the institutional choices that will determine whether its post-COVID trajectory contributes to or undermines the goals of equitable, resilient, and democratically accountable urban governance.

The overarching conclusion of this analysis is that the post-COVID moment represents a genuine strategic opportunity for the reorientation of smart city management toward a more citizen-centred, equitable, and democratically accountable model — but that realising this opportunity requires deliberate institutional choices that are not guaranteed by the dominant commercial and bureaucratic dynamics of smart city development. The risk of path dependence — the consolidation of emergency digital governance arrangements that were adequate for crisis conditions but embody problematic trade-offs between efficiency and equity, convenience and privacy, technical optimisation and democratic participation — is real and documented in the emerging post-COVID urban governance literature (Cheshmehzangi, 2021; Sharifi & Khavarian-Garmsir, 2020; Kitchin, 2020).

Avoiding this risk requires, at minimum, three institutional commitments that current smart city management frameworks do not always make explicit. First, a commitment to democratic governance of digital infrastructure: the decisions about what data to collect, how to use it, who has access to it, and what algorithmic systems are deployed on it are governance decisions with profound implications for the rights and life chances of urban citizens, and they must be subject to democratic deliberation and oversight rather than delegated to technical experts or commercial vendors. Second, a commitment to digital equity: any smart city management strategy that

improves services for the digitally enabled while creating new barriers for the digitally excluded is not a success but a failure of urban governance, and the post-COVID consolidation of digital services must be accompanied by sustained investment in digital inclusion programmes, hybrid service delivery models, and the public infrastructure — broadband connectivity, digital skills training, access to devices — that genuine digital equity requires. Third, a commitment to institutional learning: the post-COVID period is an opportunity to evaluate the emergency innovations of the pandemic years systematically, to identify what worked and what failed, and to build the evidence base for a more deliberate and well-grounded smart city management strategy — one that is oriented not by technological ambition or commercial opportunity but by a clear analysis of the urban governance challenges that digital technologies can most effectively address. The cities that emerge from the post-COVID period as leaders in smart urban governance will not necessarily be those that deployed the most sophisticated technologies during the pandemic, or those that most rapidly consolidated pandemic-era digital innovations into permanent administrative infrastructure. They will be those that used the crisis as an opportunity to develop a more reflective, more equitable, and more genuinely participatory relationship between digital technology and democratic urban governance — one that treats the smart city not as a technical achievement to be pursued for its own sake but as an institutional project whose value is determined entirely by its contribution to the wellbeing, the agency, and the equal citizenship of all who live within it.

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THE REAL ESTATE MARKET BETWEEN ECONOMIC CAUSALITY AND THE RISKS OF ORGANIZED CRIME

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ABSTRACT

The city of Cluj-Napoca turned into the biggest real estate boom in Romania. Although wages have remained at the national average level by field of activity, the price of housing tends to take such a large scale that it exceeds the amount of real estate in many European countries and cities. The community of ordinary, honest and industrious people sees themselves excluded from their own city, suffering because of this price explosion which has an impact in all social spheres. The explanation that the price level is due to the large number of students and computer scientists is easy and convenient for the authorities who do not really have reactions, answers and solutions.

KEYWORDS: *accommodation, maximum profit, corruption, computer scientists, real estate, money laundering, indolence, incompetence, complicity, community suffering, emigration, solutions.*

J.E.L. Classifications: R31, R21, R28, D31, I31, R11, O18, J31

1. ARGUMENT

After December 1989 in Cluj-Napoca there were phenomena and facts prominently highlighted on the national socio-economic map: the Caritas pyramid megagame, the FNI scam guaranteed in the end by the CEC, the bankruptcy of the largest private Bank "Dacia Felix", the headquarters of two antagonistic national parties UDMR and PUNR and very important, in the long term, the expansion of "Babeş Bolyai" University which became the largest in the country, both in terms of number of students and as the number of sections. The transformation of the number of students into an economic, not only scientific, cultural and social argument, even without coverage on the labor market, induced the increase in the number of students at all universities. It is not easy to mention "all" universities! The six state universities have a large share:

"Babeş Bolyai" University, Technical University, University of Medicine and Pharmacy, University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine, University of Art and Design, Academy of Music. Along with these, the legislation after 1989 allowed the establishment of private education - "Bogdan Vodă" University (one of the first in the city), Dimitrie Cantemir University (centered in Bucharest, but with strong branches of Law and Economic Sciences in Cluj), "Sapientia" University focused on the Hungarian community, as well as "Partium" University in Oradea which has activity in Cluj as well, as well as other higher education institutions reorganized/disbanded over time, or with more limited or meteoric activity - "Avram Iancu", "Spiru Haret", "Phoenix", the Protestant Theological Institute and we do not claim to list exhaustively.

It is certain that Cluj-Napoca has the highest density of students compared to the number of inhabitants in the country. These crowds of students, about 100 thousand with master's and doctoral students, in principle, were mainly charged tuition fees and all kinds of expenses were increased, based on the well-known principle of the price that appears as a result of the competition between demand and supply. There is a very high demand in Cluj, sometimes exorbitant, the solution, the most profitable and immediate, was just to increase the prices.

Given that practically no dormitories were built after 1989, (only one in the Gheorghieni District, near "Economic Sciences" - FSEGA, but it is not entirely dedicated to students) among the prices that have exploded in Cluj, the shocking is that of rents and, logically, in the next steps, real estate prices. The explanation of the large number of students and IT specialists is the most convenient in excusing apathy or anti-crime inefficiency, but it is also necessary to analyze the hypothesis if part of the pressure on prices can come from financial flows associated with organized crime.

2. POSTULATED: ORGANIZED CRIME IS INTERESTED BY THE BIGGEST PROFIT

The accommodation capacity in the state dormitories is approximately 14,000-15,000 places, and the students who do not get a place in the dorm, volens-nolens, enter a rental market where a level of 300-500 euros for a studio apartment excludes young people from disadvantaged backgrounds from Cluj university studies. Many of them would have deserved to perform in Cluj! It is estimated that approximately 65,000 students live in rented accommodation annually.

Most students barely pay their rent and living expenses, very few can afford to enter the property market as buyers. There is, however, one category that influences the real estate market the most - IT specialists.

They influence more because they have high salaries relative to the rest of the population. However, the infusion of students and the university environment determined the explosion of the crowd of IT-scientists in Cluj-Napoca, rightly considered a "Silicon Valley" of Eastern Europe. The estimate goes up to the existence of about 30,000 IT specialists in Cluj with a number of over a thousand active IT companies.

All of these provide clues to the size of the rental market and the total value of real estate transactions.

In 2025, Cluj county registered an approximate volume of 30,782 real estate transactions with an estimate of between 1.8 - 2.2 billion EUR annually (sources: ANCPI - National Real Estate Agency; Imobiliare.ro; Storia.ro s.a.).

The rental market is more difficult to quantify, but it can be approximated by the number of residential units estimated to be in the rental circuit of at least 45-50 thousand units (apartments and rooms). Considering the data published in some specialized websites, Imobiliare.ro; Storia.ro, or of public institutions (City Hall of Cluj Napoca - floating population) we arrive at a total estimated annual value of approx. 300 million EUR.

What happened in the USA during alcohol prohibition when alcohol smuggling produced a huge amount of black money? Who appeared on the market?

In drugs, in human trafficking, in the smuggling of oil to Yugoslavia in the 90s, in the massive cutting of forests in countries that do not protect them, in prostitution, in gambling and betting, wherever, when the stake of a very large profit appears, even if it is illegal, who undoubtedly appears?

Popular wisdom has an expression that captures the phenomenon: "Let it be, because frogs gather!" Is there a risk that part of the real estate market in Cluj or in Romania will be accessed, influenced or even controlled by organized crime?

The clearest proof of the influence of organized crime is the huge number of homes sold that remain unoccupied! Between 18,000 and 24,000 housing units, depending on the information sources, in Cluj-Napoca alone. Thousands of apartments are bought for hoarding. Rising property prices coupled with very low interest rates offered by banks on savings have made buying an

additional home an investment for anyone who can afford it. But it is also a classic method of money laundering where the goal is not the profit from the rent, but the legalization of the initial amount through subsequent resale.

3. REAL ESTATE IS FAVORITE TO BE A "SAFE HAVEN" (SAFE REFUGE) FOR ILLICIT CAPITAL

Although the presence of the IT sector and students would lead to the thought of a constant demand, especially in the conditions in which a salary recession in IT is foreseen (it actually took place), the hyperbolic evolution of real estate prices in Cluj cannot be justified. Practically, these real estate prices have been decoupled from the real purchasing power of the average salary, even if this "average", in Cluj, contains a lot of IT.

Who does the disconnection? A working student, a programmer even with an above-average income is subject to the bank lending grids. When the price per square meter exceeds the threshold of 3000 euros/sq m, or in special areas/center, over 5000 euros/sq m, they become unaffordable for the middle class through mortgage credit. Everyone knows that high prices are supported with "cash", which highlights sources of financing external to the transparent banking system, specific to organized crime that needs to "clean" financial funds of dubious origin as quickly as possible. It's like a geometric law, a postulate, it's just like that, but even if it's like that, it's certainly not a proof on file, it's just an assumption. There are institutions that, based on some laws, will look for this evidence, being within their competence.

Some authors on economic crime suggest that real estate markets in fast-growing cities may become vulnerable to the infiltration of capital from illicit activities (Unger, 2021). The real estate sector is recognized as a classic instrument for money laundering, including the profits from drug trafficking (FATF, 2019).

An interesting work in the field is by a collective led by Klitgaard Robert "Corrupt Cities: Practical Guide to Institutional Reform". These specialists identify three main mechanisms:

- money laundering through real estate investments because real estate offers: high and relatively stable value; the possibility of justifying the origin of the funds; integration into the formal economy.
- capital reinvested from the drug market. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the drug market generates hundreds of billions of USD annually globally (UNODC,

2023). Part of these funds are reinvested in: residential real estate; commercial premises; urban developments.

In Europe, studies on cities such as Amsterdam or Barcelona have shown correlations between the underground economy and speculative real estate investments (Savona, 2020).

- the third mechanism refers to demand distortion. Is it the case of Cluj?

Black money does not pursue classic profitability, but:

- preservation of value;
- anonymization of property;
- integration into the legal circuit.

Thus, artificial demand can push prices above the level determined strictly by legitimate supply and demand.

4. COMPETENT INSTITUTIONS, CASE STUDY AND THE THREAT NARCO TRAFFIC

Combating the phenomenon would require the coordinated action of several institutions:

- Directorate for the Investigation of Organized Crime and Terrorism (DIICOT)
- National Anticorruption Directorate (DNA)
- National Office for the Prevention and Combating of Money Laundering (ONPCSB)
- National Fiscal Administration Authority (ANAF)
- General Inspectorate of the Romanian Police (IGPR)

The main legislative framework mainly refers to:

- Law no. 656/2002 on the prevention and sanctioning of money laundering
- Law no. 143/2000 on preventing and combating drug trafficking and illicit drug consumption
- Criminal Code (art. 367 – organized criminal group)

Examples of relevant files:

Romania

- 2020 – DIICOT file on drug trafficking and money laundering through real estate purchases in Bucharest (DIICOT public release);
- 2022 – File regarding an organized criminal group involved in tax fraud and real estate investments (Bucharest Court of Appeal),

- 2023 – Case instituted by DIICOT regarding cocaine trafficking and property investments in the west of the country.

Germany: Investigations coordinated by the Bundeskriminalamt (BKA) demonstrated the use of real estate for the recycling of profits from drug trafficking networks (BKA Report, 2021).

Netherlands: The Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU Nederland) reported in 2022 the increase in suspicious transactions in the real estate sector in Amsterdam, associated with the drug economy.

5. THE THREAT OF DRUG TRAFFICKING ON CLUJ. INCLUSIVE OF CLUJ REAL ESTATE

Cluj-Napoca is a major university center, and the reports of the National Anti-Drug Agency indicate the existence of high consumption in the university environment (ANA, 2022). In economic theory, a city with: high consumption, logistical proximity, high purchasing power, can generate important financial flows in the underground economy.

If these flows are reinvested in real estate, it results:

- additional pressure on demand;
- cash purchases;
- lack of price sensitivity.

However, we note that no public data has been identified that accurately quantifies the weight of this phenomenon in the formation of prices in Cluj-Napoca.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND PROPOSALS

It is well known that the upward spiral of real estate has a major negative impact on all components of social life. Institutions with competences in the field are expected to leave their mark more and contribute to the normalization of the perspectives of local communities, despite a lack of social reactivity typical of an increasingly aggressive, apathetic population, resigned to the idea that nothing can be done to improve living conditions.

A lot can still be done, there are international anti-corruption models. Where there was political will, things got better, some negative phenomena were even eradicated, and some proposals can be extracted from those models:

- Extending the verification of the source of funds for transactions above a certain value threshold. Constantly checking the real prices from the real estate agencies with those declared at the notary chambers:
- Automatic interconnection ANAF–ONPCSB–DIICOT.
- Complete public register of beneficial owners (in line with EU Directive 2018/843).
- Extended confiscation according to art. 112 Criminal Code.

Romania is the country that in peacetime was condemned by pauperization, lack of perspective, systemic corruption to have the largest share of emigrant population in Europe, and of course with an unwanted leading place in the world, and all this took place in peacetime. By analogy, from the much-acclaimed "5-star city", the aberrant price spiral in Cluj-Napoca can produce similar, uncontrollable effects internally. Paraphrasing the legal admonition, we would conclude by warning, "Any silence can turn against us!"

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***Law no. 656/2002 for the prevention and sanctioning of money laundering

ROMANIAN POLICE MAJOR PROBLEMS OF HUMAN RESOURCES AND COMPARATIVE MODELS

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ABSTRACT

The Romanian Police, as the primary law enforcement institution in Romania, faces persistent structural and human resource (HR) challenges that affect its operational efficiency and public trust. Despite post-1989 reforms and the transition to a civilian institution, the system continues to exhibit characteristics of centralization, bureaucratic rigidity, and limited modernization of HR management practices.

KEYWORDS: *Romanian Police, Post-1989 period, Efficiency, Progressive transformation, Incomplete transformation*

J.E.L. Classifications: **J24, J45, M54, H11, P51**

1. INTRODUCTION

The efficiency of the Romanian Police after 1989 was characterized by progressive but incomplete transformations. The specialized literature emphasizes that the process of police democratization in Central and Eastern Europe was often fragmented and dependent on the political and institutional context (Marina Caparini and Otwin Marenin, 2004). We try to use the term reform as little as possible (and we say efficiency) because for us, rightly, reform has sometimes become a term synonymous with the destruction, the demolition of something that worked (not rarely better without reform), for example, the Romanian school, or the institution of the sectorist within the police and the examples would be numerous.

2. SYSTEM SIZE AND PERSONNEL DEFICIT

The Romanian Police faces an estimated deficit of approximately 13,400 positions ($\approx 20\%$), while the Romanian Gendarmerie has approximately 20,000–23,000 employees. These data point to a major structural problem, where the loss of staff is faster than replacement capacity. The

Gendarmerie has valuable people, very well trained, but rarely and ineffectively used, in the Police they could show their worth much more.

3. EUROSTAT COMPARATIVE DATA

According to Eurostat data, Romania has approximately 300 police officers per 100,000 inhabitants, a level comparable to the European average (Aggregated data from MAI reports and staff shortage analyzes (2023–2024).

Police Country / 100,000 inhabitants

Romania ~300

Germany ~300

France ~320

Poland ~250

Hungary ~290

Czech Republic ~400

The interpretation of these data indicates that Romania's problem is not the total number of police officers, but their distribution, the loss of experienced personnel. Apparently it seems that we are integrating into the European context, but does it depend on what we say the police represent? They are counted as police officers employed in administrative and logistical structures, from different structures ("Agents" Anti...) whose activity is much more similar to popularization, information NGOs, distributing leaflets and posters than the activity of operative police forces.

4. INSTITUTIONAL FRAGMENTATION

The Romanian system is characterized by the coexistence of the Police, the Gendarmerie and the Local Police. This structure generates overlaps and inefficiency, being considered suboptimal in the specialized literature (Robert Reiner, 2010). Who can afford to maintain institutions of tens of thousands of employees "in the spirit of tradition" and national culture when the same activities and missions could be done with specialized structures of the Police? Overcoming the reality that the former military Security units took over the tradition and portfolio of the Gendarmerie at full speed.

We don't discuss the Local Police here anymore, being often assimilated to a private police of the local officials (in Iași they also dealt with the pursuit and monitoring of a mayor's mistress) with duties perceived as exclusively with spoliation, punishing the population through fines and car seizures. And here, however, there is a human capital with great potential that could be used much better!

It is obvious, however, that this fragmentation generates:

- overlapping skills;
- confusion for citizens;
- operational inefficiency;
- coordination difficulties in critical situations.

For example, in the management of protests or urban public order, responsibilities, powers (and accountability), coordination and cooperation are often unclearly divided between the Police and the Gendarmerie.

5. THE DUALITY OF THE POLICE-GENDARMERIE

Romania maintains a rare dual model in the region. Most states in Central and Eastern Europe have adopted unified systems.

Relevant examples: Austria (unification, 2005), Belgium (integrated reform, 2001), etc.

Austria is a relevant example, as it carried out a major reform in 2005:

What happened? The federal police, gendarmerie and other structures were unified. Only one structure was created: the Austrian Federal Police.

Results: reduction of bureaucracy; increased efficiency; clarity in skills; budget savings

This model can often be invoked in Romania as a possible reform direction.

In what other countries was unification achieved? Complete unification is not frequent, but there are examples:

Belgium: Reform in 2001; The police was reorganized into an integrated system (federal + local); The gendarmerie was abolished as a separate structure.

Netherlands: Unified National Police System; There is no separate gendarmerie (with limited military exceptions).

Ireland: One national police force (Garda); No gendarmerie type structure.

There are still many countries with a dual system, but those who have integrated, unified think it is much better.

Bayley argues that integrated systems provide a better fit for modern security requirements (David H. Bayley, 1994). We thus try to appeal to the opinions appearing in the specialized literature, not to issue subjective opinions.

6. HOW IS PUBLIC ORDER ORGANIZED IN FORMER SOCIALIST COUNTRIES?

The comparison with what is happening in other states can be even more conclusive, not with Western states where the material possibilities would be different, but with former communist states:

Poland: Civil Police + Military Gendarmerie (but with a limited role); There is no separate civil gendarmerie as in Romania.

Hungary: Unified police force; No separate gendarmerie.

Czech Republic: Civilian National Police; Simplified structure, without gendarmerie.

Slovakia: Model similar to the Czech Republic.

Bulgaria: National Police + Special Forces. No classic gendarmerie.

Croatia: Unified Police. special units for interventions.

Comparative conclusion: Most former socialist states abandoned the dual model (Police + Civil Gendarmerie) and adopted unified police, special internal structures (not institutionally separated).

Romania is, thus, an exception in the region.

7. IT WAS ABLE TO IDENTIFY A SERIES OF ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST THE UNIFICATION OF THE POLICE AND THE GENDARMERIA

Advantages:

- elimination of overlaps;
- cost reduction, especially in conditions of budgetary pressure;
- operational clarity;
- single command in crisis situations (in a popular expression one could say that "fewer bosses, fewer secretaries and personal drivers, more work".)

Disadvantages:

- institutional resistance, the invocation of tradition;
- cultural integration difficulties (military vs civilian);
- risk of excessive centralization.

8. THE PROXIMITY POLICE AND THE SECTORIST'S PROBLEM

The concept of "sectorist" was abandoned in favor of the community policing model, of the proximity policeman, but its implementation in Romania remains incomplete and, let's face it, ineffective.

The sectorist provides direct and continuous knowledge of the community, which enables early identification of problems and prevention of crime, not just reaction to it.

Through his constant presence in an area, he contributes to increasing citizens' trust in the police and improving institutional communication.

In addition, the sectorist facilitates the collection of relevant information and rapid intervention, being a key element of the modern model of community policing.

Practically, by abolishing the sectorist institution, the Romanian Police largely disconnected from the reality of the street.

Goldstein emphasizes that modern policing must be oriented toward solving community problems (Herman Goldstein, 1990).

9. RETIREMENT AGE – EUROPEAN COMPARISON

Romania allows frequent early retirement (47–55 years), while most European states maintain ages between 60 and 65.

This difference represents one of the biggest structural vulnerabilities of the system.

To take the best people out of the system, the most experienced, the most independent who could devote themselves to the profession, amounted to a coup d'état against national public order and safety. In addition to the extremely important fact that the young employees, who had just entered the institution, no longer had anyone to learn from.

10. IMPACT OF EARLY RETIREMENT

Early retirement generates:

- loss of experience
- increasing costs
- lack of staff

According to Manning (2010), accumulated experience is a “critical organizational capital” and its loss destroys the effectiveness of the institution. He also defines this phenomenon as a loss of "institutional capital" (Peter K. Manning, 2010). Human capital is essential in any field!

11. RE-USE OF RETIRED STAFF

There are approximately 105,000 MAI pensioners in Romania. Western models demonstrate the effectiveness of using retired staff in:

- vocational training
- analysis and intelligence
- community police
- administrative functions

This practice is insufficiently used in Romania.

12. BASED ON THE ANALYSIS AND COMPARISONS MADE, SOME EFFICIENCY DIRECTIONS CAN BE DISTINGUISHED (WE EXPLAINED WHY, EVEN IF WE ARE EXAGGERATING, WE WOULD NOT WANT TO USE THE TERM OF REFORM TOO OFTEN ANYMORE) FOR THE ROMANIAN POLICE

The reintroduction and operationalization of the sectorist institution. The police must have the relevant information and control over the reality on the ground.

Institutional reorganization: serious consideration of unifying or redefining roles, reducing fragmentation. Absorption of the Gendarmerie and possibly the Border Police.

Professionalization: merit-based recruitment, modern continuous training, depoliticization.

Digitization: integrated IT systems, interconnected databases, the use of artificial intelligence.

Increasing transparency: public reporting: generalization of video cameras for interventions, independent control mechanisms, transparency and outsourcing of contests to eliminate vassalage and political involvement.

Conclusions. The analysis highlights that the Romanian Police is facing a systemic crisis determined by:

- Wrong reform measures (abolition of sectorists);
- institutional fragmentation (the Gendarmerie, the Local Police and the Border Police are too little involved);
- shortage of staff (~20%);
- early retirement.

Eurostat data confirms that the problem is mainly structural, not numerical.

The reform must aim at institutional integration, the modernization of human resources and the return to some aspects that have demonstrated their effectiveness, the effective use of professional experience and human capital.

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CHALLENGES IN THE SYSTEM OF PUBLIC ORDER AND SAFETY. ANALYSIS OF MAJOR RISKS

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ABSTRACT

The article analyzes the main legal and institutional challenges in the public order and safety system in Romania, with an emphasis on the selection of human resources, professional motivation and systemic risks.

Numerous empirical observations from practice are used to highlight current dysfunctions and the effects of insufficiently substantiated reforms. The study proposes a critical approach to the phenomenon of "abuse of reforms" and emphasizes the need for a coherent policy of human resources and institutional modernization.

KEYWORDS: *Public order; human resources; intrinsic motivation; extrinsic motivation; institutional reform; systemic risks; public trust; corruption; legal security*

J.E.L. Classifications: H11, H83, J24, D91, P48, G01, D73, K42

1. THE IMPORTANCE OF HUMAN RESOURCE SELECTION, REFORMS AND CONSEQUENCES

1.1 MAJOR CHALLENGES AND RISKS. REFORMS AND THE ABUSE OF REFORMS

1.1.1 ARGUMENT

The public service of public order and public safety is governed by fundamental principles of administrative law: legality, efficiency, continuity, adaptability and satisfaction of the public interest.

Any institutional change must be assessed in light of the impact on these principles. More and more it is found that some reforms were carried out just for the sake of reform, the idea of a real abuse of reforms is taking shape.

The foundation of this article starts from an essential finding: certain institutional decisions have negatively affected the efficiency of the system by weakening prevention mechanisms, losing professional capital and diminishing control over the criminal environment.

1.1.2 SYSTEMIC AND OPERATIONAL RISK ANALYSIS

1.1.2.1 THE RISK OF OPERATIONAL CAPACITY DEGRADATION

The most significant risk is the chronic staff shortage. Waves of mass retirements are seen as an unintended attack on public safety.

The decrease in the attractiveness of the profession, combined with premature retirements, led to a dilution of professional competence. The lack of mentoring and transfer of experience accentuates this phenomenon.

The direct consequence is the risk of operative and judicial malpractice. There have been situations where graduates have been coordinated by less experienced staff than them.

Example: situations reported in police union reports regarding the lack of staff and the overloading of agents (e.g. Europol Union, 2022-2024 communications). A deficit of approximately 8,000 employees in the Romanian Police is estimated. Source: Europol Union, official releases and analyzes regarding the shortage of personnel in the Romanian Police.

1.1.2.2 THE RISK OF CORRUPTION AND INFILTRATION

The vulnerability of staff to organized crime is a major risk. Non-competitive pay, relative to the financial resources of criminal groups, creates the conditions for corruption.

This risk manifests itself through information leakage, institutional protection and institutional capture at the local level.

Example: cases of police officers investigated for supporting drug or people trafficking networks ("live meat" trafficking), reflected in DIICOT files (e.g. files regarding drug trafficking in the port of Constanța). Source: DIICOT – official releases and activity reports.

3. The risk of safety and health at work

The risk of aggression against the police has increased significantly. The lack of modern equipment places the policeman in a vulnerable position.

There is also a major psychosocial risk: burnout, depression and, in extreme cases, suicide.

"Although there is no uniform official statistic regarding insult crimes directed exclusively against police officers, the corroboration of data from the reports of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Public Affairs indicates an estimated annual volume of between 700 and 1,000 such crimes. The trend is an upward one, the phenomenon being characterized by a high frequency in the operative activity of police officers (MAI, 2023; SNPPC, 2026)."

2. THE RISK OF LEGISLATIVE UNPREDICTABILITY

The instability of the normative framework generates uncertainty and fear to act. The policeman fears that a legitimate intervention may later be reinterpreted as abuse.

Example: the successive amendments to the Criminal Code and the decisions of the Constitutional Court regarding abuse of office have generated different interpretations in practice.

5. Technological risk

The technological gap with criminals is obvious. Lack of investment in IT infrastructure and specialists limits responsiveness.

Example: difficulties in investigating complex computer crimes compared to the capacities of European structures.

3. THE RISK OF LOSING THE CITIZEN'S TRUST

The biggest risk remains the loss of citizen trust. When public perception associates the police with incompetence or corruption, there is a rupture in the social contract.

After a certain threshold, citizens look for parallel solutions: bribes, illegal collectors or other forms of informal justice. In this context we can talk about the concept of "captive state".

Example: highly publicized cases such as Caracal or May 2, which affected the public perception of the institutions.

4. DECREASE IN THE ATTRACTIVENESS OF THE POLICE PROFESSION

Competition for admission has decreased dramatically. If in the past there were 15-20 candidates per seat, now their number is close to the number of seats.

The main causes are:

- non-competitive salary

- working conditions
- degradation of social status
- system rigidity
- the unpredictability of pensions

A young person can earn a similar salary in the private sector without the risks of the profession. The institution's image has been damaged by high-profile cases, which discourages worthy candidates.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

The public safety and order system may be at the crossroads of big choices. To choose correctly depends on moral virtue which, according to Aristotle, means "the ability to choose by a rule what a man endowed with practical wisdom would determine to be the middle way between two extremes", considered to be vices.

"From the perspective of the public sector, the importance of organizational culture, of the environment with which young people who enter public positions come into contact, must be emphasized. Institutional construction, as well as managerial decisions, must always bear in mind the limitation of the possibility of elements that present a risk from the perspective of ethical norms to negatively influence the operation of the institution. They are truths discovered by the ancient Greeks that must only be applied. (Radu, L. et al. (2013). Ethics. Bucharest: Publishing House Didactics and Pedagogy.)

The public order system in Romania faces profound structural challenges. Solutions cannot come from superficial reforms, but from coherent policies, oriented towards human resources and legislative stability. Regaining public trust must become a strategic objective.

In this context, the evolution perspective of the system must consider an integrated approach, in which the human resource is placed at the center of the reform. It is not enough just to fill vacant positions, but it is essential to increase the quality of the selection, by introducing real mechanisms for evaluating moral, psychological and professional skills. Continuous training, authentic mentoring and the valorization of professional experience must become basic pillars of institutional functioning.

Also, legislative stability is a fundamental condition for the efficiency of police action. A predictable, coherent and correlated regulatory framework with the realities on the ground will

reduce the risk of hesitation in decision-making and strengthen the legal authority of the police officer. At the same time, it is necessary to develop institutional protection mechanisms that support the staff in the exercise of their duties, especially in borderline situations.

Another essential direction is technological modernization and adaptation to new forms of crime. Investments in digital infrastructure, data analysis and specialist training must become real priorities, not just declarative goals. Without them, the gap between the institutions and the criminal environment will continue to deepen.

Last but not least, regaining the citizen's trust must be the result of an authentic process, based on professionalism, transparency and consistency. Trust cannot be imposed, but is built over time, through every interaction between police officer and citizen. In this sense, organizational culture and professional ethics become determining factors.

In conclusion, the future of the public order and safety system depends on its ability to make fair, balanced and responsible choices, in the spirit of that "middle way" that Aristotle spoke of, but adapted to contemporary realities.

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**THE EFFICIENCY OF THE PUBLIC ORDER SYSTEM. PROPOSAL FOR A
FERENDA LAW ON POLICE REFORM THROUGH THE ABSORPTION AND
RECONSTRUCTION OF INFORMATIONAL CONTROL**

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ABSTRACT

This text analyzes some structural dysfunctions of the system of order and public safety in Romania and proposes legal ferenda solutions based on operative realities. Three main directions of reform are identified: institutional reorganization through the absorption of the Gendarmerie, the reintroduction of the sectorist as an informational control tool and the capitalization of the human capital represented by retired police officers. The analysis is supported by institutional data, European comparative models and relevant criminological concepts.

KEYWORDS: *efficiency, informational control, Police, Gendarmerie, sectorist, human capital, absorption, lege ferenda, European models, contemporary challenges.*

J.E.L. Classifications: H11, H83, K14, K42, J24, D23, O52

1. INTRODUCTION

The system of public order and safety is one of the fundamental pillars of the rule of law, being responsible for protecting the rights and freedoms of citizens. In the current context, characterized by criminal mobility, the development of organized crime and the complexity of social phenomena, the efficiency of law enforcement institutions becomes essential.

The present analysis starts from a fundamental finding: system dysfunctions are not generated exclusively by the lack of resources, but mainly by the way they are organized and used. Comparative models demonstrate that effectiveness is driven by institutional coherence and unity of command (Bayley, D.,1994).

2. THE REAL DIMENSION OF THE PROBLEM: THE SCARCITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF RESOURCES

The Romanian Police faces an estimated deficit of between 10,000 and 15,000 posts (IGPR, Activity Report, 2023), directly affecting the operational structures.

At the same time, the Romanian Gendarmerie has approximately 20,000–23,000 employees (MAI, Institutional report, 2023), and the Border Police: approximately 12,000–13,000 employees (IGPF, Annual Report, 2023).

This distribution highlights an essential problem, - not the total lack of staff, but the inefficient allocation of staff.

The situation goes against the principle of public service efficiency, which requires the optimal use of available resources (Vedinaş, V., 2020).

3. INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS: THE CASE OF CLUJ

Cluj County represents a relevant model for the analysis of systemic imbalances.

Estimated:

- Police: 1,200–1,400 police officers, with an operational deficit
- Gendarmerie: 600–800 gendarmes

The police face a deficit in: • criminal investigations, public order, prevention. Instead, the Gendarmerie is mainly used for public order at events, guarding, specific interventions.

In conclusion, we can say that the resource exists, but it is not used effectively in combating everyday crime.

4. PRIORITY REFORM: ABSORPTION OF THE GENDARMERIE

The dual Police-Gendarmerie structure generates: •overlaps of competences, high administrative costs, coordination difficulties.

From a legal perspective, this situation goes against the principles of good administration (Weber, M., 1978).

Comparative models: in Austria in 2005 there was a Police + Gendarmerie merger, which led to increased efficiency. Belgium also switched to an integrated system, and in the European country

with the most praised institution of its kind, Great Britain, we also have a unique police force, without gendarmerie.

The European trend is clear: integration, not fragmentation, although of course there are enough counterexamples, but not of efficiency, but more of tradition!

5. FERENDA LAW PROPOSAL

TITLE I – Reorganization

Art. 1 – The National Police is established by reorganizing the existing structures.

Art. 2 – The Gendarmerie is functionally integrated into the National Police.

Art. 3 – Personnel are taken over with retention of rights.

It is not an abolition, but an effective reorganization.

TITLE II – The Sectorist

Art. 4 – The function of sector specialist is reintroduced.

Art. 5 – Duties: informational control, prevention, community relations,
Sectorist = "the eye of the state in the territory".

TITLE III – Human capital

Art. 6 – Rehiring some of the retired police officers.

Art. 7 – Domains: mentoring, analysis, proximity
Experience = institutional capital (Radu, L. 2013).

TITLE IV – Organization

Art. 8 – Regional support structures

Art. 9 – Operational / administrative delimitation

6. BORDER POLICE – MIXED SOLUTION. TOTAL ABSORPTION IS NOT RECOMMENDED DUE TO:

- European obligations and specialization. Solution: functional integration, cooperation.

7. WHY NOT THE LOCAL POLICE. PROBLEMS:

- politicization, different standards, uneven recruitment.

It is well known, and must be acknowledged, that integration would generate a systemic risk of corruption (Mungiu-Pippidi, A., 2015).

8. INFORMATION CONTROL AND THE "BROKEN WINDOW" THEORY

The "Broken Windows" theory shows that minor disorder breeds crime (Wilson & Kelling, 1982).

No sectorist: late reaction, loss of control. It can practically be said that the Romanian Police was disconnected from the reality of the street.

With the existence of the sectorist, the situation changes and we can talk about prevention and local control.

9. IMPACT ON CRIME

Without prevention:

- crime adapts and expands. The proposed reform would increase efficiency, reduce criminality and improve response.

10. CONCLUSIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

The current system is characterized by fragmentation and inefficiency. The reform must be structural, coherent, grounded in reality and centered on the three essential directions:

1. absorption of the Gendarmerie
2. the reintroduction of the sectorist
3. the use of pensioners

European models confirm that efficiency derives from unity and professionalization. In the absence of reform, there is a risk of perpetuating a system unable to respond to contemporary challenges.

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CONTRIBUTORY CAPACITY IN CONTEMPORARY TAX SYSTEMS: BETWEEN NORMATIVE IDEAL AND EMPIRICAL CONSTRAINTS

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Motto: *"Power involves a world that combines both chance and necessity, chaos and order" Alvin Toffler "Power in motion".*

ABSTRACT

The ability-to-pay principle is one of the fundamental pillars of the tax theory. The article proposes an integrated analysis — theoretical, empirical and comparative — of how this principle is applied in contemporary economies, with an emphasis on Romania and relevant comparisons with Poland and Hungary. The approach is an essayistic-analytical one, supplemented by econometric tools (regression on the Gini coefficient), to highlight the distance between the normative ideal of fiscal equity and institutional realities. The results indicate that the principle functions as a normative benchmark rather than a pure operational mechanism.

KEYWORDS: *contributory capacity; fiscal equity; inequality; Gini coefficient; progressive taxation; fiscal pressure; ability-to-pay (ability to pay); tax compliance*

J.E.L. Classifications: **K21, H24, D63, H21, D31, D63, E62, H20, H26**

1. INTRODUCTION

Beyond formulas and legal constructions, taxation remains the expression of a fundamental question: who, how much and why contributes to state financing?

The principle of contributing capacity provides a seemingly simple answer - everyone contributes according to their economic power. In reality, however, this idea crosses a tense field where equity, efficiency and the constraints of the global economy meet.

In Romania, this tension is visible: the low level of tax revenues coexists with significant inequalities, suggesting an incomplete application of the principle.

This principle is all the more important to highlight, analyze and apply as sociologists and empirical findings have revealed a surprising truth, inequity in the community leads to suffering and revolt to a greater degree than a shortage, the lacks themselves.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

In practice, states — including Romania — do not apply the principle of contributory capacity in its "pure" form, but in a permanent balance between equity and economic reality. That is why we see seemingly paradoxical systems: countries with high inequality and low taxes or, conversely, states with high taxes but socially accepted.

In Central and Eastern Europe (including Romania, Poland and Hungary), the dominant model is not an "ideal" one, but a pragmatic one: moderate taxes, imperfect collection and a dose of tax competition. Here, the contributing capacity does not disappear — but is "filtered" by economic constraints.

Contributory capacity (ability-to-pay) implies that the tax burden must be calibrated according to the taxpayer's resources. Traditionally, this is expressed by:

- income (flow)
- wealth (stock – stock)
- consumption (use)

This view is associated with the idea of vertical equity (the rich pay more) and horizontal equity (the similar pay the same).

In relative opposition is the benefit principle, which suggests that taxes should be correlated with public services received (Stiglitz, 1987).

In our view, in practice, no tax system applies exclusively one of these principles — they coexist in an unstable equilibrium.

3. ROMANIA: BETWEEN CAPACITY AND COLLECTION

In our country, the fiscal picture is marked by a paradox. Tax revenues are 28–29% of GDP while the EU average: ~40%.

The single income tax rate is 10% with very high social contributions (total labor burden: ~40–45%).

At the micro level, households allocate more than 20% of their income to taxes, while the coefficient indicating the inequality of wealth distribution among the population (the Gini coefficient) is much higher than in the European Union and is something over 0.34% (high inequality).

In other words, economic capacity exists but is not fully translated into effective fiscal capacity.

This situation, experts say, suggests not so much a low level of taxation as:

- a narrow tax base
- collection difficulties (tax compliance)
- fragmented preferential structures

4. A REGIONAL LOOK: FISCAL PATTERNS IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

The comparison with Poland and Hungary highlights a common but not identical logic.

Poland:

- progressive system (12% / 32%)
- more efficient collection
- more visible redistribution

Hungary

- single share (15%)
- Very high VAT (~27%)
- emphasis on consumption taxation

Romania

- single share (10%)
- reduced collection
- limited redistribution

Overall, the region prefers moderate income taxes and compensates through indirect taxes, which dilutes the pure application of contributing capacity.

5. ON "EXTREME" TAXATION: BETWEEN MYTH AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

References to 90% quotas appear so frequently in public debate that they have become almost legendary. There were such quotas in reality, but in earlier eras:

- United States (1950s): marginal shares >90%
- United Kingdom (1970s): up to 98%

They targeted only very high incomes (marginal income) and operated in economies: less globalized, with reduced capital mobility

Today, even in countries like Denmark or Sweden, famous for "Swedish socialism" the maximum levels are around 50–57%.

The conclusion is clear: extreme progressiveness is no longer structurally sustainable.

6. TAX YIELD AND COVERAGE OF PUBLIC EXPENDITURES IN ROMANIA

This perspective offers perhaps the most concrete picture of the contributory capacity: not how much is taxed, but how much the tax system actually produces.

The structure of fiscal revenues in Romania is:

- social contributions: ~11–12% of GDP
- VAT: ~6–7% of GDP
- income tax: ~2–3% of GDP
- profit tax: ~2% of GDP

There is a very strong reliance on taxing labor and consumption, not high incomes or capital.

Covering public expenses represents 35–37% of GDP, while tax revenues are approx. 28–29% of GDP. The result is a difference, a budget deficit of more than 6–7% of GDP. In other words, the tax system does not cover the operation of the state!

This situation reveals three essential aspects:

- (1) The contribution capacity is under-collected. Not the lack of economic resources, but the inability to transform them into tax revenues.
- (2) The fiscal structure is unbalanced. Emphasis is placed on: labor (taxing it), consumption and less on capital and wealth. That is, in empirical perception, those who work are taxed, not the rich!
- (3) Deficit addiction. The state operates partially on loans and structural deficit.

Regional comparison:

- Poland: better coverage of expenses (~36% revenues / ~40% expenses) .
- Hungary: higher revenues (~34% GDP), but based on VAT
- Romania remains below the regional level in terms of fiscal efficiency.

7. STRUCTURAL LIMITS OF THE CONTRIBUTING CAPACITY

The application of the principle is restricted by several factors:

- imperfect measurement (informal economy, hidden income)
- fiscal optimization (tax avoidance)
- global capital mobility
- fiscal competition between states

In addition, the classic tension between equity (redistribution) vs. efficiency (economic incentives).

8. CONCLUSIONS: A NECESSARY BUT INCOMPLETE IDEAL

Contributory capacity is not a pure technical rule, but a normative ideal.

In practice:

- states cannot perfectly observe real incomes
- taxpayers react strategically
- the global economy limits fiscal autonomy

In Central and Eastern Europe, including Romania, the result is a compromise. We have enough taxation to run the state, but not enough for deep redistribution

Contributory capacity remains a fundamental landmark of fiscal theory, but in Romania it is under-applied, especially from the perspective of collection, in the region it is strategically adapted, not fully implemented, and globally it is limited by capital mobility and fiscal competition

We might conclude that, in essence, the principle functions as a normative compass, not as an automatic mechanism.

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FROM THE MIXED ECONOMY TO THE SOVIET-TYPE ECONOMY

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the transformation from a mixed economy—characterized by the coexistence of private and state ownership—to a Soviet-type economy defined by centralized planning and state control over all major means of production. The transition typically occurred in Eastern Europe after World War II under the influence of the Soviet Union, involving the systematic nationalization of industry, collectivization of agriculture, and the elimination of market mechanisms. Political consolidation by communist parties played a crucial role in enforcing these economic changes. The paper highlights how this shift aimed to accelerate industrialization and ensure social equality, but often resulted in inefficiencies, shortages, and reduced incentives for innovation. By analyzing key policies and their socioeconomic impacts, the study provides insight into the structural and ideological foundations of centrally planned economies and their long-term consequences.

KEYWORDS: *Mixed economy, Soviet-type economy, Centralized planning, State ownership, Nationalization, Collectivization of agriculture, Elimination of market mechanisms, Communist political consolidation, Eastern Europe post-World War II, Soviet Union influence, Industrialization, Social equality, Economic inefficiency, Shortages, Innovation disincentives, Centrally planned economies*

J.E.L Classifications: P21, P22, P26, N14

1. INTRODUCTION

The year 1945 began internationally with the Crimean Conference of the Three Great Powers. In addition to the arrangements necessary for the continuation of the war, the general principles of the evolution of “liberated Europe” were discussed. It was decided to hold free elections organized by representative governments, without stating the guarantees for the actual fulfillment of these desires. Relative to the situation in Romania, the Conference not only did not produce positive effects, but moreover, it proved that in the Soviet interpretation the principles of the “Declaration

on Liberated Europe” acquired a completely different meaning than that intended by those who stated them. Thus, the Government of March 6, 1945 did not respond to any of the Yalta requirements.

Surprised by this decision of Moscow, which did not respect the agreements recently signed at Yalta, Churchill mentions in his memoirs: “The very evening when we were speaking in the House of Commons about the results of our efforts at Yalta, the first violation by the Russians of our understanding, both in spirit and in letter, took place in Romania”(W. Churchill, 1998). Although he was “deeply disturbed by this news”, which in reality was a brutal intervention by Moscow and would be repeated in other states, the British Prime Minister admits that “we were prevented from protesting, because Eden and I, in our visit in October to Moscow, recognized that Russia must have a predominant role in Romania and Bulgaria, while we have the ascendancy in Greece”(W. Churchill, 1998). Thus the Soviet Union managed to establish in Romania, by force and deception, the government of a communist minority.

The Groza Government, which did not include representatives of the P.N.T. and P.N.L., with the exception of some dissidents, called itself “of broad democratic concentration”. In reality, it was the embodiment of a fictitious coalition, since under the leadership of the communists, the Cabinet only included parties and organizations allied to the P.C.d.R., as well as its “fellow travelers”, among whom the most important was Gh. Tătăărăscu, appointed vice-president of the Council of Ministers and minister of foreign affairs (Ș. Constantinescu, 2002). The reality in Romania in the spring of 1945 is accurately described by General C. V. R. Schuyler, the US representative in the CASC: “The current Romanian government is a minority government, imposed on the nation by direct Soviet pressure. This government is dominated by the Romanian Communist Party, which probably represents less than 10% of the Romanian population. The vast majority of the Romanian people are deeply nationalistic and energetically oppose the communist system in any form”(Ș. Constantinescu,2002).

At the time of taking power, the President of the Council of Ministers, Dr. Petru Groza, sent a telegram to the President of the Council of People's Commissars of the Soviet Union, Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin, the President of the US, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and the Prime Minister of Great Britain, Winston Churchill. Their content expressed Romania's determination to intensify the war effort to defeat Germany and the hope that in this way it would "create a new international

situation, which would allow it to participate in the work of pacific organization of tomorrow's world".

However, there was a big difference between the official declarations and the real plans of the executive. The goals of the Groza Government corresponded to those pursued by the USSR, more precisely the Sovietization of Romania. This clearly results from the Plan discussed in Bucharest on March 7, 1945 by a delegation of Romanian communists, led by Ana Pauker, and a delegation of the Communist Party of the Union Soviet, led by Evgheni Suhlov. In general terms, the Plan had been drawn up in Moscow by Gheorghii Dimitrov at Stalin's express request. It envisaged a series of actions aimed at the communization of Romania. The focus was on the Communist Party of Romania and its organs of repression. It envisaged: the completion of the agrarian reform by confiscating the large estates; the abolition of the army inherited from the old regime and the creation of a new army modeled on the Tudor Vladimirescu and Avram Iancu divisions, formed in Russia; the liquidation of all banks; the abolition of small peasant farms and the preparation of the collectivization of agriculture; the abdication of the King and the exile of the royal family; the suppression of economic and financial ties with the great capitalist powers and the orientation of the Romanian economy towards the Soviet Union and the countries subordinate to it; the suppression of historical parties by arresting, killing and kidnapping some of their members; the creation of a political police modeled after the NKVD; the ban on citizens from Western countries entering Romania, etc.

The program of Bolshevization of Romania, inspired by Moscow, was carried out without any deviation. First of all, the Communist Party, as the Kremlin's agent, took measures to remove political opponents from the public scene and physically destroy them. Many of them were brought under the law punishing war criminals or the provisions on the purification of the state apparatus without any reason (Zainea, I. 1995).

Regarding internal organization, in addition to the massive increase in the number of party members, from about 1,000 in August 1944 to over 700,000 in 1947, the communists also relied on a very complex institutional organization (Știrban, M., 1991). The higher governing bodies in October 1945 were the Central Committee, the Politburo and the Secretariat (Onișoru. Gh., 1998). There were 12 regional party committees, 58 county committees, 1,284 city organizations and 1,210 village organizations active in the territory. At the local level, the following were active: the Local Committee, Zonal Districts, Institutional or Neighborhood Cells, Street or Workshop Sub-

cells. After the October 1945 Conference, it was decided that the institutional reorganization would include the following specialized Departments or Sectors: Organizational, Mass Organizations, Cadres, Political Education, Administrative. A new reorganization took place on the occasion of the enlarged Plenary of the CC on January 8–9, 1947, when the local and regional committees were dissolved and an organization at the county level was opted for. Also on this occasion, other departments appeared: Youth, Women, Trade Unions and Minorities. In October 1946, the following mass organizations were operating: the Union of Trade Unions, the Patriotic Defense, the Agricultural Workers' Union, the Ploughmen's Front, the Hungarian People's Union, the Progressive Youth, the Popular Sports Organization, the Romanian Antifascist Women's Union, the Jewish Democratic Committee, ARLUS, the New School, and the Cooperators. This large number of organizations was intended to attract attention, but above all to cover all sectors of society.

The imposition of the communist model was done through gradual measures. At the National Conference of the Romanian Communist Party in October 1945, Gheorghiu-Dej emphasized the need for “the entire industrial capacity of the country, the state and the private sector to form a unified whole.” Although later, for tactical reasons, the communists concealed this objective, in practice they pursued it with great perseverance, and from 1947 they began to put it into practice.

2. LEGISLATIVE REGULATIONS. INSTITUTIONAL CHANGES

The first measures taken by the Groza government aimed at solving the most pressing problems of Romanian society regarding the national territory and the economic and social difficulties.

Based on the request formulated on March 8, 1945 by Dr. Petru Groza and Gh. Tătăărăscu, the Soviet Union approved the return of Romanian authorities to northwestern Transylvania. The act was presented as a generous gesture on the part of the Soviet Union, determined by the fact that in Bucharest there was a government that enjoyed Stalin's trust (Ș. Constantinescu, 2002).

On March 23, 1945, the government would proceed to implement the agrarian reform*. Although over 400,000 landless peasant families were privatized, reality showed that it was a “poisoned gift”, because this reform aimed to win over the villagers for the new regime, the goals of which would soon be identified in 1949, when the collectivization of agriculture was launched (Iancu, Gh., Tărău V, Troșcă, O. 2000).

Representatives of all political parties developed programs for the long-term reorganization of agriculture, before the installation of the Groza Government.

The Communist Party, the Ploughmen's Front and the National Peasant Party were in principle in favor of the reform. Differences were manifested in relation to the period of its launch, the area and the method of application. Prime Minister Nicolae Rădescu and the National Liberal Party were against it, considering it premature, as long as the war continued and the soldiers on the front were the most entitled to benefit from its results, and the internal situation made it inopportune. The Prime Minister tried to maintain political and economic order and stability through various methods, such as the Regulatory Law of January 26, 1945, which aimed at eliminating speculation, controlling grain transport, inventorying availability by counties and drawing up a general plan for supplying the population (Onișoru. Gh., 1998).

In early February 1945, the NDF's Governing Platform was published. In a press statement, PNL president Dinu Brătianu argued that his party did not find agrarian reform opportune, prompting a response from the Minister of Agriculture, the national-peasant Ion Hudiță. A few days later, the NDF submitted to the Agrarian Reform Study Commission the project for the expropriation of areas of over 50 ha in the plains and 30 ha in the hills and mountains. Published in the newspapers "Ardealul", "Argus" and other central newspapers, it corresponds in principle to what was stated in the NDF's Program Manifesto of October 1944, which supports individual peasant property limited to the working capacity of a family, based on the doctrine and motivations of the "peasant state". The project also provided for the organization of model farms with the function of agricultural and zootechnical resorts.

On the other hand, the Ploughmen's Front launched a Manifesto demanding immediate agrarian reform by expropriating estates over 50 hectares. The difference between the two documents was the "revolutionary path" of implementation, which would have led to the fall of the Rădescu government.

The National Liberal Party and the Union of Agricultural Trade Unions tried to prove the economic and social futility of expropriating estates. At the other extreme was the Communist Party, which relied on the presence of Soviet troops and launched a vast campaign to undermine the positions of the historical political parties, aiming to remove them from power. At the urging of the Communists, peasants from several villages entered the abandoned estates in November 1944, switching to sowing arable land. The calls for peace and legality from the national-peasantists and

liberals were presented as signs of opposition to the implementation of the agrarian reform. It is therefore evident that the interest shown by the parties in the agrarian issue also sought political advantages⁸²¹. The forces in the struggle disputed the adhesion of the peasantry to one or another of their programs, seeing in the agrarian reform a means of acquiring electoral capital (Alexandrescu I., 1996).

In this context, one of the first measures adopted by the Groza government was the legislation of the agrarian reform through Decree-Law No. 187 of March 20, 1945 (Monitor Oficial, 1945). The purpose of the normative act, provided for in art. 2, was the strengthening of the peasantry's ownership and the creation of State reserves. Areas of over 50 hectares were affected. The expropriation regime was also applied to collaborators with Germany, war criminals and those responsible for the country's disaster, refugees after 1944, absentees, plots of land over 10 hectares that had not been cultivated on their own in the last seven years, volunteers against the United Nations and property of deceased persons.

The defining feature of the legislator's conception was the order of priority for those entitled to ownership: concentrated or mobilized soldiers and all those who fought against Hitlerite Germany; orphans, widows and invalids from the anti-Hitler war, of war in general; landless peasants; agricultural workers and tithe collectors who worked the expropriated properties; peasants with land under 5 hectares. Characteristic for the conception of the reform was also the provision that the goods falling under the incidence of the law, land or confiscated agricultural inventory, immediately became the property of the State, without any compensation. Tractors, plows, locomotives, reapers and combines on the expropriated lands were transferred to the State, which was to later establish county centers for renting agricultural machinery. Exemptions from expropriation were also provided for: the domains of monasteries, churches, rural cooperatives and cultural and charitable organizations, royal domains, rice fields, vineyards and forests, the regime of which was to be the subject of a special law, as well as the lands that acquired the status of model farms. According to art. 21 of the Decree-Law, the price for the received lots, established in money or in kind (cereals), was equivalent to the value of an average annual harvest. This justifies the statement that this price was more symbolic. "The amount was small and did not constitute a burden for the individual peasant. It was nevertheless important, since the Communist

Party, aware of the peasants' long struggle for land, used it to prove to them that their ownership of the land was definitive" (Hitchins K., 1996).

In the spring of 1948, the work of implementing the agrarian reform was, in broad terms, completed. 155,823 properties belonging to citizens of Romanian origin or of other nationality were expropriated, with a total area of 1,468,946 hectares. 1,109,562 hectares were distributed to the peasants, and the rest were set up as a state reserve. The structure of agricultural property changed, achieving what was called at the time the "liquidation of estates from an economic point of view" by abolishing land ownership of over 50 hectares (Constantinescu, N., 2000).

The agrarian reform of 1945 had a strong impact on the economic and political evolution of Romania. The essential consequence was the disappearance of large properties and the consecration of small ones, which, however, lacked the potential for development and modernization (Constantinescu, N., 2000).

Regarding the mistakes, abuses and inconsistencies that occurred in the application of the agrarian reform of 1945, it is considered that these phenomena were exacerbated by the conditions of its adoption and application, namely the fact that it was conceived and implemented by a communist-type political-institutional mechanism, that it began in the final phase of the war, when the atmosphere was still turbulent, and also under the occupation of Soviet troops, but not least due to the fact that the land intended for appropriation was little, which created a specific tension between those interested in receiving it.

The dysfunctions resulting from the provisions and from the application of the law had their say, in many areas the villagers lacking agricultural inventory, seeds and credits were forced to give up the land or leave it uncultivated.

One of the most serious consequences of the abuses produced was the total expropriation, en masse, of Romanian citizens of German nationality. The state of war with Germany and Hungary led, through the Armistice Convention of September 12, to the obligation imposed on Romania to take measures to intern the citizens of the two states who had their residence here. The Soviet authorities transformed internment into "deportation", so that in January 1945 numerous Germans from Transylvania were sent to reconstruction work in the USSR, their properties being confiscated. The provisions of the Decree-Law on Agrarian Reform of March 1945, in art. 3

paragraph a, explicitly mentioned as the first category that was to be expropriated, "land and agricultural properties of any kind belonging to German citizens and Romanian citizens, natural and legal persons of German nationality (ethnic origin), who collaborated with Hitlerite Germany". By February 1947, by the effect of this article, 95% of the agricultural properties of the Saxons and Swabians had been expropriated. Absent owners could not retain more than 10 hectares. The rest would come into the possession of the State, which would allocate these lands to those who did not own land, without granting any compensation to the former owners. A few months after the promulgation of the law, the Ministry of Justice decided that the value of the confiscated lands would be returned to the owners outside the country, as was also provided for in art. 18 of the 1923 Constitution. At first the United States opposed this decision and requested the return of the confiscated lands. In September 1947, the State Department accepted that compensation was preferable to the return of the lands, since the latter alternative was practically impossible (Courtney, J., Harrington, J., 1991).

Washington wanted the compensation to be in accordance with international law, not with Article 24 of the Peace Treaty, which stipulated that it be paid in local currency. In practice, the claimant had to spend the entire amount in Romania. In contrast, international law provided for the payment of compensation in convertible currency outside Romania. Since most of the American claimants were domiciled in the USA, this was obviously the preferable solution. Bucharest refused to accept the solution offered by the Americans. Negotiations continued until January 1951, when the State Department decided that the American owners should be granted compensation from Romanian assets in the USA, blocked by the Enemy Trade Act. These assets totaled approximately \$24.5 million. The issue of these compensations would eventually be resolved in 1960, under the terms of a Romanian-American agreement.

In addition to the numerous operational measures adopted during the implementation of the reform, it is worth mentioning the Law of 7 June 1947 (Monitor Oficial, nr.127, 1947, p.4553) by which actions related to the agrarian reform were declared "acts of government that cannot be challenged in court", thus ex officio extinguishing the lawsuits filed by the former owners of the privatized peasants. The next day, the Law for the Regulation of Circulation and Establishment of the Legal Regime of Agricultural Real Estate (Monitor Oficial, Partea I, nr. 140, 1947, p.5062-5068) was voted, which annulled the alienations of agricultural land in 29 counties affected by the drought, made by farmers with a property of less than 5 ha between 1 August 1946 and 23 June

1947, to persons other than descendants up to the third degree, assuming that they were made under duress. It was also specified that only peasants who owned an agricultural land area of less than 15 ha could acquire agricultural land and real estate. The control of the movement of agricultural properties is exercised by the State through the right of preemption and by the fact that for any purchase its authorization had to be obtained in advance.

Several points of view were expressed in relation to the purpose and effects of this law. Thus, it was considered that an end was put to the numerous legal actions brought by the former expropriated owners of many peasants who had been granted land, removing the state of insecurity among those who had received land. In June 1947, over 2,000 such trials were pending throughout the country, which put tens of thousands of peasants on the road (Alexandrescu, I., 1996). The same opinion considers that the second aforementioned normative act hindered the restoration of estates and prevented the development of rural bourgeoisie households and the further fragmentation of peasant property, prohibiting the division of properties smaller than 2 ha in the plains and 1 ha in the hills and mountains, the mortgaging of agricultural property being the responsibility of authorized financial institutions in this regard.

Another opinion (Hitchins, K. 1996) considered that centralized planning and dirigisme were the order of the day and that the measures taken prepared the collectivization of agriculture. The law of June 7 imposed strict control over the sales of private properties and gave priority to the State in the acquisition of land. Law no. 68 of February 16, 1946 (Monitor Oficial, Partea I, nr.40, 1946) imposed limitations on the sales of agricultural products by private peasants through taxes (quotas). The new taxes were in fact a forced surrender of the harvest to the State.

The confiscation in 1948 of the land areas owned by the Royal House until December 30, 1947, as well as the confiscation of the 50 hectares of land remaining to the former owners by Decree-Law No. 83 of March 2, 1949 (Şandru, D., 1993) are also considered as additions to the agrarian reform of 1945.

The latter act completely removed land ownership from private hands and liquidated the remnants of the middle village estates, the chiabur equivalent of the Soviet term kulak.

The land, livestock, and equipment of landowners who had owned up to 50 ha of land under the 1945 Agrarian Law were expropriated without compensation. Practically overnight, the Militia moved in and removed 17,000 families from their homes and relocated them to resettlement areas. The confiscated lands, totaling almost one million ha, were pooled to create either state farms or

collective farms that were theoretically collective property but in fact were run by the State, as the Ministry of Agriculture indicated the types of crops and set the prices. Members of collective farms were allowed to keep small plots of land of up to 0.15 ha. Most peasants, from the landless to those who worked their land using only family labor, were organized into state or collective farms. This process was carried out through large-scale coercive measures. Resistance to collectivization, non-return of “quotas,” delays in paying taxes or performing agricultural work resulted in the imprisonment of about 80,000 peasants, 30,000 of whom were publicly tried. Collectivization was completed in 1962. As a result, 60% of the total area of 15 million ha of agricultural land went to collective farms, 30% to state farms, and only 9% remained in private ownership. The latter were located in hilly and mountainous areas (Deletant, D., 1997).

The opinions of specialists in Western and Romanian literature after 1990 regarding these measures are unanimous. For example, a single reference seems eloquent to us. "In most cases, the redistribution of land meant nothing more than legalized theft. Through the system of peasant cooperatives, government agents were sent to the villages to have under their control every aspect of peasant life. The establishment of these cooperatives represents the final step in establishing a form of collectivist feudalism" (Markham, 1996).

Regarding the situation in industry, in the spring of 1945, the disorganization caused by the continuation of the war was visible; the Soviet occupation and the increasing demands for reparations; the lack of raw materials; the high costs for supporting the Romanian army on the Western Front; the precarious situation of transport, with the rolling stock of the railways reduced to less than half; the chronic lack of fuel; the disruption of economic mechanisms after the takeover of power by the pro-communist government; increasing inflation, as a result of the constant budget deficit and the acute lack of goods on the market; the drought of 1945, continued in 1946. The Groza Government's reaction to these realities had four components: political demagoguery and the press campaign against speculators; legislation regarding speculation and economic sabotage; the establishment of commissariats; the beginning of sovromization of the Romanian economy.

In order to give credibility to the press campaign, the Government adopted on May 3, 1945 Law No. 351 for the repression of illicit speculation and economic sabotage. The 72 articles emphasize repression. The law applies to industrialists, traders of various categories, craftsmen, producers, natural or legal persons, public or private, including consumers (art. 1). This normative act does

not solve economic problems, but it is a first due to the multitude of crimes and the severity of the penalties provided. The law supports the propaganda of the communist party, deceiving the great mass of consumers who, unwary and uninformed, came to believe that the lack of essential goods was due to saboteurs and speculators.

To create the illusion of citizen participation in the new regulations, the Government also adopted Law No. 352 on May 3, 1945, establishing citizen control bodies. They operated under each county prefecture, and appointments were made by the Ministry of Internal Affairs from among the “representatives designated by the political groups that were part of the democratic concentration government” (art. 2). The penalties, provided for in four of the eight articles of the law, were imposed on those who hoarded goods. To demonstrate that it had full control of the economy, the executive adopted, on the same day, Law No. 348 for the regulation of prices and the circulation of goods. The guiding principle was that the State would set and control the price of goods. The penalties for incorrect application of the provisions were correctional imprisonment from 2 to 5 years and confiscation of goods, and “for exceeding by any means the legal industrial or commercial benefits” – correctional imprisonment from 1 to 12 years.

The three laws put into force simultaneously fully met the goals of the communist party: the gradual destruction of traditional mechanisms, components of a normal economic life and their replacement by the Soviet model. They constituted only a first stage aimed at: “directing, limiting and controlling the production, circulation, distribution and consumption of goods, products and services or the leasing of services and goods” (art. 8 of Law 351). They were, at the same time, the first link in the communist party’s control over the economy. They restricted free initiative and hit the financial base of private entrepreneurs – down to the last craftsman, workshop owner.

On June 19, 1945, a Decree-Law was adopted for the transition of industry to peacetime production. According to its provisions, the placement of available employees was to be carried out by the Ministry of Labor at the proposal and under the supervision of a committee formed by a delegate of the Ministry of Labor, two delegates of the General Confederation of Labor and a delegate of the Union General of Industrialists of Romania. The State Undersecretariat of War Industry was transformed into the State Undersecretariat of Industry. Its main task was to create the means of adapting and transforming the war industry into a peace industry, coordinating state industrial production, ensuring the raw materials necessary for the fulfillment of received orders. In order to support various industries, under the conditions of resuming trade relations with most

neighboring countries, significant quantities of cast iron, steel, technical materials, cotton, etc. could be imported. As part of the measures to reshape the industry, according to peace conditions, measures were adopted to produce material necessary for railways, agriculture, and to cover the needs of the population, at least in part. Enterprises, regardless of whether they were state-owned, mixed, or private, received orders and credits. In order to curb the race between prices and wages, improve domestic supply and facilitate the execution of obligations arising from the conventions concluded with the USSR, which had not been achieved through previous measures, several normative acts were adopted, given the scarcity of goods, the disproportion between production and domestic consumption needs, and the inflationary tendencies resulting from the large volume of loans granted.

Beyond the macroeconomic problems, since the summer of 1945 the daily difficulties of the population have increased, with food security becoming problematic for an important social segment. The first solution imagined had in mind the establishment of commissariats for the supply of salaried workers.

Established at the beginning of May 1945, within industrial and commercial enterprises, as a means of combating speculation, through the commissariats, the employees of the respective enterprises were supplied with a series of strictly necessary goods at production prices. On January 20, 1946, their number amounted to 978 and they supplied a third of the country's population at that time (Alexandrescu., I., 1996).

The government relied on the commissariats in an attempt to improve the purchasing power of employees and the poor population in general. Through them, it was aimed to continue directing the few essential items on the market according to the responsibility and workload of each employee; the distribution of additional rations was established by categories of employees in relation to the effort made and the energy consumed in the production process. Of particular importance was the preference for State supply, both to individuals and to other commercial organizations, as well as the reduction of tax duties on some textile articles intended for the supply of employees through the economy (Constantinescu, N., 2000). Although they functioned poorly, which is why they were replaced by cooperatives, they contributed to a certain extent to facilitating the supply of the 1.6 million employees⁸³⁸, with products that had disappeared from trade due to speculation. The solution, a crisis one, could not overcome the economic collapse towards which the country was heading (Onișoru, Gh., 1998).

The Soviet government was interested in monopolizing the production and foreign trade of Romania through a series of long-term economic treaties (Hitchins, K.1996). The most important in terms of its implications for the country's subsequent political and economic development was the one signed in Moscow on May 8, 1945 (Arhiva Istorică Centrală, 1945).

In the view of the specialized literature before 1990, the deliveries of raw materials, semi-finished products and other Soviet products made according to this agreement had, in the circumstances shown, a positive effect on the functioning of important branches of the Romanian economy, although the total volume of foreign economic exchanges continued to be at the end of 1944 and in 1945 completely unsatisfactory compared to the needs (Alexandrescu, I. 1996).

In recent Romanian historiography⁸⁴³ the economic agreement signed with the Soviet Union in Moscow, on 8 May 1945, announced as a great victory of the Government, proved to be a new obstacle to the recovery of Romania. It can be included in a series initiated by the Kremlin with Bulgaria (March 14, 1945) and continued in July and September 1945 with Poland and Czechoslovakia, respectively. It was officially announced that A. I. Mikoyan, from the Soviet side, and Mircea Durmă, from the Romanian side, signed an agreement on the reciprocal deliveries of goods between the two states for a period of one year (Onișoru, Gh. 1998). It was accompanied by a Protocol by which the Soviet Union sent Romania 2,000 tractors and provided for the establishment of joint ventures in the industry. In fact, it was about 2,000 tractors that Romania was supposed to return to Moscow. It was specified that the parties would agree on the conditions for their use.

The instructions for the implementation of the texts signed in Moscow are recorded in 6 documents, the vast majority of which are confidential: the Agreement on reciprocal deliveries of goods; the confidential Annex A contains the list of Soviet goods for export to Romania; the confidential Annex B contains the list of Romanian goods for export to the USSR; the confidential Protocol on establishing the prices of goods that will be the subject of exchanges between Romania and the USSR; the Table for calculating prices for wood material and the Protocol on the method of liquidating the balances in the old accounts of the State Bank of the USSR established at the NBR.

The parties agreed that the exchange of Romanian and Soviet products would be based on the world prices of the day, with the specification that for some of the goods they had already been fixed and recorded in the Confidential Protocol annexed to the Agreement.

Regarding the joint ventures – sovroms, it is unanimously considered in economic historiography that they were the main instrument through which the Soviet Union exploited the neighboring states in the first post-war years (Onișoru, Gh. 1998).

In theory, sovroms assumed equality between partners, but in practice they became the instruments of the Soviets' exploitation of Romania's economic resources (Hitchins, K, 1996). Sovroms were established in every branch of the economy, and the most important ones from the USSR's perspective, Sovrompetrol and Sovromtransport, began to function immediately. Romanian investments in these enterprises were disproportionate in relation to the benefits obtained and the possibilities of exercising control. Direction and control were in the hands of Soviet officials. The Soviet companies benefited from every possible advantage, such as exemption from taxes and restrictive regulations, while British, American or Dutch companies had to operate under the most unfavorable conditions, designated by the Government to eliminate them.

The Soviet companies created great difficulties for the national economy, because they expressed unequal economic relations between the two countries, to the detriment of Romania (Constantinescu, N. 2000). The principle of mutual advantage was not respected, and the orientation and sale of production, investments and their location, and the qualification of personnel were resolved only with the agreement of the Soviet side, the Romanian State being obliged to ensure the Soviet partner a share of the benefits even if for various reasons the respective enterprises did not make a profit. Romania continuously insisted on the abolition of the sovroms, which was only achieved in 1954 (Alina Ilinca, 2003).

In 1947, the specific weight of the sovroms was 36% in the oil industry, 12% in the forestry industry, and about 53% in the banking sector (Banu, F. 2004).

Sovrompetrol was created on July 17, 1945. In 1947, it held 37% of the meters drilled for exploration and 43.7% for exploitation, 29.8% of crude oil production, 36.5% of the processed quantity, 37.7% of internal oil shipments, and 38.2% of external ones.

Sovrompetrol controlled the new oil fields in exploitation. Soviet participation consisted of in the shares of former German and Italian companies, as well as in the Belgian and French investments that Germany had taken over when these countries were under German occupation. The Romanian country's participation consisted of all the oil companies and lands owned by the Government, as well as in the indemnities owed to the Romanian Government. In all cases in which private Romanian enterprises were asked to join the sovroms, the Romanian Government signed on their

behalf, without any prior consultation, and if the directors refused to recognize the validity of the agreements, they were simply replaced with trusted people. Sovrompetrol was the only oil company authorized to import drilling machinery and equipment.

The Sovrombanc Group was established in August 1945 from "Sovrombanc" and "Societatea Bancară Română și Banca Agricolă". On December 31, 1946, the Group's balance sheets were 424 billion lei compared to 579.7 billion lei of the other banks in the network. After only 6 months of 1947, the Group surpassed all other banks, the figures in the half-year balance sheet being 3,621.7 lei to 3,249.3 billion lei. The same situation was manifested in terms of the amount of investments. On December 30, 1946, the Sovrombanc Group recorded 298.3 billion lei, and the other banks 400.9 billion lei, so that on June 30, 1947 the amounts were 2,637.9 and 2,367.7 billion lei, respectively.

Sovrombanc controlled over 40% of the capital invested in banks, almost 90% of total exports and financed over 70% of the main commercial transactions. Romania's participation in the establishment of the Group consisted of several commercial banks and a capital subscription, while the Soviet Union contributed German shares to several large Romanian banks, such as the "Romanian Commercial Bank" or the "Romanian-Italian Commercial Bank". As all Romanian banks were later nationalized, they would merge with Sovrombanc, giving the USSR control over all of Romania's financial activity.

An analysis of the way the capital was constituted and the functioning of the Sovroms is provided by the historian R. Markham, who took over the comments made by Brutus Coste, the former Romanian chargé d'affaires in Washington (Markham, R. 1996).

Sovromtransport leased the Romanian ports and obtained the right of ownership over all the port installations, docks, cranes, shipyards, etc. These were entirely the property of the Romanian State. Romanian participation also consisted of the fact that all the sea and river vessels that had previously belonged to the State, as well as the 200 ships and barges belonging to private owners, had been requisitioned by the Romanian Government, and made available to the Sovromtransport company. Soviet Russia contributed only a few ships, which it had also captured from Romania, despite the provisions of the Armistice. Although its so-called participation represented less than 5% of Sovrom's assets, it owned 51.2% of the company's shares (Ports, maritime and river transport have always been entirely the property of the Government and have operated under this

regime since the formation of modern Romania until the creation of this joint venture) (Banu., F. 2002).

TARS – Sovrom Airlines held the monopoly on air transport in Romania and operated on several international routes in Eastern Europe.

Romania contributed to the capital of this company with its airports, all ground facilities, repair services, etc., as well as aircraft owned by LARES (the only Romanian air transport company, controlled by the Government). The Soviet Union provided most of the airliners. According to the agreement that formed the basis for the establishment of Sovrom, the Soviet Union obtained full control over all airports, as well as air navigation (Alexandrescu. I. 1996).

As for Sovrom for public road transport, it held the entire monopoly in the field. In exchange for a few dozen wagons, the Soviet Union obtained a 50% participation. The Romanian share of 50% consisted of the contribution of the Romanian Railways, a few dozen smaller transport enterprises, as well as the right to free use of the transport routes, which were entirely owned by the State.

Sovromlemn was responsible for 50% of the country's construction wood production. Romania participated in this joint company with all the State forests and those belonging to public institutions, that is, together with over 60% of the total forest fund, with the related sawmills and funiculars. The Soviet contribution from which the Soviet Union benefited from 50% of the capital, as well as the management of the company, was limited to a few industrial machines and installations. It represented less than a tenth of the Romanian share. This insignificant contribution in industrial machinery and equipment, captured by the Russians as war booty from various European countries, proved useless because the wood and timber industry was suffering from excessive investments, compared to Romania's forest reserves. As a consequence of the massive deforestation of the forests, from 1940–1946, more than 60% of the sawmills were out of work. In this situation, Romania ceded to the Soviet Union 50% of the capital of the joint company that controlled half of the wood and timber industry, without actually benefiting from a counterpart.

The form of collaboration through such joint companies proved inadequate, even detrimental to the Romanian economy (Gherghina, N., 2002-2003).

Through successive agreements concluded on 31 March and 18 September 1954 regarding the sale and transfer to Romania of the Soviet share of participation in these companies, 12 of the 16 sovroms were dissolved. The value of the Soviet share of participation was repurchased in equal annual installments, spread over 15 years, the payment amount being considered an interest-free

loan granted to Romania by the Soviet Union. In 1956, the last 3 Soviet-Romanian joint companies were dissolved. At the time of the liquidation of the sovroms, according to the protocols for the repurchase of the Soviet share, an amount disproportionately large compared to the actual contribution made by the Soviet side was established.

As a result of discussions between the Romanian and Soviet governments, the USSR agreed to reduce by 4.3 billion lei the amount previously stipulated, according to the protocols for the redemption of the Soviet participation, of which 1.5 billion lei for German assets, a figure that represented the correction of the amount initially established as a result of the preferential regime, unfair regulations and procedures intervened in the activity of the former sovrom units, such as the handover of the assets of Austrian, Czech, French, Belgian citizens; forced takeovers by Germany from individuals or legal entities; Allied subjects; Romanian assets wrongly considered German. For 10 years, until 1956 when these sovroms were abolished, a large part of Romania's economic surplus went to the USSR. Their proliferation did not escape the irony of the great man of culture Nichifor Crainic, who was surprised that Sovromlimbă had not come into being on Romanian territory.

In these conditions of “scientific” plundering of resources, the country’s economic situation would experience a continuous degradation, becoming disastrous in 1947. The compensations to the Soviet Union, which amounted to 1.2 billion dollars, of which 300,000 were actual compensations, 470 million were restitutions, 200 million were reintegrations and rights, 75 million were for the maintenance of Soviet troops and 50 million were for other purposes, also contributed to this situation (Marinescu, A.S., 2001).

On August 23, 1945, the Soviet government proposed to the executive branch in Bucharest that the diplomatic representations of the two countries be elevated to the rank of embassy. In Bucharest, S. I. Kavtaradze, the ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary of the USSR to Romania, presented his the letters of accreditation to King Michael, and in Moscow, university professor Iorgu Jordan presented them to the President of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union, M. I. Kalinin, and to the First Vice-President of the Council of People's Commissars and People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, V. M. Molotov.

Having the official support of the Soviet Union and ensuring its supremacy of force over its political opponents, the communist government led by Dr. Petru Groza was able to carry out

without too much difficulty the fight to destroy the economic, social and political system that Romania had created throughout the modern era.

The measures against the economic, social and political foundation of the Romanian State, as well as the campaign to repress the anti-communist opposition, encountered political resistance from the historical parties, the democratic press and King Michael, as well as armed resistance organized in the Carpathian Mountains, the Danube Delta and the Brăila Lake. Supported by large-scale street demonstrations, the Sovereign's anti-communist action was directed primarily against the Government's measures, trying to counteract its acts that knowingly disregarded the 1923 Constitution, which had just been reinstated. Since simple protests and appeals to defend the constitutional order could not slow down the process of Romania's communization, the King resorted to energetic measures. Starting in August 1945, he refused to sign the decrees and laws that were presented to him for approval. The "royal strike" deepened the conflict between the Sovereign and the Government and led in the first decade of November 1945 to a large-scale street clash between the anti-communist forces and the supporters of the new regime. The situation worsened when the representatives of England and America declared that they refused to recognize the new Government led by Petru Groza. The Anglo-American attitude was based on the findings of alarming states of affairs that Washington's envoy, Mark Ethridge, had made during opinion polls in Romania and Bulgari (Burger, U. 2000).

Reporting on the findings in Romania, the US representative in Bucharest, James Byrnes, drew Molotov's attention to the fact that the national-peasant and national-liberal members who had participated in the Government until March 6, 1945, had been completely removed and had suddenly become "fascists", "although for years they had been the representatives of parliamentary democracy in Romania". The American diplomat noted that "the Romanian people now see in the Petru Groza Government the representative of a new dictatorship in place of the one overthrown on August 23". He reminded Molotov that while the Soviet side considered it fully representative of Romanian democracy, the Anglo-Americans, on the contrary, respecting the promises made at Yalta to the countries of Eastern Europe, repudiated it, considering it dictatorial, since it expressed the ideology of an extremist party that controlled the judiciary, the gendarmerie, the police and the security services (Byrnes J. 1947).

The political situation in Romania was the subject of negotiations during the Conferences of Foreign Ministers in London⁸⁵⁸ and Moscow respectively. The beginning of 1946 brought the

resolution, through direct arbitration of the representatives of the great powers, of the political crisis in favor of the government coalition (Ultima Ora, 1945). Emil Hațieganu from the PNT and Mihail Romniceanu from the PNL were included in the executive as ministers without portfolio (Știrban, M. 1989) .

Under these conditions, in February 1946 the Western powers recognized the Groza Government. On February 5, 1946 the political representatives of the USA (Burton Y. Berry) and Great Britain (Le Rougetel) in Romania sent similar notes to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, communicating that their Governments were ready to recognize the Government in Bucharest and to consider the persons indicated to be appointed as diplomats in Washington and London. In the response notes of February 7, 1946, the Government presided over by Dr. Petru Groza expressed its satisfaction with the decision of the USA and Great Britain to recognize it and resume diplomatic relations with Romania⁸⁶¹. Following the development of these events, it can be appreciated that the Soviet Union achieved a new victory, because through a “political cosmetic operation he had obtained the recognition of the Groza Government by the USA and Great Britain; secondly, personalities from the second line of the historical parties had entered the Cabinet, who were in fact simple extras” (Constantinescu, Fl. 1997).

Referring to the mission in our country, Archibald Clark-Kerr, in a three-page top-secret report addressed on January 25, 1946 to the British Foreign Minister, Ernest Bevin, concluded that “Vashinsky governs Romania as a province of the Soviet Union and the Groza Government is nothing more than a simple instrument in his hands”. The British diplomat concluded the report with the following words: “I left Bucharest, therefore, with a feeling of sadness and deeply grateful that I was not born in Romania”(Chiper, I., Constantiniu Fl., Pop A. 1993). By completing the Petru Groza Government, according to the well-known Stalinist manner, the Bolshevization of Romania gained new perspectives, as it also explicitly met with Anglo-American approval. Relying on this improvised legitimacy, the Government, with the support of the Russian occupation forces, gave the measures for the communization of the country a comprehensive character. Throughout 1946, it carried out a relentless repressive action against the historical parties in which it saw the last support of the “Romanian reaction”.

The assault against the democratic forces, but especially on the historical parties, occurred in the context of the preparations for the general elections, announced in a meeting of the executive on January 8, 1946. In this climate, the Government pushed the battle of ideas between the electoral

formations onto the path of violent confrontation with the historical parties. A campaign of slander was unleashed against them, the leaders were attacked and the party press was banned.

The preparation of the elections from the point of view of the State administration was the subject of the interventions of Teohari Georgescu and Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu, in January 1946, on the occasion of the P.C.d.R. Plenary. The former emphasized that the party controlled the Ministries of Justice and Interior, had 400,000 members, about 6,500 mayors and 40 prefects. 60–70,000 civil servants had been purged, but it was considered that 80% of the votes could not be obtained with the help of the police alone. That is why the levers of power already acquired had to be strengthened by an activity of education and political mobilization, especially in the army and the judiciary. On the same occasion, Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu considered that in view of the elections, about 1,500 magistrates loyal to the party were needed and that for this, the purge had to be continued, as well as persuasion work, combining blackmail with terror, legal means with illegal ones, and intense activity had to be carried out, especially in the territory, so that these people would exist at the time of the elections. At that time, there were about 250,000 people in the army, of which 44,000 were officers and non-commissioned officers hostile to the “democratic regime”. Therefore, the “unhealthy” cadres had to be isolated and then purged so that there would be no surprises on voting day, especially since the army would not only vote, but would also ensure order during the elections (Știrban, M. 1989).

In parallel with this activity, the communists blocked the political initiatives of the opposition. Pressure, blackmail, and terror were the characteristics of these actions. The civil servants were conditioned in their activity by belonging to one of the "democratic" parties, the commissariats preferentially supplied workers registered in the FND, the army and the magistrates were subjected to a new wave of purges. The opposition's propaganda was impossible to carry out. The radio and the Ministry of Information were instruments of manipulation of public opinion used exclusively by the communists and their allies. Countless acts of violence were committed against the peasant and liberal leaders. The meetings organized by them in the territory were the target of the workers' shock groups; attempts were made on the lives of Dinu Brătianu (February 24 - Câmpulung), Nicolae Penescu (March 9 - Craiova), Ion Mihalache (March 16 - Suceava), Emil Hațieganu and Mihail Romniceanu (April 22 - Someș, respectively Gănești), but also of other leaders from territory of these parties, some of them being assassinated. The opposition press, especially the provincial one, was faced with great pressure. In addition to censorship, the printing workers

refused to print it and demanded the elimination of inconvenient articles. Sometimes it came to the closure of some newspapers. All the protests submitted by the two opposition ministers against these violations of the freedoms to which the government had committed in January, remained without result.

By Decree no. 3.033 of 15 October 1946 convened the electoral body for 19 November 1946 (art. 2) and the Assembly of Deputies for 1 December 1946 (Monitor Oficial, Partea I, nr. 239 bis, 1946).

The general elections of 19 November 1946 followed, the official result of which was as follows:

The Bloc of Democratic Parties, led by communists 348 mandates

The Hungarian People's Union, allied with the communists 29 mandates

The National Peasant Party 32 mandates

The National Liberal Party 3 mandates

The Democratic Peasant Party, led by Dr. Lup 2 mandates.

50 years after this political event, it is unanimously acknowledged that the elections of November 19, 1946 were falsified and that, in reality, they were won by the National Peasant Party, led by Iuliu Maniu, which obtained over three quarters of the votes (Focșeneanu, E. 1998).

Following the elections, the communist party, after having subordinated the Government, the judiciary and the press, also had at its disposal the legislative body or the “labor parliament”, as its propagandists called it. It had seized through violence and fraud the absolute power that it would hold through the same methods for fifty years. E. Focșeneanu concludes, with bitterness – “By fraudulently legitimizing the power it had seized abusively, with external support, the Petru Groza government would proceed to prepare the final attack against democracy” (Focșeneanu, E. 1998). An important part of the legislation was that concerning the trial of war criminals and those guilty of the country's disaster.

The Petru Groza government repealed Laws no. 50 and no. 51 of 21 January 1945 and submitted for promulgation Law no. 312 of 21 April 1945 for the prosecution and punishment of those guilty of the country's disaster or war crimes (Monitor Oficial, Partea I, nr.94, 1945), in which the

conditions of prosecution and trial were tightened, violating even more seriously the constitutional principles. The People's Tribunal was created, by flagrant violation of art. 101 par. 2 of the Constitution, which prohibited extraordinary courts. The handling of cases within it was carried out by public prosecutors (art. 4–6), from outside the Prosecutor's Office, appointed by the Council of Ministers. This organ of the executive power, violating the separation of powers in the state, received judicial prerogatives: it notified public prosecutors of the cases to be investigated (art. 5 para. 1), issued arrest warrants (art. 7 para. 1), which were not subject to any confirmation. The trial was based on a summary procedure, without the administration of evidence (art. 14 para. 1), and the notes of the hearing were summary (art. 14 para. 2), an extraordinarily serious matter, since the exact recording of the debates constituted the indispensable guarantee of the control of the observance of the procedure. The grounds for appeal were reduced to two: the wrong composition of the court and the wrong application of the law, so that the main issue in a criminal trial, of guilt or innocence, remained to the assessment of the political judges.

With the abolition of the irremovability and stability of magistrates and the creation of the precedent of summary trials, the judiciary ceased to exist as an independent power in the State, being completely subordinate to the executive power (Focșeneanu, E. 1998).

Based on these normative acts, the political trials took place, through which the democratic opposition was removed. Between May 6–17, 1946, the "Trial of the Great National Treason" took place, imposed by the Soviets and completed with the broad concurrence of the authorities in Bucharest. In the case of political trials, the sentence was decided before proceeding to the administration of evidence, the hearing of the accusations and witnesses, all of these procedures having the sole purpose of reinforcing the conclusion previously formulated.

Marshal Ion Antonescu was handed over to the Romanian authorities by the Soviet government and, together with the members of his last government, was tried by the People's Tribunal, sentenced to death and confiscation of property, by Criminal Sentence no. 17 of 17 May 1946, holding him and the members of his Government guilty both for the crime of the disaster of the country and for war crimes (Barbul, Gh. 2001).

In addition to the political importance of this trial, the constitutional one is greater, because together with the appeal based on ordinary grounds for cassation, judged and rejected by the High Court of Justice and Cassation, Section II, on 25 May 1946, an appeal was also declared for the

unconstitutionality of law 312/1945, which was rejected by the High Court of Cassation in United Sections by Criminal Decision no. 21 of 31 May 1946.

The unconstitutionality of art. 1–3 and 4–8 of Law no. 312 of 24 April 1945 was invoked, which contravened High Royal Decree no. 1,849 of October 11, 1944.

Issued in exceptional war conditions, the jurisprudence of the High Court of Cassation and Justice considered that the sole article of the High Royal Decree is an integral part of the Constitution, but constituting a derogatory provision from it, it is of strict interpretation. However, these derogatory provisions refer exclusively to those guilty of the country's disaster and cannot be extended to war crimes, which have an international character, are provided for by art. 14 of the Armistice Convention and are to be tried and punished by an international court in collaboration with the victorious powers.

Consequently, it is obvious that Law no. 312/1945 was unconstitutional by its very title, which also included "war crimes", because it exceeded the constitutional approval of exemption from the provisions of art. 101, para. 2 given only to those "guilty of the country's disaster". For the trial of war crimes, art. 14 of the Armistice Convention provides for the obligation of collaboration between the contracting parties, at the level of governments, so that the People's Tribunal's decision also violated this document, since a national court judged what is given to the competence of international courts by an international agreement, an agreement that engaged the sovereignty of the State.

Rejecting the constitutionality appeal, the High Court of Cassation and Justice extended, in contempt of any legal principles, an exception to the clear text of the Constitution, justified by reasons of State and war, to other cases without any legal justification, which meant a flagrant violation of the fundamental law, possible in the case of judges lacking both irremovability and stability (Barbul, Gh. 2001).

With their political opponents silenced and having the preponderance in Parliament, the left-wing forces continued to deepen the process of resuming the Soviet-style economic model by adopting, during 1946 and 1947, several normative acts in the economic and social fields. All of these would aim to satisfy Soviet goals, being taken under the pressure of the presence of of the Red Army in Romania and on the economic subordination relationship with the USSR.

For the year 1946, one of the most important measures for the process of increasing the role of the State in the economy was the nationalization of the National Bank by the Law of December 28. As a result, the NBR remained a joint-stock company (200,000 of 300 lei each), but all shares belonged to the State. Although its operations remained essentially the same, it was invested with the right to guide and control the banks in the country, regardless of whether they belonged to the State or not, with the right to request information from them and to make recommendations to them, to give them norms and instructions in the interest of the national economy. On May 31, 1947, the National Bank took measures in the area of loans, including those granted through banks' own funds, with priority given to those intended for production, while loans for circulation were limited to removing the difficulties generated by the passage of goods from producers to consumers. The opportunity and conditions for granting investment loans were left to the discretion of the National Bank. In order to comply with the imposed line, the National Bank moved to introducing its representatives into the Boards of Directors of banks, and by the Law of July 15, 1947 and by the norms issued on July 22, 1947, control over the use of loans was regulated. The granting of loans for the purchase of gold, jewelry, for the storage of goods, etc. was prohibited. The granting of loans to enterprises that had sufficient own funds, but used them for speculative purposes, immobilizing them in gold, hard currency, and not in production.

It was particularly important that the financial means obtained from them had to be used, under threat of fines or criminal sanctions, exclusively for the purposes for which they were granted. According to the lending norms, approved by the Board of Directors of the NBR on July 22, 1947, only loans intended to contribute to the increase in production and the economic recovery of the country were granted, excluding from lending any requests that did not comply with the requirements of the economy or that were of minor importance for the respective period, as well as applicants who had their own liquid funds (Alexandrescu, I. 1996).

A series of other financial laws, adopted at the same time, provided for the prohibition in contracts of the clause of payment in gold, foreign currencies and commemorative medals, as well as of pledge operations with such values, establishing the regime of sale of shares of joint-stock companies, the regime of goods located abroad, paid or paid in advance by merchants, industrialists and any Romanian owners of goods through foreign exchange made available by the NBR or through clearing credits. They were directed against speculation in foreign exchange and gold.

The same purpose was also authorized to mint one million commemorative gold medals, a measure through which it was hoped that it would contribute to neutralizing the effects produced by speculative actions on gold and especially on the commemorative medal issued at the beginning of 1945. The aim was to lower the exchange rate and shift activity from speculation in gold, medals and foreign exchange to industrial actions, determining the decrease in prices and the recovery of the national currency.

In the literature before 1990, it was considered that these measures, and primarily the nationalization of the National Bank of Romania, created the framework conducive to a unitary and firm financial policy, which allowed the efficient use of monetary resources in order to recover the economy, strengthen accounting and control, and contributed to the subsequent defeat of the difficulties that stood in the way of economic recovery and, in particular, to curbing inflation.⁸⁷⁴ Western literature (Hitchins, K. 1996), however, appreciates that in the second half of 1947 the Communist Party intensified its control over each branch of the economy. We associate ourselves with these opinions, since it is obvious that by nationalizing the National Bank of Romania, the Communist Party had at its disposal one of the most important economic levers that will allow it to direct the entire financial system towards the achievement of its immediate and long-term goals. A serious financial problem was galloping inflation. The cost of living index had risen continuously during the war from 100 in August 1939 to 944 in August 1944. It did not stop after 1945 but, rather, multiplied, reaching 440,869 in April 1947 and 525,688 in July of the same year. For a while, the government let inflation run its course in order to weaken the economic power of its political opponents. But the leu was already almost as “expensive” as the paper on which it was printed, which is why on August 15 a severe monetary reform, prepared in secret, was announced. The reform hit the middle class hard, who lost a large amount of their savings, but it also affected workers and peasants, even though they were allowed to exchange more old lei for the new currency. ⁸⁷⁶ The monetary reform of 15 August 1947 established the withdrawal from circulation of BNR banknotes, metal money issued by the Ministry of Finance, treasury bills, cash receipts, payment certificates and other monetary signs. In their place, new BNR banknotes and Ministry of Finance notes were put into circulation. The newly introduced leu was defined by a content of 6.6 milligrams of gold with a fineness of 0.900, with a price of 1 kg of gold of 168,350.17 lei. The exchange of old lei for new money based on the ratio of 20,000 to 1 was carried out in differentiated amounts, according to the occupation of the presenter: agricultural families – 5 million lei;

employees and pensioners – 3 million each; those without a profession – 1.5 million each. Private enterprises were allowed to exchange only in limited quantities, equal to the salaries paid in July, with the stipulation that commercial enterprises were completely deprived of the right to present old lei for exchange. The reason lay in the desire to force them to sell the stocks of goods they held and to prevent speculation in them. The rest of the amounts in old lei were declared “blocked”, so that a large part of the speculative capital in trade, banks and industry was expropriated, and the monetary circulation was reduced to 1,377 million lei (Constantinescu, N., 2000).

Along with the monetary reform, a special law was adopted that provided for the mandatory transfer, against payment, to the National Bank of Romania, of gold held by individuals. On this occasion, another 1,465 million new lei were put into circulation.

The monetary reform put an end to the race between prices and wages, and hit speculation hard, directing efforts towards restoring and increasing production⁸⁷⁸. In this sense, the historian I. Alexandrescu (Alexandrescu, I. 1996) spoke out, in consensus with the entire literature from the communist period. He highlighted the moment of the reform, showing that monetary stabilization hit the “economic positions of the big bourgeoisie”, of “speculative capital” and contributed “to improving the material situation of those who work”, ensuring “a substantial increase in the purchasing power of the great mass of employees”. Prices were recalculated by the State, removing the anomalies caused by inflation in the structure and correlation of industrial and agricultural prices. Wages were also recalculated, so as to result in an increase in their purchasing power. “Carried out without foreign loans, as non-governmental circles expected, and without the concession of economic activities of the country, the reform represented a manifestation of the country’s economic and political independence (Alexandrescu, I. 1996).”

Recent Romanian economic historiography partially appropriates the analyses from before 1989. In the opinion of historians formed after the fall of the communist regime, it is obvious that the monetary reform was conceived and carried out from class positions and led to a new distribution of national income by sterilizing money capital. The total amount of money in circulation decreased spectacularly, from about 17,000 times, reaching 2,842,000,000 lei. At the same time, through a special law, individuals were obliged to convert their gold and currency into stabilized lei, at the parity set by the National Bank of Romania. The first reports arriving at the Center confirmed that a significant part of the population initially received the reform well, in the hope that inflation would be significantly reduced. By autumn, however, almost everyone realized that

the monetary reform had not solved the country's economic problems, the only point hit well being the "class enemy". However, workers, peasants and civil servants also suffered along with it (Onișoru, Gh. 1998).

An extremely critical position was also expressed by the former prime minister, C. Sănătescu. He stated that the monetary reform “was not a stabilization, but a confiscation of wealth, because the right to exchange only an extremely small amount was given, which was barely enough to live on for a few days. Merchants and peasants, who had large sums of money, were completely ruined; unable to exchange them, they saw their work wasted”. Indeed, the political meaning of the monetary reform was to carry it out from the positions of “the struggle of the working class against the exploiting class”, as the representatives of the communist party declared.

The stabilization hit the middle classes that contributed to the modernization, development and Europeanization of Romania throughout the modern era, and which placed it within the Western Model.

We cannot speak of a real reform, meant to ensure monetary stability, but rather of a mass theft. It is true that the reform illegally withdrew the immense monetary mass that had been thrown without measure on the market. However, due to its strong ideological connotations, the positive economic effects were very short-lived.

For the year 1947, the Law of April 6 on the establishment of the Ministry of Industry and Trade is noteworthy. A series of state economic bodies that operated separately – the Ministry of National Economy, the Undersecretariat of Supply, the Commissariat of Prices, the Commissariat for Foreign Trade and the Undersecretariat of State Industry – were included in a single ministry, that of Industry and Trade, which became an effective body of economic guidance and control. It was responsible for establishing norms and taking measures to draw up and guide production programs, the use and distribution of resources, the technical manufacturing process, domestic and foreign trade activity in establishing wage regimes, the orientation of credits, etc.

The broad tasks and powers conferred on the MIC allowed the State to move towards restricting the possibilities of the representatives of capital, forcing them to work in accordance with the general interests of the “revolutionary-democratic regime”⁸⁸³. Its provisions, which allowed many problems to be resolved promptly, through simple ministerial decisions, determined the opposition of the members of the Tatar liberal parliamentary group who expressed their

disagreement, fearing how the “general and discretionary powers” that the P.C.d.R. would have in the field of economic policy through the MIC would be used.

At the microeconomic level, this institutional framework was completed by the Law on Industrial Offices of May 24, 1947 (Monitor official Partea I, nr.129, 1947 p.4647-4653). These were mandatory groups of enterprises whose activity was subject to the control of the new State power. Created in branches, the offices included both state and private enterprises, operated as joint-stock companies and were managed by Boards of Directors formed on the principle of parity from representatives of the Ministry of Industry and Trade and private owners. The decisive role in management belonged to the ministry. 27 offices were established. Although they did not abolish capitalist private property, they exercised systematic control over the way in which it was used, limited the free character of production and directed the activity of private enterprises in order to restore and consolidate the national economy. By their nature and object, the industrial offices had an anti-capitalist character and generated numerous conflicts of interest. By establishing the offices, the industrial cartels that had existed until then in some industrial branches were liquidated (Alexandrescu I. 1996).

The increase in State control in the economy continued with the creation on June 21, 1947 of the Ministerial Commission for Economic Recovery and Monetary Stabilization.

At the proposal of the representatives of the P.C.d.R., the Assembly of Deputies voted, on July 3, 1947, the Law for the Organization of Economic Control by the MIC (Monitor official, Partea I, nr.159, 1947). According to the law, control operated in all branches of the national economy and was carried out by a large apparatus that included the General Directorate of Economic Control, as a central body, and local bodies in each county, as well as permanent delegates to factories and plants, in the main economic sectors.

The direct intervention of the State in the commercial sector, through the establishment in October and November 1947 of the State Commercial Company for the Distribution of Rationed Products with headquarters in Bucharest, of the Municipal Commercial Company for the supply of the capital with essential food items, vegetables, animals, as well as fuel, and of the State Stores under the direct control of the MIC, led to the restriction of commercial speculation.

The supply of food and industrial products based on cards, a system introduced in the summer of 1947, was carried out through consumer cooperatives and retail stores. On December 31, 1947, 3,767,262 cards for food products and 3,466,586 for industrial products were issued.

Towards the end of 1947, the control and massive intervention of the State covered the main industrial branches.

The obedience of the Bucharest government to Moscow is also reflected in the way its representatives acted in international relations. We are particularly considering the participation in the Paris Peace Conference of 1946, the signing of the Peace Treaty on 14 February 1947 and the subsequent rejection of the Marshall Plan (Buzatu, Gh. 2002).

It can be appreciated that the entire activity of the Romanian delegation present in Paris took place within the limits permitted by Moscow, namely by the head of the Soviet Union delegation, Viacheslav Mihailovich Molotov (Constantinescu, Ș. 2002). Intrigued by some meetings of the members of our delegation with Western representatives, especially those from the USA and Great Britain, Molotov summoned Ion Gheorghe Maurer and Alexandru Bârlădeanu and informed them that all contacts with other delegations should cease, and that they could only take place if permission had been requested in advance and approval had been received.

Despite the declaration made by Gh. Tătărăscu on August 11, 1946, "We are leaving to defend Romania's interests at the Peace Conference. We will do it with due respect, but also with determination" (Scurtu, I. 1994), the observations and amendments of the Romanian delegation were oriented only on the articles of the Draft Peace Treaty that were not the subject of Romanian-Soviet relations.

Territorial issues related to the Romanian-Soviet border were the subject of intense discussions only within the Romanian delegation. Gh. Tătărăscu addressed a note to the General Secretariat of the Conference, in which he signaled the existence of some "border discrepancies", giving as an example only the Corbu Island south of Turnu Severin, which was transferred to Yugoslavia, without mentioning anything about the serious errors of delimitation of the border from the northeastern border of the country and from the Danube Delta, from which several islands on the Chilia arm were incorporated into the USSR. Even with these omissions, the note was not handed over to the Political and Territorial Commission for Romania and did not appear as an official document within the Conference. Later, in an Aide Memoire, Gh. Tătărăscu tried to justify that "no references were made to the Romanian-Soviet border because we will resolve them in the spirit of friendship and collaboration that characterizes the relations between Romania and the USSR". Considering the international context and the fact that Romania was under the occupation

of the Soviet army, the position of our country's delegation to recognize the border with the USSR, established with the acceptance of the great Western powers, was not surprising.

Based on the "understanding" with Moscow, the Bucharest delegation objected only to the compensation requested by the Western powers and did not propose any changes to the articles of the Draft Treaty, which referred to Romanian-Soviet relations, which were to be resolved within the framework of bilateral discussions.

Romania's initialing of the Peace Treaty of February 14, 1947* opened the possibility of expanding its international relations (political, economic and cultural) with other states, consecrating the territorial status quo but, at the same time, imposing heavy clauses in the economic and military fields. The fact that Romania was put in the position of signing the Peace Treaty as a defeated state, not recognizing its status as a co-belligerent, cannot change the indisputable truth of the important economic and military effort made in the war fought alongside the United Nations between August 23 and May 9/12, 1945. The failure to grant co-belligerence led to the imposition of very heavy economic clauses, which, superimposed on the Soviet occupation and the establishment of the communist regime, decided the fate of Romania until the end of 1989.

To complete the picture of Romania's foreign relations and its increased dependence on Moscow, the Romanian government's rejection of the Marshall Plan* should also be mentioned.

Romania rejected the Anglo-French invitation to participate in the International Conference that was to open in Paris on July 12, 1947, a week before it was to begin, namely on July 4, at the proposal of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Gheorghe Tătărăscu. It followed the refusal of the Soviet Commissar for Foreign Affairs, V. M. Molotov, to accept the Franco-British plan. Convened by the British and French governments following the statements of the US Secretary of State, General Marshall, according to which the United States was ready to contribute to the economic recovery of Europe by granting credits, the Conference had the intention of its organizers to regulate the composition of the cooperation committee and the subcommittees that were to quickly draw up a report on the available resources and the needs of the European countries in the next four years.

The Romanian government considered that the organization proposed by the British and French governments "will fatally lead to results that will mean, on the one hand, a weakening of the independence that the countries of Europe want and must preserve with regard to their economic policy", and, on the other hand, "an interference in the internal affairs of these countries". At the

same time, it expressed its disagreement with the tendency to divide Europe in two, as a result of the process in full swing and within which General Marshall's proposals and the Anglo-French ones that followed them occupied a distinct place. The situation that was being created – the Romanian rulers declared duplicitously and falsely – thwarted the establishment of a climate favorable to European collaboration and cooperation.

“The organization of the West with the isolation of the East of the continent cannot be a happy creation neither for the economic recovery of Europe nor for the establishment of trust and the consolidation of peace.” Consequently, Bucharest ritually declared that it could not collaborate in an action that it considered economically inefficient and politically dangerous*.

The Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Gh. Tătăărăscu, on the occasion of discussing the response that Romania was going to give to the invitation to participate in the Paris Conference, forgetting, perhaps, that it had been formed within the Western cultural model, considered that the invitation of Romania, together with other European states, constituted, in essence, an attempt to attract it into the sphere of a foreign policy other than the one it had mainly followed, alongside the Soviet Union and the popular democratic countries (Știrban, M. Păun, N. 1991).

In the spirit of this new orientation and having an overwhelming majority in Parliament, the communist power considered itself strong enough to destroy democracy in Romania, in two stages: the first aimed at removing the opposition represented by the political parties and annihilating the army, in order to isolate the King and the second, overthrowing the monarchy and expelling the Sovereign (Știrban, M. Păun, N. 1991).

The first stage was triggered on July 29, 1947, when, through a Journal of the Council of Ministers, citing the attempt of some peasant leaders to illegally leave the country, the PNȚ was dissolved. Left alone in opposition and with a very small share, the PNL CIC Brătianu dissolved itself, and the Social-Democratic Party was swallowed up by the P.C.d.R. The vast majority of the leaders of the historical parties ended up in communist prisons (Micu, M. 1991).

On September 1, 1947, 37 generals, a rear admiral and thousands of senior and junior officers were dismissed (Monitor Oficial, Partea I, nr. 201, 1947), eliminating from the army the elements faithful to the monarchical tradition (Focșeneanu, E. 1998).

The monarchy, which continued to resist in Romania, was no longer just a Romanian problem, but of the entire bloc of communist states. Thus, at the end of September 1947, the meeting to establish

the Information Bureau of the Communist Parties, in reality the Fourth International, known by the abbreviated name of Cominform, took place in Poland. The communist parties of Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Poland, Romania, Hungary, the Soviet Union, France and Italy participated. All of these countries, except Romania, were republics, and four of them (including Italy, which was not in the Soviet sphere of influence, but had proclaimed itself a republic by referendum on June 21, 1946), had established a republic after the end of World War II. The Communist Party of Romania appeared in a disadvantageous position, being the only one that had not achieved this mandatory stage, the removal of the monarchy, on the way to total control of political power. Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, after justifying his lagging behind by the party's small share on August 23, 1944, made a commitment to end the collaborative relations with the Tătăărăscu group, to proceed with the drafting of a new Constitution, and to intensify the process of building a popular democracy.

The fate of the Romanian monarchy had thus been decided and sealed with the founding of the Cominform, which could not conceive of a constitutional monarchy regime in the communist bloc. Gheorghiu-Dej, Minister of National Economy, made a commitment to the representatives of foreign powers to overthrow the constitutional order in Romania. The meeting took place in total secrecy, without any prior announcement, and after its conclusion it was evasively announced that it had taken place "somewhere in Poland, at the end of September". The decision regarding Romania was surrounded by conspiracies, and for this purpose, Gheorghiu-Dej's report would be published among the last, around mid-December, and the Romanian newspapers would reproduce it exactly on the day of the coup d'état, on December 30, 1947, when conspiracies no longer had any purpose.

On November 11, 1947, the leadership of the PNT, led by Iuliu Maniu and Ion Mihalache, was sentenced to years in prison for "treason", for ties with Western political circles, normal in a democracy, but which the communists called "ties with espionage agencies".

In addition to the physical liquidation of the opposition, the trial also constituted a pretext for fulfilling the first commitment made by Gheorghiu Dej in Poland. Even before the decision was pronounced, on November 6, 1947, the Assembly of Deputies adopted with 187 votes in favor and 5 votes against a motion of no confidence in the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Gheorghe Tătăărăscu, on the grounds that officials of this ministry had facilitated the national-peasant leaders' connections abroad with Western "espionage agents". On November 7, 1947, the four ministers

(Gheorghe Tătărăscu, Gheorghe Vântu, Al. Alexandrini and Radu Roșculeți) and three undersecretaries of state belonging to this group resigned, being replaced by communist ministers, led by Ana Pauker and Vasile Luca.

The PNL dissident led by Gheorghe Tătărăscu was part of the Bloc of Democratic Parties, but had openly declared its monarchist orientation, so that, by their exit from the government, the King's last political support had been annihilated, and his isolation was complete.

On December 30, 1947, through threats and blackmail, Petru Groza and Gheorghiu-Dej obtained the signature of King Michael I on a previously drafted act of abdication, which ended as follows: "I abdicate, for myself and for my successors to the throne, renouncing forever for myself and for them all the prerogatives that I exercised as King of Romania.

I leave to the Romanian people the freedom to choose their new form of State"(Monitor Oficial, Partea I, nr. 300 bis, 1947).

More or less under communist pressure, in the other former monarchies that entered the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union, the republic was established in an at least formally constitutional way by Constituent Assemblies, which had the competence to decide on the form of government and to draft a new Constitution, or following a referendum, as in Bulgaria.

In Romania, since the Republic was not proclaimed by a Constituent Assembly, two problems arise: the first, the legitimacy of the act of abdication of King Michael, the second, the legitimacy of the proclamation of the Republic.

In relation to the first problem, it must be analyzed whether the act of abdication represented the free will of the King or whether the use of force was justified; in the second problem, whether the constitutional rules that guarantee that the change in the form of government represents the will of the people, from whom all power emanates, were respected.

The act of abdication was presented as an act of freely consented will of the King, who "in full agreement with the responsible factors of the country" was convinced that "the institution of the monarchy no longer corresponds to the current conditions of our state life". However, immediately after the King's departure into exile, the authors of the coup d'état themselves revealed the truth, no longer able to keep hidden what they believed to have been a merit, and began to talk about the King's expulsion and the removal of the monarchy. As the communist language did not allow for a variety of expressions to name the same event, but rather formalized a specific name, the expressions "The King was forced to abdicate" and "abolition of the monarchy" were eventually

chosen. King Michael I, at a press conference on March 4, 1948, in London, would declare that the act of abdication had been forced upon him by a Government installed and maintained in power by a foreign country, a Government unrepresentative of the will of the Romanian people, and therefore he did not consider himself bound in any way by the act that had been imposed on him (Times, nr.51.012, 1948).

So the first version of the free consent act, an agreement between the King and the Government, is contested by both parties and must be excluded. It is a certainty that the King's abdication was an act obtained through pressure, threat and blackmail, which makes it voidable. If the King had not denounced it so vehemently promptly, it could have been considered eventually accepted and confirmed or validated by the passage of time, but the King expressly invoked its nullity only two months after the abdication. Moreover, regardless of how it was obtained, the act of abdication by itself did not represent the abolition of the monarchy, but the opening of the succession to the Throne. The inclusion in the act of abdication of the expression "for me and for my descendants to the Throne, renouncing for me and for them" has no legal value. In private law, no one can renounce for another, and in public law, the succession to the Throne is not left to the free will of the holder, but is regulated by constitutional norms. Therefore, the abdication of the King does not result in the loss of the Throne, because it was taken away by violence, threat and blackmail, nor in the establishment of the Republic, which does not depend on the will of the Sovereign.

In order for this act to acquire a constitutional appearance, Law no. 363 of December 30, 1947 for the establishment of the Romanian state in the Romanian People's Republic (Monitor Oficial, Partea I, nr.300 bis, 1947). After art. 1 notes the abdication of the King, art. 2 provides: "The Constitution of 1866 with the amendments of March 29, 1923 and those of September 1, 1944 and the following are repealed", so that art. 3 specifies: "Romania is a People's Republic. The name of the Romanian state is the Romanian People's Republic".

The problem that arises in connection with this law is that the Assembly of Deputies was an ordinary legislative assembly and not a constituent assembly and therefore could not pronounce on constitutional issues. Even Petru Groza and Gheorghiu-Dej had countersigned, together with the other members of the government, Royal Decree no. 2,218 of July 13, 1946 for the organization of the national representation, which in art. 17 provided for its incompetence in constitutional matters: "The Assembly of Deputies cannot proceed, either in whole or in part, to revise the Constitution. The revision of the Constitution of March 29, 1923, as it was reinstated by Decree

no. 1,626 of September 2, 1944 and amended by the provisions of the present decree, will be done only according to the provisions set forth in Title VII of this Constitution and only by an extraordinary Legislative Assembly, elected specifically for this purpose". Therefore, Law 363 of December 30, 1947 could not have constitutional value, even if it was adopted by the Assembly of Deputies as claimed, because it could only adopt ordinary laws and was expressly prohibited, both by the Constitution and by the law countersigned by all members of the Petru Groza Government, from ruling on constitutional issues.

It is worth mentioning an opinion expressed in the specialized legal literature (Focșeneanu, E. 1998), according to which the adoption of this law constituted not only a violation of the Fundamental Law, but also a criminal act. E. Focșeneanu draws attention to the fact that the analysis of the minutes of the session of the Assembly of Deputies of December 30 shows the non-compliance with the procedure provided for by the Internal Regulations of the legislature and that in fact a political rally presented as a session of the Assembly of Deputies took place. Moreover, the law allegedly adopted by the Parliament was promulgated by Decree no. 299 of December 30, 1947, which appears under the signature of Petru Groza, erected as head of state, and countersigned by Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu, as minister of justice. Later it would turn out that the latter was not in Bucharest at that moment and that he had learned about the proclamation of the Republic on the radio (Pokivailova, T.A. 1996).

Therefore, not only the law proclaiming the Republic, but also the Decree promulgating this law is a forgery, because the signature of the Minister of Justice was either forged (material forgery), or does not exist and then the Official Gazette is a false attestation (intellectual forgery).

Romania was the only European country in which the Republic was not proclaimed by a Constituent Assembly or following a referendum, but was established by forgery (s.n.). The only official act authentic document mentioning the change in the form of government (wrongly referred to as the form of state), remains the Government Proclamation to the country of December 30, 1947, which cannot have any legal effect, being the emanation of the executive power. Consequently, the 1923 Constitution, reinstated at the end of August 1944, could not be suppressed, but only its application was prevented, in fact, by the force that substituted the law.

Beyond any legal considerations, which were not relevant for the communist authorities at that historical moment, the organization of the new form of government was moved on. A new State needed a fundamental law to match.

The draft Constitution was submitted to Parliament on April 8, 1948 and after only two days of its first meeting, it was unanimously adopted on April 13, without undergoing any essential changes. The 110 articles of the government draft were reduced to 105, as a result of certain adjustments.

Chapter II contains provisions related to the economic and social structure of the Republic. This part of the Constitution allows the State not only to control any economic activity, but also to appropriate any kind of property, including the land of the peasants. The communist government immediately implemented this law, designed specifically to deprive a person of his goods, "for the benefit of the common good". The confiscation of property constitutes the very essence of this Constitution, the main goal for which the communists acted since the day they took power (Markham, R. 1996).

The seizure of property was carried out gradually, as a result of several thoroughly drawn up and implemented plans. By the summer of 1948, most sources of income, with the exception of land, had been seized by the communists in the form of nationalization. In June, the Law for the Nationalization of the Banking and Insurance Industry, Mining and Transport Enterprises was approved. All the main industrial and commercial concerns that had not yet passed into the hands of the State now passed into the hands of the Communists. It was, in fact, a real "purge" operation. The Council of Ministers adopted the measure in just half an hour, and the Grand National Assembly, pronouncing itself in favor, immediately voted for the project to become law. The project was debated only from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., practically not being analyzed at all. Shortly after, the Government read the law and made a series of fiery comments about it. When it was all over, the 414 members voted, by acclamation, for a rapid transformation of the social order in Romania. The Communists took over the entire economic system, without a single voice in Parliament raising its voice against this act of mass confiscation of property. More than a thousand of the country's most important enterprises were nationalized. Among them were 25 oil companies and 20 metallurgical companies. Foreigners were also dispossessed of their assets, along with local residents. The only exceptions were the companies and institutions that the Red Army and the Soviet government had previously taken over in favor of the Soviet Union. Everything took place in a veritable carnival atmosphere.

The first article of the law, comprising 75 paragraphs, listed the types of enterprises that were to be confiscated: metallurgical plants, enterprises producing coal, precious metals, oil, gas,

construction materials, electricity, glass, lumber, furniture, paper, construction, textile, chemical, plastic, cosmetic, pharmaceutical, alcoholic beverage, and food industries. Every means of transport and communication was taken into possession by the State.

Following the nationalization laws of June 11, 1948, there were 55 cases in which Americans requested compensation, but this number was small compared to the 400 cases registered in Hungary. The Americans' efforts to quickly resolve these claims were in vain, as they had to wait until 1960, as was the case with the claims issued following the Agrarian Reform Law.

Following the nationalization of the National Bank, not many claims arose, but one of the exceptions is the case of Mrs. Kauffman-Cosla, whose funds in Romania were nationalized, while her accounts in America were blocked (Courtney, J., Harrington, J. 1991).

The Planning Commission, which replaced the former Supreme Council of the National Economy and the Commission for Economic Recovery and Monetary Stabilization. Article 2, point b, established that the new body was authorized to draw up the general plan of the national economy and the economic and political objectives established by the government.

In Romania, at the end of 1948, about 15% of the industry belonged to the socialist sector, and the necessary premises were created for the transition to planned management and socialist industrialization. Against this background, in the sixth decade, the power switched to the brutal leveling of Romanian society.

The June nationalization ended an economic cycle. It consecrated the legality of the command economy and abolished the free market economy for a long period of time. The class opponent was defeated – the representative of capital, who had consecrated Romania's synchronization with the Western model of development. In the name of the victory of the proletarian revolution, a decisive blow was struck at private property – one of the basic principles that constituted the very essence of individual freedom in the entire modern evolution.

In the vision of the Romanian Workers' Party, optimal conditions were created for economic planning and the transition to socialist industrialization. By Law no. 119 of June 11, 1948 for the nationalization of industrial, banking, insurance, mining and transport enterprises (Monitorul Oficial, nr.133 bis, 1948, p. 5041-5062), with the exception of the National Industrial Credit Company, the other banks and credit institutions were to be liquidated. The economic blow doubled the political one and came after the numerous waves of arrests, through which the single party ensured its total control over society. In the terms of the party documents, the political-social

realities were reconciled with the economic ones of Romania, which would assume the "bright future" of Communism for half a century.

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SPORTS ACTIVITIES VIEWED THROUGH THE SPECTRUM OF SOCIOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

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ABSTRACT

The subject of sport and physical activity in determining individual and social well-being, viewed from a sociological perspective, is highly relevant, especially for Romanian society, which faces numerous problems whose responsibility is seen as both individual and structural (economic-political and socio-cultural). However, unlike the general public, politicians, cultural figures, and especially the agents directly involved in the world of sport, sociologists who study sport seek to go beyond such general assessments and to analyze social causes and consequences in greater detail, which also involves revealing certain critical aspects. This paper proposes several theoretical-epistemological models for the sociological investigation of sports phenomena.

KEYWORDS: *epistemological foundations, investigation, sports phenomena, methods, theoretical models*

J.E.L. Classifications: C60, C61, C62, D50, D58

1. INTRODUCTION

As a complex social phenomenon, sport today acts as a spokesperson not only for individuals who adopt a healthy lifestyle or practice it professionally, but also for social groups marked by financial, power-related, symbolic, ludic, medical, or recreational interests. The presence of sport in the contemporary world goes beyond the obvious perceptions of common sense.

Numerous economic-political, socio-cultural, politico-ecological, and psycho-social aspects are highlighted in a series of scientific works (see George Ritzer, 2007). Themes such as

institutionalization, rationalization, legitimization and delegitimization, democratization, the globalization of sport, or reactions to the process of sportification represent only part of the topics addressed by the sociology of sport.

At the macro level, sociology and social psychology analyze the structural relationships and dynamics among a wide range of phenomena: sport and capitalism; sport as catharsis and spectacle; sport and urban space; sport and culture; sports subcultures; sport and the environment; sport in relation to ethnicity, race, gender, religion, and social class; sport and social capital; sport and social resistance; sport and the state; sport as profession and labor; sportization; sports heroes and celebrities; the sports industry; sport and mass media; sports stadiums as social phenomena; and sport as socio-cultural symbolism.

In what follows, we will attempt to provide a synthesis of the main theoretical-epistemological models addressing this subject, on the basis of which we have anchored our empirical research strategys.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT

2.1 THE MAJOR THEORETICAL INFLUENCES

Exerted by the works of the founders of sociology - Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx - inherently extend to the sociology of sport as well. Thus, Durkheimian theses (cf. Richard Giulianotti, 2005; Stănciulescu, 1996) reinforce, among other aspects, the idea of sport's function in promoting social cohesion and solidarity through quasi-religious rituals (rules, myths, fandom, fanaticism-idolatry, the mystique of champions, ritually intensified collective behavior, etc.).

Sport can be seen as a promoter of social order at two levels:

- **the systemic level**, due to the structural-functionalist orientation, through the harmonious connection between sport and other institutions;

- **the everyday level**, as highlighted by Erving Goffman, through particular interaction rituals that protect the real and concrete identity of social actors, drawing on transpersonal symbols.

The Weberian paradigm facilitates a deep understanding of interpretative and rationalizing aspects. Interpretive sociology focuses on the complex and varied meanings and identities of social actors within sport. Weber, Guttman, and Ritzer advocate considering the impact of sport on a highly rationalized, stratified, and bureaucratized modern society. Despite their differences, both the Durkheimian and Weberian perspectives take into account the politico-economic factor that decisively influences social life and interpersonal relations.

Modern capitalism. For various neo-Marxists, sport reproduces the logic of industrial capitalism's inequalities, such as the exploitation of workers/athletes and the manipulation of consumers/spectators. However, such arguments tend to oversimplify the Marxist view by overlooking the complexity of power relations at any given historical moment.

The concept of "resistance" in the context of sport must be carefully detailed, taking into account notions of "transgression" (from one status to another, from one role to another, or from one social meaning/importance to another), associated with the carnivalesque (the value, appreciation, and function of spectacle). Contemporary authors (Mike Featherstone, 1995; Richard Giulianotti, 2005; Rotariu & Iluț, 2006; Robertson & White, 2003) emphasize the idea of structured, polyphonic research (multiple voices) in sociological investigations of, among other things, sports cultures.

Another fertile direction in studies of the socio-psychology of sport is the perspective of Michel Foucault. The celebrated author's theories regarding the "disciplining" of populations in both bodily and spatial terms are prominent in subsequent (constructivist and postmodernist) interpretations. While modern sport facilitates certain bodily developments, the risk of injury and the demand for constant effort remain connected, as a background, to models of social inequality. Participation in the world of sport generates strong emotional bonds at both individual and collective levels, while also contributing significantly to rationalization and spatial valorization (through reciprocal adjustments of the meanings assigned to performance in terms of

the importance allocated to time and distance, quantified in achievements/records).

2.2 MODERN SOCIOLOGY

Has introduced further nuances in the study of social phenomena. Representative figures include Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu (1986 and 1979 – cf. Stănciulescu, 1996).

Elias's processual-sociological perspective examines society as a game in which participants - spectators and players alike - are "interdependent" and engaged in a continuous flow of play. His theory of the civilizing process has been applied to the interpretation of the social history of sport and, more controversially, to the explanation of violence in sport.

Pierre Bourdieu, adopting a structuralist-constructivist approach, offers a starting point for a more critical yet complex analysis of social phenomena, linking themes from the world of sport to inter-group constraints. Bourdieu's later work became more politicized, sharply criticizing social inequalities and the policies of "neo-liberal" governments. Additionally, the renowned author critically highlights concepts such as conspicuous consumption, symbolic violence, and the background dominance of interest groups behind the scenes in activities that appear open (such as sport), which hold strong appeal for the general public.

The symbolic interactionism paradigm, which includes several distinct theoretical variants, considers individual characteristics (even formal ones) not only as statuses but also as "social symbols"- symbolic constructs that help organize and structure social experiences and determine a range of meanings, evaluations, value judgments, or myths.

Supported by American sociologists such as George H. Mead, W.I. Thomas, Charles H. Cooley, and Herbert Blumer, the study of social interaction rests on three main premises:

- a. Human beings act toward things based on the meanings those things hold for them;
- b. Meaning is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that an individual has with others;

c. These meanings are handled and modified through an interpretive process used by people when dealing with the things they encounter. Although symbolic interactionism has been criticized for overemphasizing the role of symbols and intersubjectivity in social life, it has become a powerful source of inspiration for contemporary sociology, particularly within social constructivism.

Social constructivism encompasses a range of sociological and social-psychological perspectives, including phenomenology (Alfred Schutz, Peter Berger, and Thomas Luckmann), symbolic interactionism (George Herbert Mead, Charles H. Cooley), and ethnomethodology (Harold Garfinkel, Aaron Cicourel). These perspectives are not adopted as causal explanations of the social world but have the advantage of highlighting the importance of meanings in everyday life.

As theoretical perspectives (rather than formal theories), they provide broad guidance on the socially constructed features of experience, including the experience of living one's life according to values centered on health and psycho-physical balance.

The starting point of constructivism is that, while theory must serve as a reference for perspectives, these perspectives involve the concrete study of how (not why) ordinary people themselves "theorize" the world they inhabit and justify their own actions.

Clifford Geertz (1983) emphasizes the "achieved" aspect of culture rather than the "given," describing participants in this process as continuously modifying the "web of significance," thereby providing culture with a wide variety of meanings.

2.3 POSTMODERNISM

According to postmodernists, unlike the early period of modernity, our lives are increasingly characterized by a weaker adherence to the structural values of family, class, community, and nation, or to social expectations related to gender, age, class, or race status.

The postmodernist current and globalization have sparked some of the most significant debates in the social sciences over the past three decades. The postmodern orientation is largely

based on the idea that certain classical roles and statuses have become irrelevant in contemporary society (a concept introduced by Neugarten in 1982).

These ideas have been presented (Mike Featherstone and Hepworth, 1991) as an ideal to which the social sciences should relate through a significant shift in perspective compared to classical theories (structural - functionalist) and even compared to the paradigms of symbolic interactionism or constructivism.

However, while traditional values (family, work, religion, the military) remain relatively stable, new values have emerged and spread exponentially over the last four to five decades worldwide. These include a lifestyle perceived as healthy and “successful,” the appreciation of youth, and individual physical well-being. As a consequence, an entire industry has developed around preserving youth, health, and well-being at all ages (hence the expression “successfully aging”), directly associated with healthy eating and engaging in physical exercise across all ages and, naturally, differentiated among social categories.

Within this same value-oriented, attitudinal, and behavioral trend, there is also a growing awareness of environmental issues and ecological nutrition (the so-called “spiral of public concern”). Mass media plays a major role in reinforcing these trends, making them fundamental components of our daily lives.

Thus, postmodernism introduces, to some extent, a different kind of “value homogenization,” encompassing a distinct configuration of values. Of course, the concentration of attitudes and concrete concerns regarding a healthy lifestyle is strongly linked to an individual’s standard of living, education, and cultural background.

Interest in the issue of self-identity has been extremely high in recent decades within psychology and social psychology (Christopher Phillipson, 1998; J. Simons et al., 1994), aiming to explain the relationship between what an individual does and what they believe about themselves. Regarding age identity, social category, or the adoption of a leisure framework, the tension emphasized is that between the individual’s internal identity and the identity imposed by

society. From the perspective of postmodern theorists, all kinds of identities - within Western societies - become relative, with the normative prescriptions of industrial (post-industrial) society becoming largely irrelevant.

Concerning the empirical understanding and treatment of social construction, there are some differences among postmodernists, highlighted by American authors Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein (1999). Although the debate only marginally addresses lifestyle issues, it has implications for how such topics can develop both analytically and empirically.

The controversy revolves around the following dilemma: if the social world is analytically open to subjective formulations and leads to a free empirical “game,” how can we nonetheless extract models of social life for sociology? The answers appear to cover a continuum, from advocates of free-form research to proponents of directed research, sharpening differences regarding the execution of qualitative studies. This tension was already foreshadowed four decades ago by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967), who, while promoting a new perspective on social inquiry - one with integrative and interpretive emphases - also drew attention to its numerous pitfalls and challenges.

3. EPISTEMOLOGICAL ANCHORS

In the conceptual framework of our empirical approach, we take into account certain theoretical interpretations of social phenomena in general and sports phenomena in particular, in order to later ground our research epistemologically by specifying the type of activity targeted by the study - namely, why, how often, and in what manner our subjects engage in various forms of physical activity. Additionally, we aim to determine the concrete and symbolic functions that sport fulfills in the lives of these individuals.

The epistemological taxonomy of the types of phenomena to be explained (**explanans**) and the types of explanations for these phenomena (**explananda**) can serve as a starting point for systematizing modern sociological theories about various societal phenomena. These categories can be analyzed according to major types of explanations of social life influences and life-cycle

phenomena, as proposed by Derek Dannefer and Paul Uhlenberg (1999, pp. 313–314): one **personological**, and the other **sociological**.

Personological analyses (Kohli and Meyer, 1986; Elder, 1998; Clausen, 1993) and sociological analyses (Jaber Gubrium, James Holstein, and Buckholdt, 1994) focus on three levels of analysis:

- **Individual level** – tracking the structure of discrete human lives, from birth to death, and the characteristics of these particular life courses.
- **Social or population aggregation level** – mapping the collective patterns of individual life course structures within a given population.
- **Cultural or symbolic level** – studying broad societal representations of the life cycle and the roles prescribed for each age stage, derived from shared social knowledge and experience, including the nature of life-event boundaries and the socially recognized roles, norms, and meanings.

Each of these levels of analysis targets important phenomena that require careful description and examination. For example, at the **individual level**, key points of personal transition and the direction of trajectories based on their significant characteristics must be identified. At the **population or collective level**, the challenge lies in aggregating these individual characteristics into a collective framework. At the **socio-cultural level**, the focus is on the social structuring of roles attached to various statuses (age, gender, education, etc.) and on defining and evaluating specific life elements within the context of a given social system.

Inspired by D. Dannefer's (1999) classification of explanatory types (personological and sociological) and by the identification of specialized sociological studies as belonging to the level of analysis (in assessing consequences and outcomes for the life course - including the adoption of a healthy lifestyle and sport as a way of life - at either the individual or population level), we have developed the following general framework in Table 1:

Table 1: *Types of explanations and levels of analysis in modern sociology*

Level of Analysis of Life-Course Outcomes (Consequences)	Personological Type of Explanation	Sociological Type of Explanation
Individual	Personological Explanations for Individual Outcomes	Sociological Explanations for Individual Outcomes
Population	Personological Explanations for Population-Level Outcomes	Sociological Explanations for Population-Level Outcomes
Symbolic Construct	Life Course as a Personal Symbolic Construct	Life Course as a Shared Social Symbolic Construct

In most studies, the **personological type of explanation** is included both for the personal conduct of the subjects themselves and for the population as a whole. This approach also seeks to capture the subjects' perspectives on the population's adoption of a balanced life, in which sport represents a constant.

One of the methods employed (the **multiple case study**) will use **in-depth interviews** and **observation sheets** as central techniques. The figure below illustrates the **epistemological framework** within which the research can be conducted. The study will focus on the two levels, and the methodology will be constructed from both **functionalist** and **constructivist** premises.

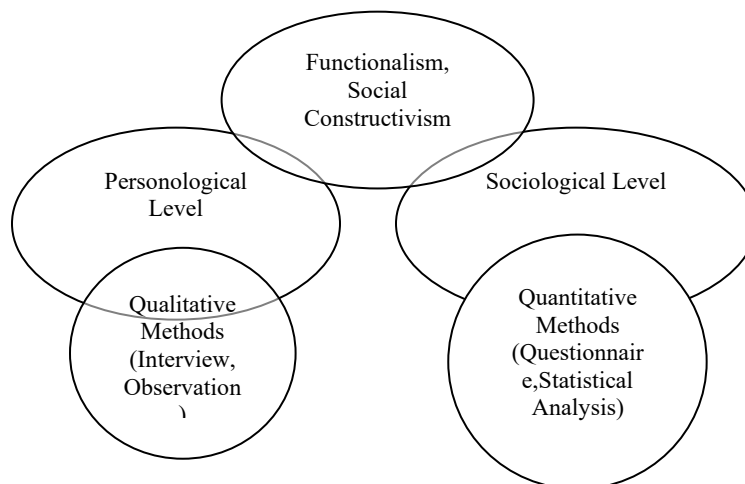


Figure 1. *Methodological dimensions of the empirical Theoretical-approach*

This allows us to observe the specificities of the Romanian context regarding the perception of sport in general, as well as the practical engagement in sports (various physical activities) during leisure time.

The theoretical premises we start from are related to global trends, the differences observed between various categories of individuals, and largely align with the research questions:

- To what extent is there a positive association between standard of living and the regular practice of physical activities
- To what extent is there a positive association between education level and a favorable opinion of sport in general and its practice in particular
- What are the associations between age, gender, and marital/family status and the regular practice of physical activities
- What are the reasons (both objective and subjective) that led to the decision to engage in the respective physical activity
- What differences (types of leisure activities – TV, rest, walks, meeting friends, hobbies, sport) exist between those who, in the past and presently, have had practitioners of physical activities in their close social circle (family, friends, colleagues) and those who do not have such a context
- To what extent has mass media contributed to a healthy lifestyle through public appeals emphasizing the importance of sports activities?

- Is there a difference in life philosophy or value adherence to a healthy lifestyle between those who practice physical activity and those who do not

As previously mentioned, the following research methods can be used:

- **Multiple case study** (using **in-depth interviews** and **observation**) on a sample of subjects selected according to diverse sociodemographic criteria.
- **Standardized questionnaire** administered to theoretical samples from fitness centers and sports clubs.
- **Secondary analysis** of statistics and results from research conducted at the national level (opinion polls).

Following the pilot studies (consisting of preliminary interviews with practitioners and managers of the respective centers), the research hypotheses can be constructed, primarily linking them to **functionalist** and **constructivist** assumptions. Of course, the value, attitudinal, and behavioral framework of individuals can be interpreted through a much broader theoretical lens. Depending on the results, researchers may expand the explanatory scope where appropriate.

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REDESIGNING HIGHER EDUCATION CURRICULA THROUGH LEAN MANAGEMENT: BALANCING ACADEMIC QUALITY AND GLOBAL COMPETITIVENESS

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the application of Lean Management principles in the reconfiguration of higher education curricula within the context of increasing internationalization. As universities in the European Union face pressure to align academic standards with global market demands, the need for efficient, waste-free, and student-centric educational models has become paramount. The study analyzes how Lean tools, traditionally used in manufacturing, can be adapted to eliminate curricular redundancies and enhance global competitiveness. By examining post-2020 case studies from Poland, Germany, and Romania, the paper evaluates the balance between maintaining rigorous academic quality and fostering professional agility. Through SWOT and Input-Output analyses, the research provides a strategic framework for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to redesign their offerings for a digitalized, globalized era.

KEYWORDS: *higher education, lean management, curriculum redesign, internationalization, quality management*

J.E.L. Classifications: **I23, L15, M11, O15**

1. INTRODUCTION

The landscape of international business and higher education is undergoing a profound transformation, shaped by a confluence of factors that transcend borders and cultures. Traditionally, academic curricula were designed as static repositories of knowledge, but the disruptive power of the COVID-19 pandemic and the accelerating pace of global digitalization have forced the dynamics of the education industry to evolve at an unprecedented pace. This article delves into the pivotal trend of redesigning higher education through Lean Management, exploring how institutions can balance the traditional requirements of academic quality with the urgent need for global competitiveness.

As indicated in this template, manuscripts should be concise and focused on strategic outcomes. By examining the intersections of economics, technology, and pedagogy, this article sheds light on the challenges and opportunities that define the future of internationalized education. The introduction states the objectives of the work - to identify "waste" in traditional teaching models and to provide an adequate background for a more agile curricular structure.

Furthermore, the manuscript contains answers to following questions: what is the problem with current curricular rigidities, what has been done by other researchers regarding Lean in services, what tools are used for this transformation, and what are the results of recent EU implementations. The objective is to highlight the evolution of successful educational ventures, offering valuable insights for stakeholders navigating the dynamic global academic ecosystem.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The fundamental question addressing the modernization of academic structures is whether Lean Management, a philosophy rooted in Toyota's manufacturing efficiency, can be effectively translated to the "intangible" processes of higher education. To answer this, we must first define "waste" (Muda) within a pedagogical framework. According to recent studies by Douglas et al. (2020), waste in higher education is not merely a loss of material resources, but manifests as "curricular obesity"- the accumulation of redundant modules, outdated learning outcomes, and administrative bottlenecks that hinder the student's progression toward global employability.

In the realm of international management, the application of Lean principles aligns with the core objectives of resource optimization and risk minimization defined by early scholars like Militaru (2009) and updated for the digital age. Recent literature by Antony et al. (2021) argues that the post-pandemic university must operate as a "value-driven" entity, where every credit hour and every learning activity must directly contribute to the student's international competencies. This shift requires a move from a "Push" system - where faculty decide what is taught based on tradition - to a "Pull" system, where the curriculum is redesigned based on the actual requirements of the global labor market and international accreditation standards.

Furthermore, the role of digitalization has redefined the concept of "Continuous Improvement" (Kaizen) in academia. As noted by Jaradat and Stan (2023), the integration of advanced technologies - such as data analytics for monitoring student success and blockchain for credentialing - is no longer an auxiliary feature but a cornerstone of institutional resilience. In the

context of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), Lean Management provides the tools to navigate the "complexity paradox": universities must offer more diverse, internationalized programs while simultaneously reducing costs and administrative friction. Recent research by Balzer and Francis (2022) emphasizes that the "new normal" for EU universities involves using Value Stream Mapping (VSM) to identify and eliminate non-value-adding steps in the international student lifecycle, from recruitment to alumni engagement.

A critical aspect discussed in post-2020 literature is the "Agile-Lean" hybrid model. Scholars argue that while Lean focuses on efficiency, Agility ensures that the curriculum can pivot rapidly in response to global disruptions, such as health crises or technological breakthroughs like Generative AI. This is particularly relevant for CEE universities striving for global competitiveness. According to recent findings, institutions that successfully implement Lean methodologies report not only higher operational efficiency but also increased student "viewership" and loyalty, as the educational product becomes more coherent and market - aligned.

Finally, the ethical dimension of Lean Higher Education has gained prominence. According to contemporary studies, the sustainability of a redesigned curriculum depends on "respect for people" - one of the two pillars of Lean. In an internationalized context, this translates into a student-centric approach that values diversity and social responsibility. Consequently, the literature suggests that redesigning curricula through Lean Management is a multi-dimensional process defined by three critical drivers: operational excellence, digital integration, and a relentless focus on the "value" perceived by the global student as the ultimate stakeholder.

3. METHODOLOGY

The current research is designed as a qualitative and exploratory study, focusing on the strategic integration of Lean Management principles within the higher education sector of the European Union. In order to ensure technical accuracy and provide a comprehensive overview of how curricula are being reshaped for global competitiveness, the research has several main objectives:

- **a)** To investigate the current state of international business regarding the application of Lean tools (such as VSM and Kaizen) in European universities;
- **b)** To explore and define core concepts such as: curricular waste, academic quality assurance, and internationalization at home;

- **c)** To identify the structural and cultural problems the current academic systems are facing during the transition from traditional to agile educational models.

Thus, the main research question of the current article is:

“How does the implementation of Lean Management principles contribute to the balancing of academic quality and global competitiveness in the redesign of higher education curricula?”.

To provide a structured answer to this question, the study is built upon four qualitative research hypotheses adapted to the post-2020 educational landscape:

Hypothesis 1: The systematic identification and elimination of "curricular waste" (outdated modules and redundant administrative steps) significantly enhances the perceived value of the educational product for international students.

Hypothesis 2: Post-pandemic curriculum redesign is increasingly driven by a "Pull" system, where international labor market demands and stakeholder feedback directly dictate the evolution of learning outcomes.

Hypothesis 3: Successful Lean implementations in HEIs are characterized by their ability to leverage digital data analytics for "Continuous Improvement" (Kaizen), allowing for real-time adjustments to the curriculum.

Hypothesis 4: The integration of Lean methodologies in higher education faces significant cultural resistance, which requires innovative management solutions and a focus on "respect for people" to ensure long-term sustainability.

In order to answer these questions and validate the hypotheses, two main research methods used in international business management are applied: **SWOT analysis** and **input-output analysis**. These tools allow for a structured evaluation of the inputs (Lean tools, digital infrastructure, stakeholder feedback) and the resulting outputs (curricular agility, enhanced global rankings, and increased student retention) that define the modernization of European higher education.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The future of international higher education is poised for dynamic transformations, driven by an array of evolving trends that will reshape the industry in the post-pandemic era. As demonstrated throughout this study, the implementation of Lean Management principles offers a critical linchpin for institutions seeking to balance academic quality with global competitiveness. By systematically identifying and eliminating "curricular waste," universities in the European

Union, particularly in the CEE region, can ensure that their educational offerings remain agile, relevant, and value - driven.

Technology, through the integration of data analytics, virtual learning environments, and blockchain for micro-credentialing, will continue to remain a cornerstone of institutional resilience. This digital transformation, coupled with a "Pull" system driven by global labor market demands, allows for a continuous improvement (Kaizen) process that aligns academic outcomes with the needs of international stakeholders. The success of these initiatives in Poland, Germany, and Romania underscores the fact that institutional efficiency is not a detractor from academic depth, but rather a facilitator of global brand recognition and student loyalty.

Furthermore, the complex interplay of geopolitics and international business in education will demand strategic agility and risk management. As universities chart their course into the future, ethical integrity and governance transparency will reach new heights, ensuring that the drive for competitiveness does not compromise the welfare of the academic community.

In this ever-evolving landscape, a focus on "respect for people" and sustainability will be paramount for ensuring the long-term viability of the Lean Higher Education model. By harnessing these trends, Higher Education Institutions can create innovative, inclusive, and ethically sound opportunities that captivate global audiences and secure their position in the dynamic global sports - and academic - business ecosystem.

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SMART VILLAGES IN ROMANIA: DIGITALIZATION, CITIZEN-CENTRIC GOVERNANCE, AND THE CASE STUDY OF APAHIDA

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ABSTRACT

The Smart Village concept has emerged as a critical instrument for extending the benefits of digital transformation to rural communities that risk being excluded from the modernisation processes reshaping urban local governance across Europe. This article examines the trajectory of smart village development in Romania, with a focused case study on the commune of Apahida, Cluj County, which in June 2025 became one of the first Romanian rural administrative units to implement a DocuBox system — an automated, QR-code-secured smart locker enabling citizens to retrieve municipal documents on a 24/7 basis without attending the town hall in person. Drawing on qualitative interview data collected in 2023 with elected officials and public servants involved in smart city and smart village projects, supplemented by documentary analysis of official municipal announcements and current comparative literature on digital public administration, the article analyses the DocuBox initiative across five dimensions: digital transformation in local governance, efficiency and resource optimisation, accessibility and inclusivity, cybersecurity and citizen trust, and scalability and replicability. The study situates the Apahida initiative within the broader European Smart Villages Action and the Romanian national digitalisation framework, and evaluates its potential as a transferable model for other small and medium-sized municipalities. The article concludes that the Apahida pilot constitutes a strategically significant milestone in Romania's trajectory toward smart rural governance, demonstrating that innovation capacity is not the exclusive preserve of large urban centres and that citizen-centric digital solutions can generate measurable improvements in administrative efficiency, equity of access, and public trust even in communities with limited institutional and financial resources.

KEYWORDS: *Apahida, digital public administration, DocuBox, e-government, Romania, smart village, rural digitalisation, citizen-centric services*

J.E.L. Classifications: H11, H70, O18, O33, R58

1. INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has become one of the defining policy imperatives of the contemporary period in public administration. Across Europe, national governments and supranational institutions have invested substantially in the development of digital public services, electronic identification systems, and data-driven governance architectures that promise to increase efficiency, reduce administrative burdens, and improve the quality of interaction between citizens and their public institutions. The narrative of this transformation, however, has been predominantly urban: the smart city concept — with its interconnected systems of mobility, energy, health, security, and governance — has generated an extensive literature and a significant policy infrastructure, while the specific challenges and opportunities of rural and peri-urban communities have received comparatively less systematic attention (Naldi et al., 2015; Zavrtnik et al., 2018).

This urban bias in the digital transformation agenda is not merely an academic oversight; it carries concrete distributional consequences. Rural communities, which frequently exhibit lower digital literacy rates, older demographic profiles, weaker broadband infrastructure, and more constrained institutional and financial resources than urban centres, risk being systematically excluded from the gains that digitalisation generates — a dynamic that would reinforce and deepen existing territorial inequalities rather than attenuating them (Visvizi & Lytras, 2018; Saleminck et al., 2017). The European Commission's 2017 Communication on the Future of Food and Farming, followed by the dedicated Smart Villages initiative and the 2021 Long Term Vision for Rural Areas (European Commission, 2021), represents a belated but significant institutional recognition of this risk and a commitment to extending the digital transformation agenda to rural communities across member states.

Romania provides a particularly instructive national context for the analysis of smart village development. As one of the European Union member states with the most significant urban-rural divide in terms of digital infrastructure and public service delivery, Romania faces a dual challenge: to accelerate the digitalisation of its urban local governance systems, which already lag behind Western European comparators, and simultaneously to extend the benefits of digital public services to a rural population that in 2023 still constituted approximately 45% of the total national

population (National Institute of Statistics, 2023). The emergence of pioneering smart village projects — Ciugud, in Alba County, widely regarded as Romania's first genuine smart village, and a growing number of follow-on initiatives in other counties — demonstrates that Romanian rural communities are not merely passive recipients of national digitalisation policy but can be active innovators in the development of citizen-centric digital solutions (Trincă, 2023).

This article focuses on the commune of Apahida, in Cluj County, which in June 2025 announced the successful implementation of a DocuBox system — a smart locker enabling citizens to retrieve official documents issued by the town hall via a QR-code-based unlocking mechanism, available on a 24/7 basis without requiring personal attendance at the municipal offices. The study is grounded in qualitative interview research conducted between September and October 2023 with mayors, vice-mayors, and public servants directly involved in smart city and smart village projects in Romanian municipalities, supplemented by documentary analysis of the Apahida municipality's official communications and by current comparative literature on digital public administration and rural digitalisation. It proceeds as follows: Section 2 situates the Smart Village concept within the theoretical and policy literature on digital public administration and rural development; Section 3 examines the Romanian smart village context and the role of pioneering initiatives such as Ciugud; Section 4 provides a detailed analysis of the Apahida DocuBox initiative across its key dimensions; Section 5 evaluates the scalability, replicability, and future research implications of the Apahida model; and the concluding section synthesises the article's principal findings.

2. THE SMART VILLAGE CONCEPT: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND EUROPEAN POLICY FRAMEWORK

2.1 FROM SMART CITIES TO SMART VILLAGES: EXTENDING THE PARADIGM

The smart city concept, as it has been elaborated in the academic literature and in policy documents since the early 2000s, rests on the deployment of information and communication technologies (ICT) and data analytics to improve the efficiency, sustainability, and quality of urban services across multiple dimensions: mobility, energy management, environmental monitoring, governance, economic development, and social inclusion (Caragliu et al., 2011; Albino et al., 2015). The concept has generated an extensive and contested literature: scholars have debated its definitional boundaries, its normative assumptions about the relationship between technology and human flourishing, its distributional implications, and its governance model, with some critics

arguing that the smart city paradigm privileges technocratic solutions over participatory democratic governance and the interests of technology providers over those of citizens (Hollands, 2008; Vanolo, 2014).

The extension of the smart paradigm to rural settings — the smart village concept — requires both a translation and a significant adaptation of the frameworks developed for urban contexts. The European Commission's working definition, elaborated in the context of the Smart Villages initiative launched in 2017, understands smart villages as 'rural areas and communities which build on their existing strengths and assets as well as on developing new opportunities' and which use digital and other innovative solutions to improve their resilience, and build on local potentials (European Commission, 2017). This definition is deliberately broad and locally adaptive: it does not prescribe a specific set of technological solutions or organisational models but emphasises the importance of building on the particular strengths, assets, and needs of individual rural communities rather than applying a one-size-fits-all template derived from urban smart city experience (Visvizi & Lytras, 2018; Woods, 2011).

The academic literature on smart villages has identified several dimensions that are particularly relevant to the rural context. Digital connectivity — the availability of reliable, high-speed internet access — is a foundational prerequisite for virtually all other smart village interventions; without it, the deployment of e-governance, digital health, precision agriculture, and other ICT-enabled services is structurally impossible (Salemink et al., 2017). E-governance — the digitisation of administrative services and the creation of electronic channels of interaction between citizens and local public institutions — is consistently identified as among the most impactful applications of smart village technology, both in terms of efficiency gains and in terms of citizen experience improvement (Wirtz et al., 2019; Mossberger et al., 2008). Public-private partnerships (PPP) are identified by Jayasena et al. (2020) as a critical enabling mechanism for smart village development, particularly in communities with limited public financial resources: the ability to leverage private investment and expertise in the deployment and maintenance of smart infrastructure significantly expands the feasible set of interventions for municipalities operating under tight budgetary constraints.

2.2 DIGITAL PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND CITIZEN-CENTRIC SERVICE DELIVERY

The theoretical framework of citizen-centric public administration — the orientation of government services around the needs, preferences, and life situations of citizens rather than around the internal logic and convenience of administrative organisations — provides the normative foundation for the evaluation of smart village digital initiatives (Reddick, 2011; Wimmer, 2002). The citizen-centric paradigm, which has informed public administration reform in Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) member states since the 1990s, holds that the quality of public service delivery should be assessed primarily from the perspective of the service recipient — the citizen — rather than from the perspective of the service provider — the public institution — and that administrative modernisation should be evaluated by its capacity to reduce the burden placed on citizens in their interactions with government: the time, effort, cost, and information asymmetry involved in accessing public services (Janssen et al., 2004; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006).

Digital technology offers powerful tools for the realisation of citizen-centric service delivery objectives: online portals, mobile applications, automated notification systems, and self-service kiosks all have the potential to reduce transaction costs for citizens, extend the temporal and spatial availability of services, and enable more personalised and responsive service interactions. The post-COVID-19 acceleration of digital public administration — the pandemic forced both citizens and administrations to develop digital service delivery capabilities rapidly and at scale — has generated a significant body of evidence about the conditions under which digital public service adoption succeeds and the barriers that prevent it, with important implications for rural contexts where both the potential gains from digitisation and the barriers to adoption are often more pronounced than in urban settings (OECD, 2020; Twizeyimana & Andersson, 2019).

The concept of digital equity — the principle that the benefits of digital public administration should be accessible to all citizens regardless of their location, socioeconomic status, digital literacy, or physical capabilities — is of particular importance in the rural context and provides a normative criterion against which the inclusivity dimension of smart village initiatives can be evaluated (Mossberger et al., 2008; van Dijk, 2020). A digitalisation strategy that improves service delivery for citizens with high digital literacy and reliable internet access while creating additional barriers for those without these advantages is not a successful implementation of citizen-centric

governance but a digital stratification of public service quality — an outcome that is both normatively unacceptable and politically unsustainable in democratic systems committed to equal citizenship.

3. THE ROMANIAN SMART VILLAGE LANDSCAPE: PIONEERS, CHALLENGES, AND POLICY CONTEXT

Romania's trajectory toward digital local governance has been characterised by a combination of ambitious national policy commitments, significant structural barriers, and a small number of pioneering local initiatives that have demonstrated what is achievable within the Romanian institutional and financial context. The National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), adopted in 2021 as Romania's framework for the deployment of EU Recovery and Resilience Facility resources, allocated substantial funding to the digitalisation of public administration, including the development of national digital infrastructure for public services and specific grants for the digitalisation of local public administration units. Component C7 of the PNRR, dedicated to digital transformation, established a framework for the financing of smart city and smart village projects at the local level, creating financial incentives that have significantly accelerated the adoption of digital solutions by Romanian municipalities (Government of Romania, 2021).

Against this national policy backdrop, the commune of Ciugud, in Alba County, emerged as Romania's first genuinely comprehensive smart village, implementing a range of digital and sustainability-oriented initiatives — including the digitisation of administrative services, smart street lighting, electric vehicle charging infrastructure, and a comprehensive broadband network — that attracted significant national and international media attention and established a model for other Romanian rural communities to emulate. The Ciugud experience demonstrated that ambitious smart village initiatives are achievable in the Romanian context and generated a significant diffusion effect, inspiring mayors and local councils in other rural communities to explore similar approaches adapted to their own circumstances and resources (Trincă, 2023).

The qualitative research conducted between September and October 2023, on which the present article draws, involved semi-structured interviews with mayors, vice-mayors, and senior public servants directly involved in smart city and smart village projects in a range of Romanian municipalities. The interviews were conducted with elected officials and administrative staff who had personal responsibility for or direct involvement in the planning and implementation of digital

public administration initiatives, including the personal advisors of mayors, and staff from development offices and European funds departments of city halls. The interview data provided insight into both the motivations and the practical challenges of smart village implementation in the Romanian context, and identified several innovative solutions that were in the planning or early implementation stage — among them the DocuBox initiative in Apahida, which at the time of the interviews represented a promising concept that was subsequently brought to full implementation by June 2025.

The Romanian smart village landscape, as revealed by both the qualitative interview research and the broader documentary evidence, exhibits a pattern that is common in European rural digitalisation: a small number of pioneering communities at the technological frontier, a larger number of communities in intermediate stages of digital adoption, and a substantial tail of communities that have not yet begun systematic digitalisation of their administrative services. The barriers most frequently identified by interview respondents included: insufficient financial resources for initial investment in digital infrastructure; limited technical expertise within small municipal administrations; legal and regulatory uncertainties about the permissibility and data protection implications of proposed digital solutions; and the challenge of managing the transition from paper-based to digital service delivery in communities with heterogeneous levels of digital literacy among the resident population. The DocuBox solution implemented in Apahida addresses several of these barriers in a particularly creative way, as the analysis in the following section demonstrates.

4. THE APAHIDA DOCUBOX INITIATIVE: IMPLEMENTATION, DIMENSIONS, AND EVALUATION

4.1 THE DOCUBOX SYSTEM: DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

The commune of Apahida, located approximately 10 kilometres northeast of Cluj-Napoca in Cluj County, is a peri-urban administrative unit with a population of approximately 18,000 inhabitants distributed across the principal locality of Apahida and several dependent villages. Its geographic proximity to Cluj-Napoca — Romania's second-largest city and a major hub of technology, education, and innovation — creates a distinctive context for smart village development: Apahida faces the challenges typical of peri-urban communities, including rapid population growth driven by urban sprawl, pressure on local infrastructure and services, and a

resident population with relatively high digital literacy and correspondingly high expectations for the quality of public service delivery.

In June 2025, the Apahida Town Hall announced the successful implementation of the DocuBox system — a smart locker installed adjacent to the town hall building on Horea Street, enabling citizens to retrieve official documents issued by the municipality without requiring personal attendance during office hours. The operational logic of the system is straightforward: a citizen submits a request for a document — a certificate, official statement, or other document within the town hall's competence — through the standard administrative channel. Once the document has been prepared and placed in the locker, the citizen receives an automated email notification containing a QR code that, when scanned at the DocuBox terminal, unlocks the compartment containing the document. The system operates on a 24/7 basis, eliminating the temporal constraint of standard office hours and enabling citizens to collect their documents at any time convenient to them.

The DocuBox concept is explicitly modelled on the automated parcel locker systems deployed by major e-commerce operators — Amazon Locker in the United States and Western Europe, and eMAG's EasyBox system in Romania — adapting the self-service locker model from commercial parcel delivery to the administrative document delivery context. This adaptation is conceptually straightforward but institutionally significant: it imports into the domain of public administration a service model that citizens already understand and trust from their commercial experience, thereby reducing the behavioural and psychological barriers to adoption that novel public technology solutions frequently encounter. The parallel with commercial locker systems also opens the possibility — explicitly mentioned by the interview respondents — of public-private partnerships in which the locker infrastructure, when not occupied by municipal documents, could be made available for commercial parcel delivery, generating both revenue and increased utilisation of the installed asset.

4.2 DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION, EFFICIENCY, AND ACCESSIBILITY DIMENSIONS

The DocuBox initiative generates measurable improvements across several dimensions of public service quality that are directly relevant to the theoretical frameworks discussed in Section 2. The efficiency and resource optimisation dimension is perhaps the most immediately quantifiable: by enabling citizens to collect documents outside office hours and without staff assistance, the system reduces the volume of in-person visits to the town hall for routine document collection, freeing staff time for more complex administrative tasks that require human judgment and interaction. Preliminary observations following the June 2025 implementation suggest significant reductions in citizen waiting times and in the administrative workload associated with routine document handover — consistent with the broader evidence base on the efficiency effects of e-government self-service systems (Wirtz et al., 2019; OECD, 2020).

The accessibility and inclusivity dimension of the DocuBox initiative deserves particular attention in the context of the digital equity framework discussed above. The 24/7 availability of document retrieval services addresses a specific and significant barrier to equitable public service access: the incompatibility of standard office hours with the working schedules of a large portion of the resident population, particularly those in full-time employment, shift workers, parents with childcare responsibilities, and others for whom attendance at the town hall during standard business hours requires a significant sacrifice of working time or personal flexibility. By decoupling document retrieval from office hours, the DocuBox system extends effective access to municipal services to a substantially broader share of the resident population than the traditional in-person collection model allows. It also reduces barriers for citizens with mobility challenges or health conditions that make physical attendance difficult, an important consideration given Romania's demographic structure, characterised by a significant and growing proportion of elderly residents in rural and peri-urban communities (National Institute of Statistics, 2023).

The cybersecurity and citizen trust dimension of the DocuBox initiative reflects a challenge that is common to all physical-digital hybrid service delivery systems: the need to balance the convenience of automated, self-service access with adequate security measures to protect both the confidentiality of official documents and the personal data of citizens. The QR-code-based authentication mechanism employed by the Apahida system provides a level of security that is appropriate for the sensitivity of the documents involved — municipal certificates and statements

— while maintaining the simplicity and accessibility of the user experience. The integration of email notification and QR-code authentication is consistent with current best practice in e-government security design, as documented in the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) guidelines on digital public service security (ENISA, 2021). The importance of robust cybersecurity integration in hybrid physical-digital systems is also underscored by the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) obligations that apply to all personal data processing by public bodies in EU member states, which require that document handling systems implement appropriate technical and organisational measures to ensure the confidentiality and integrity of personal data (European Parliament & Council, 2016).

4.3 PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP POTENTIAL AND SCALABILITY

One of the most strategically significant features of the DocuBox initiative, as identified in the qualitative interview research, is its potential for integration into a public-private partnership (PPP) model that could substantially enhance the financial sustainability and social utility of the installed infrastructure. The interview respondents from Apahida noted that the town hall was actively exploring the possibility of making the locker infrastructure available for commercial parcel delivery when not occupied by municipal documents — a hybrid use model that would generate revenue for the municipality, increase the utilisation rate of the physical infrastructure, and provide a tangible additional service to residents who might otherwise need to travel to urban parcel collection points.

This PPP dimension connects the Apahida initiative to a broader literature on the role of public-private partnerships in smart city and smart village development. Jayasena et al. (2020) identified public-private partnerships as a critical mechanism for mobilising private investment and operational expertise in the development of smart urban infrastructure, arguing that the complementarity of public governance authority and private technical and financial capacity makes PPP models particularly well-suited to the deployment of innovative service delivery solutions in resource-constrained public administration contexts. The Apahida DocuBox model exemplifies this complementarity: the municipality provides the regulatory authority, the location, and the administrative document supply; the private partner provides the physical infrastructure, the technical maintenance, and potentially the commercial parcel delivery service that increases the system's financial viability. This hybrid model reduces the net cost to the municipality while

delivering a more comprehensive service offering to citizens and generating positive spillovers for local businesses and residents who use commercial delivery services.

The scalability and replicability of the DocuBox model across Romanian municipalities is a question of both technical feasibility and institutional appropriateness. On the technical side, the locker infrastructure and QR-code authentication system are based on commercially available, well-tested technologies that do not require specialised local expertise to operate and maintain; the primary technical requirement for replication is reliable internet connectivity, which is available in most Romanian communes at the connectivity standards required by the system. On the institutional side, the DocuBox model requires a sufficient volume of citizen document requests to justify the investment in the locker infrastructure — a threshold that is likely to be met in most communes above a certain population size, particularly those in peri-urban areas with a high proportion of working-age residents. The applicability to smaller and more remote rural communes, where document volumes may be lower and digital literacy among residents more variable, would require a more careful cost-benefit analysis and potentially a different deployment model — for instance, a shared locker infrastructure serving multiple neighbouring communes rather than individual commune-level installations.

5. BROADER IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

The Apahida DocuBox initiative, situated within the broader trajectory of Romanian smart village development and the European Smart Villages framework, generates a set of implications for policy, practice, and research that extend beyond the specific case studied. At the policy level, the initiative provides empirical support for the European Commission's Smart Villages Action, which has consistently argued that digital innovation in rural public administration is both feasible and impactful and that national and European public funding should be directed toward enabling rural communities to develop and implement citizen-centric digital service solutions adapted to their specific circumstances (European Commission, 2021). The Apahida case demonstrates that meaningful smart village innovation does not require the comprehensive infrastructure investments of pioneering models such as Ciugud; a targeted, low-cost, high-impact intervention such as the DocuBox can generate significant improvements in service accessibility and administrative efficiency with relatively modest initial investment.

The initiative also has implications for the design of national digitalisation frameworks for local public administration. Romania's PNRR-funded digital transformation programme has prioritised the development of central digital platforms and national infrastructure, but the Apahida experience suggests that locally-initiated, bottom-up innovations — driven by the entrepreneurial creativity of individual mayors and administrative teams rather than by top-down national programmes — can play a significant and complementary role in the broader digitalisation of Romanian local governance. A national framework that creates enabling conditions for such bottom-up innovation — through streamlined procurement procedures for digital solutions, legal clarity about the permissibility of novel administrative delivery mechanisms, and peer learning networks that enable municipalities to share their experiences and replicate successful models — could significantly accelerate the diffusion of smart village solutions across Romanian municipalities (Janssen et al., 2004; Twizeyimana & Andersson, 2019).

Several dimensions of the Apahida initiative invite further empirical investigation that the present study, based primarily on qualitative interview data and documentary analysis, was not designed to address. A systematic quantitative evaluation of the DocuBox system's impact on administrative efficiency — measuring the reduction in in-person visits, waiting times, and staff workload attributable to the system — would provide a robust evidence base for cost-benefit analysis and for the assessment of the system's economic case relative to alternative service delivery improvements. A citizen satisfaction survey would enable assessment of the subjective service quality improvements experienced by users of the system, including the specific dimensions — accessibility, convenience, reliability, and security — that users find most and least satisfactory. A comparative study of similar smart locker solutions implemented in other European rural municipalities — several Nordic and Central European countries have piloted comparable systems in different administrative contexts — would provide valuable benchmarks and design lessons for Romanian municipalities considering similar implementations.

Future research should also address the question of digital inclusion in the context of smart village document delivery solutions. While the DocuBox system expands accessibility for citizens who cannot attend during office hours, it does not directly address the needs of citizens who lack the digital literacy to use email and QR-code-based systems, or who do not have reliable access to a smartphone or computer. Understanding the proportion of the resident population that falls into this category, and designing complementary service delivery channels that ensure these citizens

are not disadvantaged by the shift toward digital delivery, is an essential component of an equitable smart village strategy (van Dijk, 2020; Mossberger et al., 2008). The articulation of the DocuBox system with traditional in-person service delivery — ensuring that the automated system supplements rather than replaces human service delivery channels for those who need them — is a design and governance question that the Apahida initiative has begun to address and that future research should examine in greater depth.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This article has examined the smart village concept in the Romanian context, with a focused case study on the commune of Apahida's DocuBox initiative — an automated, QR-code-secured smart locker system for the 24/7 self-service retrieval of official municipal documents. The analysis has demonstrated that the Apahida initiative represents a citizen-centric digital innovation of significant practical impact and considerable strategic importance for the broader trajectory of Romanian rural digitalisation.

The DocuBox system addresses, in a cost-effective and technically straightforward manner, several of the most significant barriers to equitable public service access in peri-urban and rural Romanian communities: the temporal constraint of office hours, the physical burden of in-person attendance, the inefficiency of routine document handover processes, and the gap between citizen expectations shaped by digital commercial service experiences and the reality of traditional municipal service delivery. Its implementation in Apahida demonstrates that meaningful smart village innovation is achievable without the comprehensive infrastructure investments required by pioneering models such as Ciugud, and that targeted, high-impact interventions can generate measurable service quality improvements with relatively modest initial costs.

The initiative's potential for integration into a public-private partnership model — enabling the locker infrastructure to serve both administrative and commercial parcel delivery functions — represents a promising mechanism for enhancing financial sustainability and expanding the system's social utility beyond its core administrative function. The replicability of the DocuBox model across other Romanian municipalities — particularly those in peri-urban areas with comparable demographic and connectivity profiles — is supported by the technical simplicity of the system, the availability of commercial locker infrastructure at accessible cost, and the clear

legal framework provided by the GDPR and national e-government legislation for document handling and personal data protection.

The broader significance of the Apahida initiative lies in what it demonstrates about the institutional capacity of Romanian rural communities to innovate in the delivery of public services. The DocuBox is more than a technological solution; it is evidence of an administrative culture that is capable of identifying citizen needs, designing appropriate responses, and bringing innovative solutions to implementation — qualities that are indispensable to the success of Romania's broader digital transformation agenda. At the same time, the Apahida case illustrates the importance of qualitative research in identifying and documenting innovative local practices before they have attracted national or European policy attention: the interview research that first identified the DocuBox concept in 2023 preceded the system's public announcement by nearly two years, demonstrating the value of sustained engagement with local administrative actors in the monitoring of digital innovation at the municipal level.

Looking ahead, the generalisation of smart village approaches across Romanian rural municipalities will require a combination of enabling conditions at the national level — streamlined procurement, legal clarity, peer learning networks, and targeted co-financing — and continued entrepreneurial initiative at the local level from elected officials and administrative staff who are willing to experiment, learn from experience, and share their innovations with their peers. The Apahida DocuBox initiative offers a clear, replicable, and compelling model of what that entrepreneurial initiative can achieve. Romania's rural communities need not wait for comprehensive national programmes to begin their smart village journey; they can, as Apahida has demonstrated, lead the way.

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