

CITIZENS' PERCEPTION TOWARD THE PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS – SATISFACTION LEVEL

Chițescu Răzvan Ion¹, Badaluta Andreea²

^{1) 2)} National University of Political Studies and Public Administration

E-mail: razvanric@yahoo.com ; E-mail: andreeabadaluta@yahoo.com

Abstract

Public administration, through its role at the social level, but also through the mechanisms of organization and functioning, can significantly interfere with the perception of the entire administrative system, from the local level to the central one. Citizens, in their capacity as the main beneficiaries of the services provided by it, through their direct or indirect interaction of cooperation/ conflict or subordination, make this administrative mechanism permanently transformed to adapt to the conditions imposed by the development of society and, implicitly, the different needs of those who form it.

The present paper aims to highlight the citizens' perception of the public administration and the relationship with it in order to find tools, methods or actions that increase the level of satisfaction of both actors.

Keywords

Public administration, perception, satisfaction

JEL Classification

M31, H83

Introduction

Through its role, namely to be the image of a country, public administration is the oldest and most important legal institution. The term administration derives from Latin, from the word ministry, which means servant, and is closely related to the magister (Nicu, 2007), that is, the master to which he was subjected (Negoita 2009, p3). According to the Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language, the administration means "the entire administrative organs of a state.". Thus, in this semantic context, the verb to administer can be interpreted as leadership, organization, coordination, guidance of citizens in a given territory, in which it is used and used.

When institutions seek solutions to citizen satisfaction and methods to promote their services to their aid, marketing intervenes (Grigorescu, 2008). Marketing can be likened to a clock system where the products/ services associated with the secondary indicator of the clock are provided to the customer, the customer being the minute watch, satisfying his needs, satisfaction being the hour indicator. All three work continuously and in a close relationship. Doing one of them may damage the entire system.

The public administration specific services generate the most frequent interactions between citizens and authorities; public administration may be seen as a link between citizens and public policies (Grigorescu, 2006), a communication channel necessary for the functioning

of a society (Brooke&Yang, 2012), but sometimes disturbed by various difficulties or barriers (Chiru, 2003). These are specific to either the transmitter or receiver and appear at the language level (difficulty of expressing or interpreting the message by using confused / inappropriate words) or in a context where the lack of attention or interest in receiving the message, the emotional state of the transmitter of the receptor generates ambiguity and unprofessionalism (Danciu & Grigorescu, 2000).

Research methodology

To find out what citizens perceive about their relationship with public authorities in Romania, we have developed a questionnaire with the help of Google - Forms. It could be accessed at address <https://goo.gl/forms/wvyisgEOSNF1V9o93>. Before it was publicly offered for completion, it was tested to verify its functionality (it does not involve viewing problems of all the questions' answering variants; spelling is correct, clear questions). The creation of the online questionnaire highlighted numerous concerns related to the assumed one: the perception of people about corruption, the perceptions of the clients about the services received, the image of the various institutions in the opinion of the citizens, the perception of the population regarding the activity of civil servants, the transparency of the public institutions in Romania.

The questionnaire was distributed in the online social networking environment, available from 05/18/2018 to 11/18/2018. At the end of this period, 171 responses were aggregated.

The questionnaire contained 14 queries, closed and opens, with a single answer but also a multiple answer. Completing it took about 10 minutes so that the respondents could remain focused until the end and thus reduce the risk of not finalizing it.

The main variables we have considered relate to the direct relationship of the citizens with the authorities, their perception of the quality of the public services reflected in the activity of the public administration institutions. It was offered the opportunity to grasp gradually the satisfaction, respectively the dissatisfaction of the respondents regarding the details that make up the directions analyzed through the questions asked. We also evaluated these analyzed directions with the help of two control questions, one closed and one open type, so that, by correlating the answers, we can draw a detailed profile of the relationship between citizens and authorities. In order to highlight the personal, pregnant needs of the citizens, we introduced an open question in the questionnaire asking for the respondents to enumerate proposals for improving their relationship with public administration institutions, thus understanding the action direction of the administration that citizens need and which these will support (Voican, M., 2006).

The research ethics

In the introductory part of the questionnaire, the purpose of the research was stated so that the persons who access the address to which they are located to be informed regarding the subject for which they are asked for their opinion. Thus, we ensured the informal consent of those who participated in the research. Also in the introduction, we assured you that there are no correct or wrong answers that could be offered to encourage the sincerity of the respondents. To ensure that personal data is protected and that they will not be used for purposes other than the present study, we have stated from the outset the guarantee of anonymity and confidentiality for all those who respond. We also mentioned that their participation is voluntary so that there are realistic expectations about the lack of remuneration for their contribution to the present research and, last but not least, that there will be no repercussions if they refuse to participate or change their minds during the process.

The way the questions were formulated was simple and coherent by using a colloquial and not a specialized language because we considered it very important the understanding of the

questions because the level of education of the respondents was different and only so the answers could be real and interpretable. The questions were prepared and written in an objective way, so that they can give the subjects freedom of analysis and expression without influencing their response.

The research's limits

The questionnaire is an exploratory study, not a representative one, because there are under-represented categories (for example, the category of respondents aged over 65, the category of people without studies) or overrepresented (for example, the category of people with urban residence, with higher education). Thus, the conclusions drawn from the analysis of citizens' responses cannot contribute to a statistical generalization, but it helps to shape a profile and a model of strategy.

The main limit of the research conducted in this study was the distribution of the questionnaire in the online environment that leads to the restriction or even elimination of certain categories of respondents (Grigorescu & Chitescu, 2017). According to a survey of the National Institute of Statistics in 2017, almost 70% of the Romanian households had access to the Internet, over half of them (64.3%) being in the urban area. Compared to 2016, the improvement of Internet access in households in the country, as well as the Internet connection of rural households, was very low (by 3.6% and 0.5% respectively). Also, in rural areas, only half of households have access to the internet, which means that there is little chance that a questionnaire distributed online will reach the rural population.

Results and discussions

Since the questionnaire was anonymous in order to obtain summary information on those who responded favorably to the completion, in the first part of the questionnaire, we asked for data on the identity of the respondents: gender, age, residence, study level, and the environment in which they work.

Of the 171 respondents, 119 are female (69.6%) and 52 are men (30.4%). 36.8% are between 18 and 30 years of age (63 people), 12.3% are between 46 and 65 (21 people). The majority of respondents (49.7%) are aged between 31 and 45 (85 persons) and the lowest (1.2%, two persons) are over 65 years old.

Most respondents from the questionnaire come from urban areas - 90.6% (155 people) and only 9.4% belong to the rural environment (16 persons). Regarding the level of education, a high percentage - 88.9% (152 persons) have higher education, 9.4% have high school education (16 persons), and 1.8% of them have gymnasium studies.

An equal distribution of respondents to the questionnaire from the environmental point of view (41.5% of respondents working in the private sector, 48.5% in the public environment) was observed, which is an advantage in shaping an image of the perception of the relationship between citizens and public authorities. People who do not work also expressed in a percentage (9.9%) their opinion. The question about the respondents' opinion regarding the current functioning of the public administration in Romania implied an open response in order to give people the opportunity to express themselves clearly and precisely.

In interpreting the answers, we chose to encode the words/ phrases transmitted by those who completed the questionnaire in three categories: negative, positive and neutral. There was a disproportionate allocation because we obtained 405 responses that have a negative impact (93.75% of the total of words/ phrases being negative) and only 25 responses that can be ranked as positive points in citizens' perceptions of public administration. Two of the answers were neutral; they could not be identified if they expressed gratitude or dissatisfaction ("Government", "centralized power"). Also, each of the two "positive - negative" categories was divided into subcategories, taking into account the aspects of the public administration function to which the recorded words relate. Thus, in this case, people

referred to the quality and access to public services, to their legality and their organization through work processes, work efficiency, staff attitude and bureaucracy.

Regarding the unfavorable descriptions offered by the respondents, the most have indicated as a source of dissatisfaction issues related to the speed and efficiency of the activity of the public institutions.

Most of the opinions referred to the efficiency of public administration, describing public institutions as a "heavy-duty" system that operates "with the braked pulse", which involves "increased queues", but also improves and "works in the interests of citizens". The word "bureaucracy" was the most common among the answers. By this term is meant, in a general definition, an abundance of written documents and complicated procedures.

There are numerous specialized papers indicating bureaucracy as a problem of Romania that affects the image of public administration in the eyes of citizens, jeopardizes their trust in public institutions, but also the attraction of European funds (Francu & Hociug, 2012) and the opinion of the respondents to our study support these views and conclusions.

The main positive aspect of public administration was, according to the respondents, the employees in the public system whom they described by words like "responsibility", "professional/ professionalism", "seriousness", "respect", "promptness".

More than half of respondents, 66.1% (113 people), said that when they have a problem/ situation they do not always know where to address it, while 27.5% (47 people) said they knew, they were informed.

Regarding the main source of information about the activity and services offered by a public institution, 77.2% (132 persons) indicated the internet, 11.7% said they learned knowledge/ family information/ friends, 7% from the counter/ public relations service, and the other 4.1% said they were informed from other sources-friends, TV. Although according to an IRES study, TV is the main source of information for 77% of Romanians, the low percentage of respondents who are informed about TV public institutions is explicable because in the media of this type it is a habit of talk at most about certain civil servants or politicians, not about the institutions they represent. We consider that more than 10% of respondents who know from the knowledge, relatives, and friends about the proposed topic indicate that many people get non-standardized, possibly incomplete, informal information. Because of this, the image of public institutions can suffer.

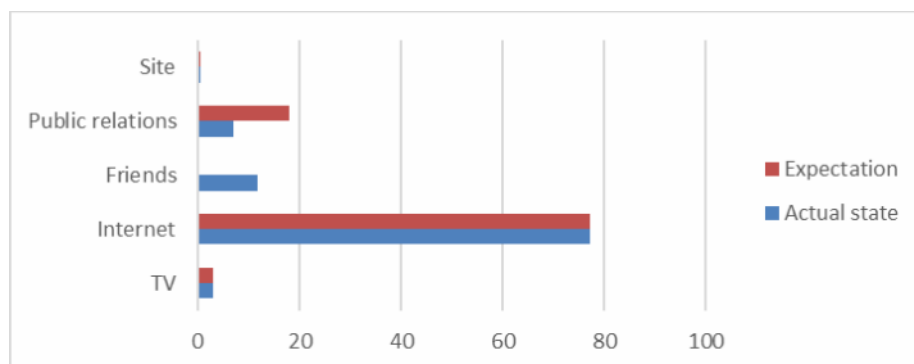


Fig. no. 1 Main sources of information; present vs expectation

Source: Actual state - http://www.insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/com_presa/com_pdf/tic_r2016.pdf,
Expectation – authors data processing study

In view of the future prospects, most of them said they wanted to be informed about the activity and services provided by the institutions via the internet (77.2%, 132 persons), 18.1% (31 persons) want to know information through the counter/ public relations, and the

remaining 4.7% want to find information from events, sites to be updated daily from TV. The fact that a double percentage of respondents said they wanted to be informed about the activity of public administration from someone authorized (counter, public relations), compared to the percentage of those already informed from this source, indicates a weak point authorities to ensure this need for citizens. In the question we considered it appropriate not to offer the source of "friends, knowledge, relatives" as the source of information is not desirable, being an informal and subjective one.

When asked about the appreciation of the relationship between citizens and public institutions, 69% think it is a poor one, and only 17.5% see it as a good one. Approximately as many people as positively believe, 13.5% believe that there is no such relationship.

The relationship between the two actors is composed of several aspects that we have surprised in an open question (question no. 6), in which we asked the respondents to describe in three words how the public administration is currently functioning. Given that all aspects were more negative than positive, the answers correlated to the two questions (no. 5 and no. 6) show that people do not constructively interact with public institutions, and vice versa, being a little confused to provide a clear answer.

Regarding the evolution of the quality of services provided to citizens by public institutions in the last 5 years, half of respondents to the proposed questionnaire (50.9%) consider that it remained the same, almost 30% (or 27.5%) believes that quality has increased, and around 21.6% believe that the quality of the citizen's services has declined thanks to public administration services.

Regarding their opinion about the quality of services offered by public institutions today, more than two thirds (76.2%) of the respondents did not have a positive opinion 21.6% declared they were satisfied, and only two people said they were very satisfied (1.2%). Also, from correlating the answers for this question to the answers given in question no. 6, it is clear and concludes that citizens are dissatisfied with the public services that the public administration offers.

For a more complex analysis of citizens' level of gratitude, they were asked to respond, on the basis of their experience, to a few aspects related to the institutions. As follows:

- In terms of access to information on services provided by public institutions, 64% say *"not at all satisfied"* and *"not too satisfied"*, 22% have a neutral opinion *"neither satisfied nor dissatisfied"* and only 13% they say *"quite pleased"*. No respondent said he was very satisfied with this;
- Regarding the transparency of public institutions, one third of respondents declared *"not at all satisfied"*, 41.52% *"not very satisfied"*. Thus, while 77% of them have a negative opinion, not even 10% (8.77%) are not *"quite satisfied"*;
- in relation to the accessibility of the location where public institutions operate, less than half (40.35%) expressed dissatisfaction, a fairly close percentage declared themselves *"quite satisfied"* and *"very satisfied"* (33, 33%); Also, about a quarter of the respondents (26.32%) consider themselves *"neither satisfied nor dissatisfied"*;
- the work program with the public is appreciated by about a quarter of respondents (23.98%) satisfactory, while more than half (58%) of them are dissatisfied (the two degrees of dissatisfaction - moderate and extreme - are approximately equally represented, 58 persons, respectively 41). For 20%, the work program with the public seems to be irrelevant in relation to their relationship with public institutions, declaring themselves *"neither satisfied nor dissatisfied"*.
- The space in public institutions to work with the public is the place where interaction between the two actors takes place. Around 18% are satisfied with this place, while about 60% are not satisfied.

- With regard to the waiting time for resolving the problem, most of them declared "not at all satisfied" (90 out of 171), and other respondents who account for more than a quarter of the total, 27%, said they were "not too satisfied". The remaining 10% have positively appreciated this.
- About the behavior of employees in public institutions, a quarter of respondents say they are not at all satisfied, and only 15% are satisfied.
- A percentage of 20 respondents believe that the language used by public institution staff is a clear one, but the perception of just over half (58.47%) is at the opposite end.
- In addition to the clarity of language, the consistency of the information provided is important in the communication between citizens and authorities. 55% of those who participated in the study said they are not satisfied with what they find out from the contact staff, and less than a quarter (19.29%) is satisfied with this.
- The volume of documents required to solve the problem is a reason for dissatisfaction with 93% of the respondents (101 out of 171 opted for the most form of dissatisfaction), while only 5% (10 of the 171) consider that the volume of documents requested is a positive aspect.

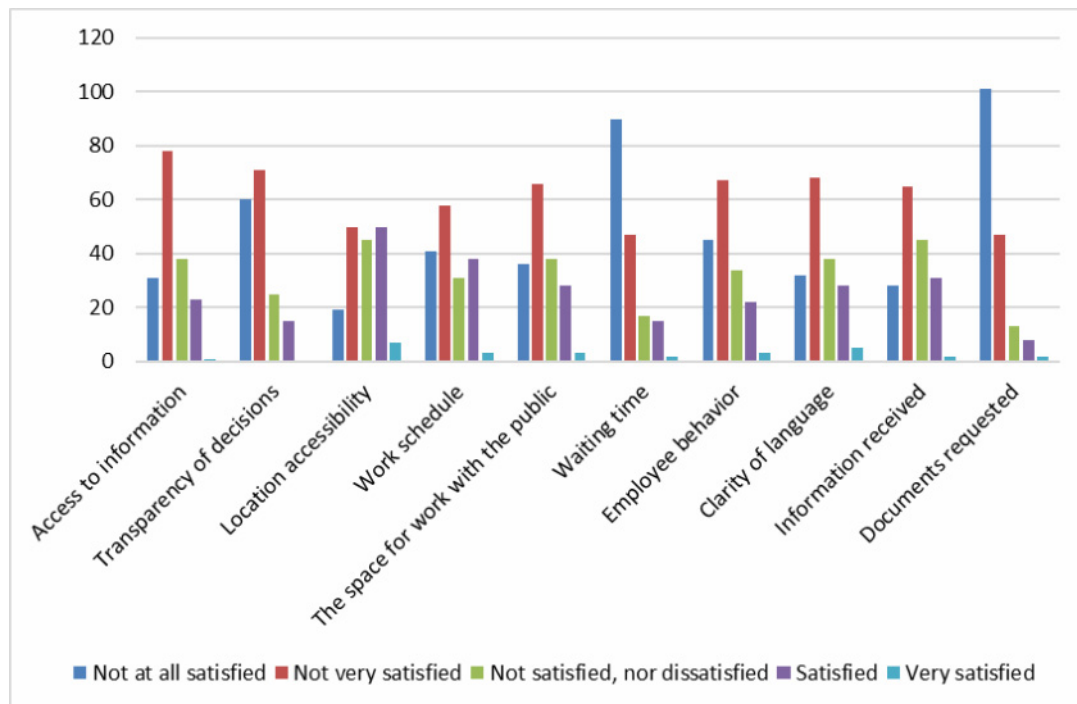


Fig. no. 2 Satisfaction level of the public services consumer

Source: authors' data processing study

Regarding the proposals that citizens have made to improve the relationship between the authorities and them, the recommendations focused in particular on digitization (the development of a platform of information of public interest, coherent and organized, digitization - 33 respondents, 7 respondents, accessibility to online information - 22 respondents, PNC access database - one respondent, Internet problem solving - 13 respondents, embedding online services in application processes - 10 respondents, e-administration - 7 respondents) as well as reducing bureaucracy (41 responses), increasing decision-making transparency (22 responses), better training/ education of employees (50 responses).

The most dissatisfied aspect of citizens is bureaucracy. This resulted from both the closed question in which we named this aspect and we requested either to be evaluated according to a scale of 1 to 5 and the previous but open-ended question that asked for three words describing how in which the public administration in Romania is currently functioning (51 people have indicated "bureaucracy" as a negative aspect present in our country today). This is also underlined by the information gathered in the open question (Question No 14), where 41 respondents mentioned the reduction of bureaucracy as a proposal to improve the relationship between the authorities and the citizens.

At the same time, the citizens expressed their dissatisfaction with the poorly computerized/ non-digitized system of the institutions as well as their limited online access to information on the documents/ forms that they need to fill, which is why, in the proposals for improvement, more responses targeted digitization.

In close relation to this issue, the waiting time for solving the problem, which was negatively pointed out by 80% of the respondents, appears. Also, correlating with the answers to question no. 6, there were 73 responses that indicated the exact same problem.

It should also be borne in mind that among the positive aspects stated by the respondents, very rare were similar opinions (not to mention two for the same positive word), whereas in the case of negative opinions some words were found in many answers ("Bureaucracy" 48 times, 32 people indicated the system as being heavy, "unprepared person" 7 times, "without interest" 11 times).

Regarding staff working in public administration, there were both negative and positive opinions. However, as already noted, the negative ones are disproportionately more numerous, so the professionalism of the employees was appreciated by two people, while 7 people have depreciated this aspect.

There were also opinions that could be classified as extreme: the quality of the services caused "hurting", it was considered an "infected", "rigorous", "dust and powder/ all-laugh" system, "Communist", where you have access to "intercession" and "spade" and compared to "thievery". This can be seen as a frustration of the citizens and also as an aspect requiring improvement. We also believe that this result could be interpreted to a certain extent and as a desire for people to get more involved in the process of providing the services they benefit from, and in developing strategies for linking public institutions.

Conclusions

In order for these services and benefits to be delivered in an efficient way, there is a need for good internal and external communication in an institution as it can be the main factor in promoting the image of an institution. Communication between institutions and citizens is done through various information, conferences, debates, meetings and can be done only over time.

It is also necessary for those working in the field of public relations to understand that they have a key role to play in gaining confidence and support for citizens' behavior, but also by constantly informing them about the activities carried out in the institution and the decisions taken at the higher level as far as it is concerned, so that the image is not affected.

Through the officials, the institutions can also find out what the needs and wishes of the citizens are and, depending on them, find solutions to satisfy them. By conducting market research, different behaviors can be adopted to improve the quality of services, but also to implement various strategies to attract beneficiaries to the market.

The issues that most dislike citizens are the bureaucracy, the weakly computerized/ non-digitized system of the institutions, their limited access to information and waiting time to solve the problem. Through the results we have been able to discover that they feel frustrated with the system and want to be more involved in the process of providing the

services they benefit, as well as in the realization of the relational strategies of the public institutions.

Citizens' proposals for improving the relationship between the authorities and them were reasonable taking into account the evolution of society. The recommendations were focused on digitization (development of platforms with public interest information, integrated databases, online services, reducing bureaucracy via the Internet), increasing decision-making transparency and better training/ education of employees. All of this largely confirms that we still need many changes in the public administration system.

In conclusion, we can say that the relationship between public institutions and citizens depends on the strategy of the institutions that have to look for methods of appropriation towards them to implement. A digitized system makes things move faster, easier and without too much time and is a fit to the standards of modern countries, but the technological system is one that is evolving rapidly. Also, greater involvement of citizens in various community welfare activities will greatly help to modernize the administration, and a satisfactory and effective relationship means the institution's ability to identify people's wishes and achieve them through modern and quality services, effective communication and optimal.

References

- Chiru, I., 2003. *Comunicarea interpersonală*. București: Editura Tritonic.
- Danciu, V. and Grigorescu, A., 2000. *Marketing—Methodology and practice*. Lugoj: Dacia Europa Nova Printing House.
- Frâncu, L.G. and Hociung, G.I., 2012. Birocrația în contextul economic actual. *Economie teoretică și aplicată*, XIX(6(571)), pp. 143-151.
- Grigorescu, A., 2006. Marketing of public and private affairs—a link. *Kybernetes*, 35(7/8), pp. 1179-1189.
- Grigorescu, A., 2008. Quality and customer satisfaction in public services. *Amfiteatru Economic*, 10(special iss. 2), pp. 130-135.
- Negoiață, A., 1996. *Drept administrativ*. București: Editura Sylvi.
- Nicu, A.L., 2007. *Drept administrativ*. București: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică R.A.,
- Stone, M., Bond, A. and Blake, E., 2016. *Ghidul complet al marketingului direct și interactiv: cum să selectați, să dobândiți și să păstrați clienții potriviți*. București: Editura Bic All.
- Institutul National de Statistica, 2016. *Comunicat de Presa, nr. 305/05.12.2016*, [online] Available at : http://www.insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/com_presa/com_pdf/tic_r2016.pdf [Accessed 15 January 2019].
- Institutul National de Statistica, 2017. *Comunicat de Presa, nr. 301/04.12.2017* [online] Available at : http://www.insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/com_presa/com_pdf/tic_r2017.pdf [Accessed 15 January 2019].