

THE UNIVERSITY OF BUCHAREST  
DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF ADMINISTRATIVE SCIENCES

# HABILITATION THESIS - ABSTRACT

NEO-CORPORATIZATION OF PUBLIC DECISIONS.  
ASPECTS OF SEPARATION BETWEEN POLITICS  
AND ADMINISTRATION

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The habilitation thesis submitted is entitled "Neo-corporatization of public decisions. Aspects of separation between politics and administration" and highlights the most relevant research conducted after the defense of the doctoral thesis in September 2012. The thesis is structured into seven sections: I. Introduction; II. Phenomenology and conceptual archaeology in the field of public administration; III. Elements of (neo-)corporatism in public administration; IV. The institutionalization of human rights in public administration; V. Future projects; VI. Conclusions and VII. Bibliography.

## I. Introduction

The first section of the thesis presents a brief overview of the evolution of the academic and professional career, as well as the main research directions pursued after obtaining the doctoral degree at the Faculty of Political Science within the University of Bucharest.

Regarding my *academic career*, I started teaching different courses of public administration and political science for civil servants as an associate immediately after defending my PhD thesis in different faculties in Romania and Bulgaria: Faculty of Administration and Public Management of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (2012-2014), Faculty of Political Science of the University of Bucharest (2013-2015), Bulgarian-Romanian Interuniversity Europe Center of University of Ruse (2013-2015) and Faculty of Business and Administration of the University of Bucharest (2015-2021), where I have also become a lecturer in Public Administration in 2021. Currently, I am responsible for teaching four courses in the undergraduate and graduate programs both in Romanian and English: *Comparative Political Systems, Methods and Techniques of Making Public Decisions, Political Systems and Institutions, and Governance and Public Policy*.

In terms of *professional achievements*, I am a member of the editorial team of the Romanian Journal of Public Affairs published by the Center for Public Affairs – Faculty of Public Administration, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration of Bucharest (since 2021), which is indexed in three international databases. Additionally, from 2020 until 2023, I have been a co-editor of the Romanian Statistical Review; the journal is published by the National Institute for Statistics and is indexed by the Web of Science (with an impact factor of 0,3, since 2022).

Moreover, after completing my doctoral thesis, I have continuously worked within the public administration sector, holding both executive and non-executive positions, as follows: 5 years at the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs (Government of Romania) as an expert in public policies, spokesperson, and international relations officer; 5 years at the National Institute of Statistics as a communications director, a position from which I coordinated the entire communication and promotion activity of one of the most complex administrative processes, the 2021/2022 Population and Housing Census.

Simultaneously, during 2019-2022, I served as a member of the panel of experts on religious freedom at the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the OSCE, being the first and only Romanian ever selected for this position. From this position, I participated in teams made up of international experts and scholars in revising national legislation on religious freedom, issuing public policy recommendations for the 57 OSCE participating states, as well as formulating numerous public viewpoints on the state's interaction with religious life for national and international press. From this capacity, I had the opportunity to interact and work with some of the most professional structures of public administration from various countries, such as the Government of the United Kingdom, the U.S. State Department, the German Federal Foreign Office, as well as international structures like the Venice Commission of the Council of

Europe, the European Union Ambassador's office for the promotion of religious freedom, the UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion, etc.

In 2023, I started a 5-year term as a member of the Steering Board (secretary of state) within the National Council for Combating Discrimination, an autonomous state authority, under parliamentary control, operating in the field of preventing, mediating, investigating, and sanctioning discrimination.

In terms of my *scientific career*, the most significant achievements can be summarized as follows:

- From 2009 to 2012, I worked on my doctoral thesis in political science at the University of Bucharest, with a special focus on neo-corporatism elements with the interwar Romanian period, while 7 months I was a doctoral research fellow at the University of Nottingham, United Kingdom.
- From June 2014 to September 2015, I completed my postdoctoral studies with the Institute for National Economy of the Romanian Academy (2014-2015) with a thesis entitled "*From political government to economic governance*".

The *scientific research results*, obtained individually or through collaborations, consist of the following:

- Author of 4 specialized books (1 in English and 3 in Romanian).
- Author and/or co-author of 7 WoS articles, 5 of which were published in journals with an impact factor greater than or equal to 0.1. One of these articles is classified as "red" by UEFISCDI and ranked in the first quartile according to Clarivate Analytics' classification.
- Author and/or co-author of 12 articles published in journals indexed in international databases.
- Author and/or co-author of 6 studies published in volumes of WoS indexed conferences or international databases, 3 studies published in volumes of conferences organized abroad, and 3 studies published in volumes of conferences held in Romania.
- Member of 3 research teams for projects obtained through international competition.

The research directions I have undertaken are conceptually and methodologically linked to the academic interest in various manifestations of the state, observed from a critical and deconstructivist perspective, and to the scientific interest in analyzing:

- not just how different public policies are implemented, but especially their conceptual rationale, and
- how various public decisions are generated by the institutional nature of certain segments of public administration that are insufficiently aligned with international practice.

My habilitation thesis does not follow a chronological structure, but rather a thematic one. Some research is mentioned in several chapters, given that it simultaneously covers multiple research topics. The research directions, in most cases, have been paralleled by actual involvement in building public decisions through my work experiences in the central public administration of Romania, as well as at the international level. These are relevant for the field of administrative science not only because they conceptually and with primary data fed the academic research, but also because they represent the practical implementation of various public policies to which I have contributed and proof that academic research is practice-oriented.

Another important aspect is that, although some research themes may seem generated by dispersed academic priorities, all my research so far (except for minor contributions within a few texts) are

interconnected firstly by identifying the possibility of accelerated democratization of the public sector through the isolation of neo-corporatist practices, as well as by a methodological approach inspired by Foucauldian conceptual archaeology and neo-Weberianism. At the same time, where my research results have had an impact on public administration through the adoption of ideas or public policy proposals by public authorities, I have highlighted this and presented other priorities for the modernization of public administration.

Therefore, after obtaining my doctorate I have focused my scientific research activities on **three main thematic directions**, namely:

## **II. Research Direction I: Phenomenology and conceptual archaeology in the field of public administration**

Conceptual archaeology inspired by political phenomenology represents for me not just a research method, but even a field of study. As a research method, conceptual archaeology provides the possibility to identify the ontology behind certain concepts that we often tend to operate with, both in the academic and public space, and to assume their operational, or at least, consensual meaning. On the other hand, political phenomenology can be interpreted as an act of academic rebellion against the methodological formalization of some of today's social science research, often invalid if it does not appeal to quantitative methods, and which also helps researchers to escape from the captivity of the object they explore.

My interest in conceptual archaeology is marked by my initial training as a political scientist, overlaid on a foundation of classical studies in high school, college, and master's (classical languages, theology, and philosophy). For this reason, the concepts and paradigms analyzed by me in various research are primarily related to the democratic theory and seek to identify successive ways, including through public policies or structural reforms, to improve the quality of democracy by democratizing public decision-making.

Therefore, I approach administrative science more from a political science perspective, and only secondarily from a management perspective. I believe that although the management perspective on public administration has its virtues and explains many of the realities of public administration, it also has certain methodological limitations because it decouples administrative systems from the nature of the political regime.

Therefore, I am more interested in the democratization of public decision-making and only secondarily in the efficiency of public institutions. More attentive to the impact of political institutions on public decision-making (Parliament, Government, etc.) and only secondarily to the sectoral impact of various agencies or governmental institutions. More interested in elements of central or supra-national governance and only secondarily in local governance.

The research paradigm I assume in the field of public administration is neo-Weberian, being particularly interested in the machinery of government and power relations within public administration, as well as historical institutionalism, given that each country generates its own constitutional, institutional, and administrative adjustments under different cultural and economic circumstances.

In this logic, the classical Weberian paradigm characterized by the centrality of the state as the main factor of modernization, reaffirming the role of representative democracy as a source of legitimacy for public administration and the special status of the public service, matures in the neo-Weberian form, different from New Public Management, and is expressed in the normative register by creating a professional

culture of public service quality in which the bureaucrat is not just an agent of the state or a mere enforcer of administrative law, but becomes an expert oriented towards meeting the needs of citizens.

Therefore, I made a brief presentation of my scientific contributions to the conceptual clarification of some terms that administrative science operates with, especially in the context of the growing interest of the international academic community in paradigms such as *Collaborative Governance* and/or *Good Governance*, emphasizing, in particular, my scientific perspective and the elements of novelty introduced in the conceptualization of different terms: *government* versus *governance*, *referendum* versus *plebiscite*, *rule of law* versus *rule by law*, *democracy* versus *post-democracy*, *religious freedom* versus *freedom of religion*, *subsidiarity*, *civil society*, and *technocrat/technocracy* versus *politician* and *bureaucrat*.

### **III. Research Direction II: Manifestations of (neo-)corporatism in public administration**

This research direction is presented in the third chapter through a segment of research published in volumes, articles, and presentations at conferences by which I have identified the presence of neo-corporatist elements within Romanian public administration. My perspective is that any democratic regime, especially the younger ones emerging from the gradual dissolution of totalitarian regimes, operates based on pre-existing structures such as oligarchy, clientelism, patronage, corporatism, etc., which are observable in the field of public administration.

Therefore, in many cases, the presence of corporatist elements is explainable by the historical transformations of the society, in other cases, they are borrowed as a form of accelerated modernization. I believe that in the case of Romania, both hypotheses are valid, with elements of historical corporatism found in the state's relationship with the church, and those of contemporary corporatism, as a mark of accelerated advancement of neoliberalism.

By corporatism, I understand a body of political ideas, not necessarily aggregated under the form of a coherent doctrine, characterized by anti-liberalism and founded on the rejection of the idea that the political majority can be representative of the national interest. At the same time, (neo-)corporatism is based on general distrust in politics, which is why either the state dominates corporate interests in society as in the authoritarian regimes of Spain and Portugal in the 20th century, or societal interests dominate the state which prefers to negotiate political power constantly and even delegate various governance attributes to corporations.

As Colin Crouch observed in the 1990s, governments tend to protect associative rights at the expense of individual ones: trade unions sacrifice members' benefits to gain political influence, and during the pandemic, the Romanian state negotiated the legitimacy of restrictions with the Romanian Orthodox Church and other religious denominations (all corporate entities) at the expense of addressing the pandemic context through international standards of religious freedom, as a right exercised both individually and collectively.

Also, in my research, I used the theoretical systematization of (neo-)corporatism proposed by Peter J. Williamson as an eminently anti-liberal doctrine present in our times in various non-liberal political regime variations, including the conceptual pairs of illiberalism and ultra-bureaucratized state, respectively post-liberalism and the post-bureaucratic state.

Therefore, the research directions I have undertaken have addressed several themes:

- Agencification, referring to the establishment of semi-autonomous public organizations at arm's length from government and exemplified through a comparative study on 32 countries, the

majority being member states of the European Union, regarding the administrative institutional design of national statistical offices, institutions that have functioned since the birth of modern states and continue to change their administrative nature, transforming from quasi-ministries in the classic sense, into increasingly politically independent non-governmental agencies, respectively increasingly dependent (methodologically, structurally, etc.) on the European Commission (Eurostat);

- Minister recruitment observed over a period of time of three decades by using the comparison between politicians and technocrats in ministerial roles;
- De-politicization of public decision-making in various aspects, analyzed from the perspective of democracy theory which connotes politicization more in neutral terms, not negative terms;
- Distinctions, sometimes transformed into dichotomies: governance/government, democracy/post-democracy, and the aspects of the post-bureaucratic state;
- Other elements of corporatism such as the relationships between the state and church and the state's approach to religious denominations, which in Romania is not done from the democratic perspective of the universal principle of religious freedom, but from a corporatist perspective, specific to the interwar period;
- Despotic temptations and infrastructural limits of the state in the context of public decision-making in Romania during the Covid-19 pandemic.

#### **IV. Research Direction III: The institutionalization of human rights in public administration**

In my research, I have approached the field of public administration through the theory of democracy and its pathologies/deviations, in which context the theme of human rights has been a central concern. Moreover, in democratic regimes, abstracting from the actual rationality of the state (*raison d'état*), the public administration has the central mission of enforcing rights and freedoms. Even where the state's mission must be configured more in the despotic register (e.g., through prosecutors, police, intelligence services), the ultimate goal of public administration is to maximize social, civil, and political rights and freedoms in a universalist logic.

Therefore, when the state acts in an infrastructural logic through segments of public administration that directly facilitate the exercise of certain rights and freedoms (e.g., the right to education, and equality of opportunity), it must do so following established international democratic best practices. Thus, my research in the field of human rights starts from the hypothesis that the international framework (international treaties, organizations and institutions, best practices, various politico-administrative formats) can be the main comparative reference point for public administration in Romania.

Methodologically, this approach has the advantage that the international framework cannot be traced back to a specific administrative model of a country, but is largely the result of over 70 years of conceptual and public policy refinements generated by the development of administrative tools to keep modern states away from the totalitarian temptations of the mid-20th century.

The research results show that, at the Romanian level, the politico-administrative system is rather tributary to elements of corporatism, oligarchy, and other deviations or pathologies of democracy. Among these, my academic interest has focused especially on elements of (neo-) corporatism, which was presented in the previous chapter, as well as on how human rights are mediated in different degrees by corporate interests in society.

Therefore, the research directions I have undertaken have addressed several themes:

- The institutionalization of the culture of freedom of religion in public administration through international standards and public policies;
- Church and state relations through the *Collaborative Governance* paradigm, where the former is identified as a corporate social body and as a counter-polity;
- Quality of governance and counter-performance of public administration. According to the democratic paradigm, public administration embraces the normative requirement of political neutrality and at the same time aims to enhance citizen's rights and freedoms. In this sense, I conducted research concerning the ability of public administration to accommodate this normative requirement and I analyzed not how efficient public administration was in delivering short-term infrastructural benefits to citizens, but rather what were its infrastructural limits in the medium and long term.
- Based on these structural limits of public administration imposed by international standards designed and refined during the post-totalitarian period, I have shown in the studies presented that in the case of Romania, as well as in the case of other insufficiently consolidated democracies, the pandemic has challenged public administration which either tried to negotiate with various social corporations the conditions and nature of the restrictions, or forced different decisions without ensuring that society can incorporate them, even under the certain threat of the virus spreading.

In this chapter, I have also presented various national and international research projects in which I was involved, as well as the impact of the research on public administration and international organizations.

**V.** The final part of the habilitation thesis presents the **plans for the evolution and development of my academic career.**

In terms of *academic development*, my medium-term and long-term objectives are related to further accommodating the content of the courses taught in undergraduate and graduate programs for the benefit of future civil servants. Additionally, my objective is to strengthen the student-professor relationship by increasing student participation in research and extracurricular activities such as the student's involvement in voluntary activities in public institutions.

The presentation of future projects is organized into two clusters of research themes, one of which is specific to a research area that I consider fundamental for understanding public administration in relation to democracy theory, while the other refers to some of the newest transformations at the international level of public administration.

I will continue to expand the research field towards various pathologies of contemporary democracies, especially neo-corporatism, populism, and oligarchy, by analyzing structures and power relations within public administration, with the main reference being democracy theory and the axiological neutrality of public administration. The academic interest themes are presented as working hypotheses, some of which have been partially tested or just touched upon in previous research: the separation between administration and politics, the distinction between the exercise of political power and bureaucratic expertise, manifestations of the post-bureaucratic state, trends of NGO-ization of public administration, innovation in public administration through the institutionalization of human rights representation in public administration, and the politicization of public administration."

**VI.** The last part of the thesis consists of **conclusions** and **bibliographic sources** associated with the three main chapters of the thesis.

In conclusion, considering my academic achievements and experience, as a future member of the Doctoral School of Administrative Sciences at the University of Bucharest, I aim to contribute by encouraging multidisciplinary research that captures the relationship between politics and administration, and particularly by analyzing contemporary elements of innovation in public administration through correlating them with European and international practices. Moreover, as not only does politics influence public administration, but this process must also be observed in the opposite direction, I aim to encourage doctoral research that captures the contribution of transformations and innovations in public administration designed for the improvement of democracy.

At the same time, I believe that the disconnection practiced in some academic environments between administrative sciences and political science, as well as hyper-specialization in various (sub)fields of study, leads to academic phenomena that no longer have the power to add knowledge to society and to make scholarly a good that migrates from one science to another.

Therefore, among the priorities of my activity within the Doctoral School, I intend to encourage research perspectives that do not see bureaucracy as an obstacle to innovation and change, but rather as an opportunity for reform and improving the quality of democracy, and to investigate the various fertile tensions between democracy and bureaucracy.

