National University of Political Studies and Public Administration

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Multidisciplinary Doctoral School

PhD Field: Administrative Sciences

SUMMARY OF DOCTORAL THESIS

Protection of individuals with regard to the processing of personal data at the level of public administration. Accessibility and regulatory accuracy

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Bucharest

2025

SUMMARY

ABSTRACT

Key-words: *GDPR-personal data-rights-risks - public administration-good regulation*

The right to life is fundamental. The protection of personal data and the respect for privacy are essential components of this right. The European Parliament and the Council of the European Union constantly strive to strike a balance between improving security and protecting human rights. Respect for the right to private life and to family life and the protection of the personal data are set out in the Articles 7 and 8 of *The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union"*, in Article 16 of *„The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union"* and in Article 8 of *„The Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms"*.

The European aim for placing the human beings at the heart of democratic societies is translated into respecting the right to privacy and protecting citizens' personal data. *Individuality* is a right that every citizen has. The right to privacy allows every citizen to be autonomous, to live in dignity and to have full control over the way in which his/her personal data are processed. In the absence of the right to privacy, the other human rights and freedoms are at risk. The right to privacy makes possible for every person to have an option as to *how*, *when* and to *whom* he/she chooses to disclose their personal data, it gives everyone the opportunity to be in control of their own identity, it gives everyone the opportunity to be in control of how they interact with the environment, it provides safety to any person in the face of unjustified abuse of power and allows anyone to think freely, without being discriminated.

The interest of the European Union to respect the right to privacy of European citizens has materialized, after a long period of debate and negotiations, in the adoption, on 27 April 2016, of the "*Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Directive 95/46/EC (General Data Protection Regulation)*". This normative act entered into force on May 25, 2018, being directly applicable, starting this date, in all EU member states.

Adopted to create a unitary vision in the processing of personal data of European citizens, *"The General Data Protection Regulation"* becomes a tool with national imprints in implementation.

Having as points of reference *"The General Data Protection Regulation",* its mandatory implementation in all the EU member states and the existence of consequences which can be seen in the application of sanctions if it turns out that a European normative act is not correctly implemented at national level, in this research we aim to check, first of all, the existence of a distance between regulation and application in relation to the implementation of this normative act in several European states, with a focus on how its provisions are applied at the level of public administration in Romania.

The *GDPR* represents a *„declaration of rights",* although from a territorial point of view it would seem to have limited effects. By applying its provisions to all European citizens, regardless of the controllers' premises, the territorial application becomes, in fact, global. Given the that data protection places the *data subject* at the heart of the actions of the governments of the member states and of the European Union, we intend to verify also if the *"data subject"* represents a common *denominator* in the implementation of *GDPR* at the level of the public administration in Romania and at European level.

All data processing that makes it possible to identify individuals *„should be in the service of citizens",* as set out in Recital 4 of the *GDPR*. The right to data protection must be taken into account only *in relation to the function it performs in society and balanced with other fundamental rights*, in accordance with the principle of proportionality. In these circumstances, we ask ourselves how prepared Romania is, how prepared the European Union is, through the actions of each individual member state, to find *the right balance* in the implementation of the *GDPR*? Is it possible for actions at the EU level, in content and form, *not to go beyond that which is necessary to achieve the objectives of the Treaties,* in such a way as to respect the principle of proportionality, as defined in Article 5 of the *„Treaty on European Union"*?

With the pace of development of the new technologies, with the scale of the phenomenon of digitalization, with the desire for the widespread use of artificial intelligence, including at the level of the public administration, humanity is on the threshold of a new era, the main characteristics of which, at the information level, are *Volume, Variety, Velocity, Veracity* and *Value*. Any activity undertaken on the Internet leaves digital footprints, which when combined and connected in a virtual ecosystem can lead to the transfer of personality into the digital environment. This personality can be real or manufactured.

The *data subjects* do risk, in the absence of correct information or digital skills training, having no control over their own data. Thus, they can become the subjects of profiling, but also the victims of possible cyber-attacks. The European Commission has observed a rise in the frequency of large-scale attacks on information systems and the preference of some states to leverage information and communication technologies to achieve political, economic, and/or military superiority, including offensive capabilities.

In this context, on 15 December 2022 was signed the *"European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles for the Digital Decade".* This document represents the European Union's commitment to a secure and sustainable digital transformation that will put people at the center of any concerns and decisions, in line with the fundamental values of the European Union.

However, the protection of personal data decreases with the increase of the degree of exposure of individuals to the virtual environment. Online activities are a threat to everything that involves respecting human rights. In this context, the European Union is searching for a compromise between the development and use of new technologies and the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

In this context, we ask ourselves whether a state could, through correct, coherent, constant information of citizens and their institutionalized training in the field of privacy and personal data protection to reach, through prevention, simplification of the regulatory process. The combination of European rules with national rules must not only be a necessary process for fulfilling an obligation that the European Union imposes on member states, but a solution to problems that have led to the emergence and approval of a *General Data Protection Regulation* in this case.

Having as object of research the *"General Data Protection Regulation"* and as a research area the public administration in general and the Romanian public administration in particular, we aimed to examine various concerns related to the emergence and entry into force of this European regulation.

The thesis contains five parts. In the first part of the thesis, we focused on presenting the right of individuals to data protection and how the protection of the right of individuals to private and family life in the European Union is currently ensured. In the second part of the thesis we presented the research methodology. In the third part of the paper, we presented the results of a comparative analysis of the context of implementing *GDPR* in six European states. In the fourth part, the most extensive, is presented the way and context of implementing this European regulation in Romania by crystallizing the perceptions of the actors involved and designing the models of administrative and judicial practice currently applicable. The fifth part of the paper was dedicated to identifying some possibilities for improving the regulatory and implementation system of the *GDPR* in Romania.

As research objectives we mention:

Objective 1: the comparison of administrative structures and functionality with regard to the application of the provisions of the *"General Data Protection Regulation"* in six European states;

Objective 2: the description of the specific conditions for the implementation of the *GDPR* at the level of the Romanian public administration;

Objective 3: the identification of solutions to improve the system of regulation and implementation of this European normative act in Romania.

The thesis aims to answer the following research questions:

The main question: How is the implementation of the *"General Data Protection Regulation"* achieved in Romania?

Complementary questions:

a) How is the application of the *GDPR* provisions managed at the level of other Member States in the European Union and what specific measures have there been taken to ensure that the implementation of the *GDPR* supports the data subjects?

b) What can be the explanation for the emergence of a distance between the regulation of the protection of personal data in Romania and the effective application of the provisions of *"to the General Regulation on Data Protection"*?

c) What is the specific administrative context for implementing the *GDPR* and how is the administrative functionality ensured to provide the protection of personal data for data subjects in Romania?

d) Is Romania at the risk of experiencing *"legislative inflation"* as a result of the *GDPR*?

e) Could there arise, at the European level, a vulnerability of data protection assurance due to a lack of digital skills training for digital subjects in an EU member state?

f) What improvements can there be made to the *GDPR* implementation conditions for in Romania's public administration?

The hypotheses we set out to verify are as follows:

Hypothesis nº1: There is a gap between the regulation and the application of *GDPR* provisions in Romania, which influences the implementation of the *GDPR* at the level of the public administration/at the public administration level.

Hypothesis nº2: The goal of the European Union is to achieve a balance between the way to make use of and to share data on the one hand, and the way to safeguard its protection on the other.

Hypothesis nº3: The application of the *GDPR* can lead to the confrontation with the phenomenon of *"legislative inflation"*.

Since the main object of the research is „The General Data Protection Regulation", the effects felt by the data subjects, but also those felt at the level of the public administration activity in Romania following the application of its provisions, we opted for the combined use of the comparative method, qualitative research methods (the *interview*, the *questionnaire with open items*, the *participatory observation* and the content analysis) and quantitative research methods (such as the *document analysis*), with emphasis on the constructivist, postpositivist approach.

This option was justified by the fact that the *GDPR* is mandatory in all EU member states since 2018. For that reason the question ***why?*** is not relevant for this research, our attention being fixed on the question ***how?*** The use of qualitative research methods has enabled us to gather relevant data to explore subjective reality and identify and propose solutions to enhance the implementation framework of *GDPR* in Romania.

The proposal of solutions to enhance the regulatory system and enforce the provisions of this normative act in Romania was established through the identification of good practice models in six European states, analyzed in a comparative manner.

This thesis brings together the academic environment and the administrative practice.

The results of the research exceeded our expectations, first and foremost considering that during the period allocated to the verification of the above presented assumptions we have crossed major events such as the pandemic caused by the COVID 19 virus, the war in Ukraine, the foreshadowing of a major

conflict between the Russian Federation and the NATO, as well as the emergence of new war outbreaks in the world, aspects that could even economically destabilize the states in the near future.

All these events have had a major impact on the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, on the rapid development of new technologies, including the emergence of artificial intelligence programs that bring the world closer to a new face of the digital age and the individual in direct confrontation with the risks of the virtual world and the effects of digitalization.

The economic and political disparities between EU member states are a major obstacle for the future. Political decisions have economic consequences. The European Union's unity will be tested as it enters the digital age, not only from an economic and logistical perspective, but also from a social perspective. The rights to privacy and data protection are taking on new meanings.

These rights involve the citizen more than ever before, they force him to take responsibility. Member States' governments are also obliged to intervene in raising citizens' awareness of the risks they are exposed to in the online environment.

The adaptation of the human being to the digital age is done against the clock**.** Regulation takes time. It is of utmost importance to achieve the adaptation of the administrative apparatus to the inclusion in the relationship with the citizen of digital programs, while ensuring the protection of processed data and the protection of the privacy of the data subjects. But from the perspective of the evolution of the new technologies the time *is no longer patient*.

The choice of this research topic was not accidental.

The administrative apparatus is heavy and difficult to adapt to change. Meanwhile, through its activities, it is the guarantor of the evolution of a society. A member state of the European Union must respect democratic values and thus public administration becomes not only the creator of rules for citizens, but also a guarantor of respect for the rule of law and the just balance in the enforcement of the law. Romania, through its historical, geographical, geopolitical and demographic context of evolution offers an interesting framework for the application of *GDPR* provisions. In addition, we believe that the verification of research hypotheses has required finding *the right balance* between public administration and research as a field of activity.

Our research has allowed the ingression into the deep area of personal data protection from the position of an executor, a connoisseur of the functioning of state institutions and at the same time an applicant of the legislative provisions in this field.

Between state institutions and citizens there is a relationship of interdependence.

„The General Data Protection Regulation" tests the quality of the administrative act, the state's relationship with citizens, more than other normative acts, because it is an instrument that obliges controllers to apply it by becoming *vulnerable* in interaction with *data subjects*, that is European citizens. In fact, controllers are obliged to apply the provisions of a normative act that makes them vulnerable.

Fundamental human rights, in particular the right to the protection of privacy, are respected in a rule of law, in particular by the creation, adoption and application of tools that allow placing the citizen at the core of government concerns. The public administration has the mission to serve society as a whole and to provide quality services to citizens, the free and unhindered citizens' access to information of public interest representing a fundamental principle of the rule of law.

But if an informed citizen can make the state institutions vulnerable through initiatives that can create bottlenecks in the exercise of their specific activities, will the state choose to correctly inform citizens or will the state protect its institutions in their activity through information *as open as possible, but as closed as necessary*?

However, the question is how much does Romania allow itself to respect the principle of transparency in the relationship with citizens in terms of the application of the *GDPR* provisions? How aware are the employees of state institutions that, in applying the provisions of the *GDPR,* they have both the status of civil servants and the status of data subjects, the liability and responsibility in performing their duties affecting this double status? How prepared is Romania to ensure data protection of *data subjects – European citizens* in the current geopolitical context?

Research hypotheses have been and are important now. The research methods we have chosen have enabled the collection and analysis of data, allowing for the verification of the hypotheses thereof. The results of this research are also confirmed by the emergence of European programs, strategies and new normative acts with an impact on the field of data protection, currently under work or adopted in the course of 2024.

The protection of personal data, as currently regulated, imposes limits and at the same time raises conceptual, financial, economic, political, security, technological, logistical or administrative barriers. During our research we have faced limitations, but also the attainment of personal boundaries. There have been time limits, the time of completion of the research imposing a fast pace of work, there have been limitations in the access to documents during the pandemic, limitations in identifying real problems related to the implementation of the *GDPR* in Romania, as well as limitations manifested in convincing some people to participate in the research by providing interviews or filling out questionnaires. There

have also been logistical limits and limitations, but also decentration limits for canceling research subjectivism, focusing on identifying real needs related to the field studied. We have faced limits in the organization of the construction of the thesis by identifying new research perspectives related to the studies/papers/ theses already existing on this subject, as well as a number of limitations ensuring methodological triangulation, related to the organization of the collected data.

The construction of the thesis is circular and not by chance. If the research started with the comparative analysis of the way of implementing the *GDPR* in six European states, then focusing on how this European normative act is implemented in Romania, the end of the research closed the circle of comparative analysis by generating models of good practices, identified at the level of the states analyzed, models that could also be implemented in Romania.

The approach of the analyzed theme, the focus on certain concepts, syntagms, placed then in a broader, historical or collective imaginary framework, the application of a established communication scheme to highlight some gaps existing in the communication *controller – public institution* /vs./ *citizen* and the approach from multiple perspectives to the phenomena they all become hypotheses that allow the opening of new research perspectives, especially if we consider the field of administrative sciences, but they also represent novelty factors.

Through the research results and the proposed solutions we ensure openness to new horizons of analysis and introspection in the field of personal data protection by taking into account the national identity factors of manifestation, but also by reconsidering the geographical, historical, demographic, political and geopolitical elements under research.

The thesis demonstrated that innovation is also required at the organizational chart of the supervisory authorities, and a development is needed in defining their structures, including in Romania. The rapid evolution of new technologies also requires the fastest possible evolution in the regulatory field. This research and administrative practice are currently certified by regulatory practice.

The future cannot be avoided and the future belongs to new technologies.

More and more sectors, more and more activities, including public administration, will use programs involving new technologies.

The world is opening up to a digital age and with this openness the world is changing. Governments are envisioning change and are trying, including through regulation, to prevent the risks that the world we know is already facing.

Caught between financial interests, curiosity about the opportunities offered by new technologies, the desire to simplify his life, the individual gains rights that controllers sometimes respect at the limit of the law. The law can be interpreted. Human rights are currently being affected and the path of humanity can no longer exclude the rapid integration of new technologies into the daily activities of citizens who need to adapt to their new existence through *„cybersecurity hygiene"*.

"The General Data Protection Regulation has been a unique document, a historical normative act in relation to the respect of the individuals' right to privacy and in relation to the respect of their right to protection of their personal data during the processing thereof.

"The Regulation on Artificial Intelligence" is a *historical normative act* at present. Perhaps in short time another normative act will receive the title of *historical normative act*.

The European regulation tries to maintain the pace with the evolution of new technologies, translating into legislation the pace of evolution of the digital world.

At the risk of becoming redundant, we will conclude by saying that *the future remains uncertain, cannot be avoided and belongs to new technologies.*

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