

**NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF POLITICAL STUDIES AND PUBLIC
ADMINISTRATION**

MULTIDISCIPLINARY DOCTORAL SCHOOL

DOCTORAL FIELD: ADMINISTRATIVE SCIENCES

DOCTORAL THESIS

SUMMARY

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Bucharest

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**STRENGTHENING LOCAL GOVERNANCE THROUGH
INSTRUMENTS ENSURING COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICS
AND INTEGRITY IN THE EXERCISE OF PUBLIC
FUNCTIONS AND DIGNITIES**

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Introduction

In the contemporary era we are going through, concern for ethics and integrity occupies a central place in academic and policy discussions, reflecting the complexity and diversity of existing issues. Within the field of administrative sciences, in particular, the understanding and proper management of issues related to ethics and integrity are, we believe, essential for promoting good governance and strengthening public trust in administrative institutions, which is a main objective of the doctoral thesis, with the title: *Strengthening local governance through tools to ensure compliance with ethics and integrity in the exercise of public functions and dignities*.

We intend to examine/analyze the instruments and strategies adopted at national and international level in terms of ethics and integrity, customizing these values in the area of public administration, with practical applications that demonstrate the research objectives.

The research therefore aims at a structured projection of the theme by outlining a comprehensive perspective on the currents, theories and concepts that underlie the understanding and practices in the field of ethics and integrity in the Romanian administrative context. We identified/analyzed the dominant trends, gaps and current challenges, and then highlighted future directions for research and practical action. We used both qualitative and quantitative research methods to support the scientific approach.

This research not only aims to provide a synthesis of existing knowledge, but also to contribute to the development and consolidation of the conceptual and institutional framework necessary for the promotion of ethics and integrity in the public administration in Romania as well as the outlining of a framework model in the field, which would bring added value to the specific doctrinal framework.

We consider that the central research theme of the thesis is extremely important, ethics and integrity being in themselves key tools in the fight against corruption at the level of public administration. Another argument in favor of the importance of research is that this topic is still not sufficiently addressed in the Romanian space, coming to cover a possible gap (lack of knowledge) in the specialized literature.

Research methodology

The scientific approach of this thesis is based on a complex, mixed, qualitative and quantitative approach, meant to provide a coherent image of ethics and integrity in public administration. The methodology includes a combination of classical and modern research methods, designed to ensure both the theoretical framework and the practical relevance of the results.

An important aspect of the research is *the systematic literature review (SLR)*, based on reference databases such as *Web of Science*, *Scopus* and *Google Scholar*. Its purpose is to identify the current state of knowledge in the field of ethics and integrity, to capture the main research trends and to outline the existing gaps. In this regard, established models for carrying out the SLR are applied, such as the one proposed by *Okoli* and, complementary, the ten-step methodology described by *Massaro, Dumay and Guthrie*, which ensures the rigor and transparency of the process of selection and analysis of sources.

Next, *bibliometric analysis* (WoS (Web of Science)), completes the literature review, providing a scientometric perspective on international academic production. This stage aims to identify thematic connections, authors and countries with the greatest contribution, as well as the evolution of the concepts of *ethics*, *integrity* and *governance* in the administrative sciences.

The qualitative methods used include *documentary analysis*, through which strategic documents, institutional reports and relevant normative acts at national and international level are examined, as well as *critical analysis*, oriented towards the rational and reasoned interpretation of the information collected. These are complemented by *the synthesis method*, which aims to integrate results obtained from multiple sources, and by *benchmarking*, through which different European administrative models and institutional practices are paralleled in order to identify elements of convergence and divergence.

On an empirical level, the research uses *the semi-structured interview*, conducted with specialists and practitioners from the public administration, as well as *the sociological questionnaire*, applied both to public officials and local elected officials, as well as to citizens, beneficiaries of public services. These tools aim to measure perceptions, attitudes and the degree of implementation of the principles of ethics and integrity at the level of local public administration, especially within the administrative-territorial units of the 7th Center Development Region.

The methodology adopted, therefore, combines theoretical-doctrinal analysis with empirical research, offering an integrated framework for interpreting the contemporary administrative reality. By using these complementary methods, the research aims not only to describe the current state of

the field, but also to identify directions of action and public policies aimed at strengthening the culture of integrity and local governance in Romania.

Research objectives

The behavior of those who provide public services is an extremely important element for citizens' trust in what public administration means. It is demonstrated in the doctrine, over time, that ethical, efficient and fair public services denote public trust. This trust is the binder that must bridge the gap between those who are the interface of the public administration (holders of public dignities, civil servants, contract staff, etc.) and citizens in order to achieve good governance. In the research carried out, we investigated whether good governance can depend on the set of instruments that ensure compliance with ethics and integrity in public administration.

Main Research Question:

How can the set of instruments that ensure the observance of ethics and integrity in the exercise of public functions and dignities strengthen the quality of governance in the local public administration?

In order to carry out the research, we have set ourselves a main objective (PO) in relation to the main question:

(OP) Analysis of the capacity of institutional and normative ethics and integrity instruments to strengthen local governance by increasing accountability, transparency and public trust in local government.

The research aimed, in addition to the central objective, to achieve three related general objectives (OGs), which in turn were detailed by corresponding specific objectives (SOs) with directly proportional research questions (I).

Thus, we have established:

(OG1) Clarification of the fundamental concepts and the theoretical-scientific framework regarding ethics and integrity in the exercise of public functions and dignities, especially in local public administration, in order to substantiate the role of these concepts in local government.

For (OG1), developed in *Part I of the thesis*, we set out to investigate and analyze the following specific objectives and we formulated correlative research questions:

(OS 1.1) Defining the methodological framework and formulating research objectives and questions.

(I 1.1) How can a methodological framework be built for investigating ethics and integrity in local public administration?

(OS 1.2) Analysis of the conceptual framework and theoretical foundation of ethics and integrity in public administration.

(I 1.2) What are the main theoretical currents and doctrinal perspectives relevant to the understanding of the concepts of ethics and integrity in public administration?

(OS 1.3) Applied analysis of the manifestation and limits of ethics and integrity in local public administration.

(I 1.3) What vulnerabilities affect the application of the principles of ethics and integrity in the local public administration in Romania?

In *Part II of the doctoral thesis*, we set out to achieve the general objective 2 (OG 2), namely:

(OG 2) *Integrated analysis of the normative, institutional and operational framework on ethics and integrity in the public administration in Romania, in correlation with international standards and relevant practices in the European space.*

As specific objectives, with correlative questions, we analyzed:

(OS 2.1) Investigating relevant regulations, policies and strategies, with a role in promoting integrity and transparency in public administration, including the development of thematic indexes.

(I 2.1) To what extent do the regulatory framework and public policies existing in Romania support the construction of a coherent system of integrity in public administration?

(OS 2.2) Evaluation of the institutional tools and mechanisms used to ensure ethics and integrity in the practice of public administration.

(I 2.2) What are the main tools for ensuring ethics and integrity used in Romania and their role in preventing unethical behavior?

(OS 2.3) Comparative analysis of European integrity models (Italy, France, Spain) in order to extract relevant good practices in the European space.

(I 2.3) What European practices can be identified at European level with the potential to be transferred to the public administration in Romania in order to strengthen institutional integrity?

(OS 2.4) To identify the contribution of international organizations to the development of ethics and integrity standards and their impact on the national framework.

(I 2.4) What is the impact of the reporting carried out by international organizations (e.g. GRECO, UN, OECD) for the development and harmonization of the national integrity system in public administration?

In the dynamics of research, the third general objective established is:

(OG 3) *Assessing the applicability and efficiency of integrity tools in local public administrations in the Centre Development Region, through a mixed empirical research, in order to identify dysfunctions, perceptions of local actors and directions for strengthening ethical governance at local level.*

For this we have also set the following secondary objectives, with the related research questions:

(OS 3.1) Identification and systematization of public functions and dignities exercised in the local public administration in Romania.

(I 3.1) What is the structure of public functions and dignities at local level and what relevance does this have for the specific framework of ethics and integrity in the sphere of public administration?

(OS 3.2) Establishing the methodological foundations of the case study by clearly defining the research strategy, collection methods and data analysis techniques.

(I 3.2) What research strategy and methodological tools are appropriate to assess perceptions and practices regarding respect for ethics and integrity in local public administrations in the Centre Development Region?

(OS 3.3) Analysis of the perceptions of employees and citizens regarding the level of ethics, integrity and corruption in the local public administration.

(I3.3) How do local actors (employees and citizens) perceive compliance with ethics and integrity norms, and what are the main shortcomings identified in local public administration?

(SO3.4) Benchmarking of the use and efficiency of integrity tools in local administrations in the counties of the Centre Region.

(I 3.4) What is the degree of implementation of integrity instruments in local public administrations and how do they differ between the analyzed TAUs?

In order to concretize the above, we have carried out research on the theoretical aspects regarding ethics, integrity, corruption, their evolution over time, their importance, highlighting the possible links between the violation of the norms of ethics and integrity and the occurrence of the phenomenon of corruption. According to the legislative benchmarks in force, we have produced an index of integrity incidents, institutional transparency measures and the consequences of non-compliance in the matter. We have identified the tools to ensure compliance with the rules of ethics and integrity, their role in the fight against corruption. We have carried out analyses on the legislative

path (sources) in the field of ethics and integrity in relation to local public administration, policies and strategies in the field, as well as research on institutional transparency measures and their role in local public administration, transparency, education and training, digitalization, etc., instruments with an active and preventive role against corruption, to other policies to prevent corruption such as declaring assets, gifts, etc.

The expected results of the research:

As a result of the scientific approach, we expected to obtain a coherent set of results (R), relevant both from a theoretical and applicative perspective, as follows:

(R1) *Elaboration of an integrated conceptual framework on ethics and integrity in local public administration*, which can provide clear theoretical delimitations, a typology of identified vulnerabilities and a solid doctrinal foundation in relation to the existing currents in the specialized literature.

(R2) *Identifying the limits and dysfunctions of the current normative and institutional framework*, through the analysis of national regulations, public policies and institutional integrity mechanisms, in correlation with European good practices and international standards (GRECO, OECD, UN).

(R3) *Building analytical and applicative tools in the form of thematic indexes* (e.g. index of regulations, applied tools, integrity incidents), useful for monitoring and evaluating institutional integrity at local level.

(R4) *Generation of original empirical data on the perceptions of local actors* (employees and citizens) on compliance with ethics and integrity norms, as well as the level of implementation and efficiency of the related instruments, within the local public administrations of the Centre Development Region.

(R5) *Formulating a set of strategic and operational recommendations*, based on mixed research (qualitative and quantitative), for strengthening local governance through ethics and integrity, including proposing an adaptable operational model at the level of local public administration.

Summary of the paper

The doctoral thesis is part of the concerns of contemporary administrative sciences regarding the quality of governance and the fight against corruption in public administration, with a focus on

the tools for ensuring ethics and integrity at the local level. The structure of the paper follows a logical and progressive path, in which the theoretical approach is complemented by a comparative analysis and, especially, by a rigorous empirical investigation carried out in the local administrations of Romania, the Development Region (7) Center. A central point of the paper is the idea that *ethics and integrity are not abstract concepts, but concrete and necessary devices for strengthening an efficient, transparent and accountable local government*.

The paper is structured in three major parts, each contributing to the coherent development of the central theme, namely the strengthening of local governance through tools to ensure compliance with ethics and integrity in the exercise of public functions and dignities. The red thread of the research aims to identify, analyze and evaluate these tools, in a theoretical and practical, comparative and empirical manner, in relation to the Romanian context and European/global practices.

The first part, *Scientific Concepts and Context*, constitutes the theoretical foundation of the research. The research design is outlined, the research questions and research objectives are established, and the research methods used, such as literature review, systematic literature review, bibliometric analysis, comparative analysis, case study, etc., are described. In this first part, the fundamental theories of ethics and integrity, their relationship with local government and how their lack generates or amplifies the phenomenon of corruption are examined. This conceptual framework is supported by a structured review of the literature, identifying emerging research directions and approach gaps in the academic and institutional space.

The second part, called Building the *Integrity System*, analyzes the normative framework, public policies, strategies and institutional mechanisms relevant to promoting ethics and integrity, with a focus on the effective tools in the field, used in public administration. Components such as codes of conduct, ethics counselor, conflict of interest regime, declarations of assets and interests, public interest warning, as well as the role of education and digitalization, as well as other relevant institutions in the field are detailed and analyzed. The Romanian institutional and legislative architecture is analyzed in depth, as well as the relevant European models (Italy, France, Spain), in order to identify good practices and possible points of convergence or divergence. The comparative analysis is complemented by the development of *thematic indexes* (of corruption prevention measures, integrity incidents, rules on pantouflage, etc.), which provide an innovative tool for diagnosis and evaluation, constituting another element of originality of the research. This part of the paper contributes to the development of an *integrated framework for the analysis of ethics and integrity in public administration*, highlighting the current limits of implementation and proposing structural solutions for consolidation, including through the use of digital technologies, ethics advisor, sensitive functions, etc., emerging themes insufficiently explored in the domestic literature.

Part III, *Ethics and Integrity in Local Public Administrations. Case study*, constitutes the applicative component of the research, based on an empirical investigation carried out in the Development Region (7) Center (Alba, Braşov, Covasna, Harghita, Mureş and Sibiu). The study is carried out both from the perspective of citizens and employees of local administrations, using combined methods: sociological questionnaire, official requests for public information. The originality of this section derives from the double level of investigation (perception vs. institutional practice) and from the combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis, in order to capture the real complexity of the climate of ethics and integrity at the local level. This part proposes, based on the collected and interpreted data, an analysis model applicable to local administration, meant to assess the effectiveness of ethics and integrity tools, but also the willingness of institutions to build a sustainable ethical governance framework. In addition, a series of pragmatic public policy recommendations are formulated, scientifically based, to strengthen integrity in local administration.

The paper concludes with the section dedicated to *General conclusions and future research directions*, which summarizes the main results and brings to attention the applicable dimension of the thesis, with relevance for public administration, academia and policy makers.

Overall, the novelty of the thesis is reflected in the integrated application of modern research methods, especially SLR and bibliometric analysis, then in the development of modern and pragmatic working tools (thematic indexes, integrated analysis model), the double empirical approach, oriented both to the perception of citizens/employees in the public administration, and to institutional practice, the corroboration of national data with European models, in an effort to transfer good practices, the formulation of substantiated recommendations, applicable in the context of the local public administration in Romania. Through this phased structure, the thesis aims not only to map an insufficiently explored field, but also to contribute to the construction of an integrated and functional model of ethical and responsible local government.

General conclusions

Doctoral research demonstrates, both theoretically and empirically, the essential link between institutional integrity and the quality of governance. Starting from the central question: *to what extent can ethics and integrity strengthen good local governance?*, the results obtained confirm the working hypothesis, local public institutions that rigorously apply integrity instruments, show increased

transparency and accountability, enjoy an increased level of public trust and administrative performance.

The thesis was built on three complementary levels: (1) theoretical and conceptual foundations, (2) analysis of the normative and institutional framework, and (3) empirical research applied at the level of local administrations in the Centre Development Region. This integrated approach has allowed for a complex perspective on how integrity rules, mechanisms and practices can become active governance tools.

The results led to the formulation of an *integrated conceptual framework* of ethics and integrity (R1), to a *critical and comparative evaluation* of the national and European regulatory framework (R2), as well as to the development of *analytical tools and indices* for measuring institutional performance (R3). The empirical study carried out at the level of county seat municipalities in the Centre Region generated *relevant primary data* (R4), which confirm the direct correlation between the level of integrity, community trust and administrative efficiency.

The research also highlighted a number of differences in the degree of implementation of integrity policies, demonstrating that their effectiveness depends not only on the legal framework, but also on the organizational culture, ethical leadership and active community involvement. Municipalities that have adopted proactive mechanisms, such as continuous ethical training, periodic reporting, interdepartmental collaboration, stand out through a more transparent and efficient governance.

The final contributions of the thesis are materialized in a *set of proposals* (R5), oriented towards improving the integrity system at the local level: strengthening the role of ethics advisors, standardizing integrity plans, creating periodic evaluation mechanisms and expanding ethical training programs.

Overall, the thesis confirms that ethics and integrity are not only moral requirements, but functional components of quality local governance. Through its multidimensional approach, the paper provides an applicable and replicable model of analysis, contributing to the development of an administrative culture based on accountability, transparency and public trust, the authentic foundations of modern democratic governance.

Own contributions

On a *theoretical level*, the thesis achieved for the first time a comprehensive interdisciplinary synthesis of theories and concepts related to ethics and integrity in public administration, with a focus

on the level of local administration. We have combined perspectives from philosophical ethics, organizational theory, administration science and anti-corruption studies, thus building a unitary vision of local institutional integrity. This integrated approach has allowed not only the clarification of key concepts (public ethics, integrity, local governance, transparency, accountability, etc.), but also the proposal of a new typology of integrity tools, grouped according to their nature (legal regulations, administrative mechanisms, participatory tools, technological tools, etc.). This overcomes the fragmentation of previous literature, providing a coherent theoretical framework for future research and reinforcing the argument that public integrity is the antithesis of corruption and an essential element of good governance, an aspect emphasized, but rarely explicitly demonstrated, in UN and OECD documents.

Methodologically, the work is characterized by a rigorous methodological design, with the use of modern methods, such as bibliometric analysis and systematic review of the literature. Then we have the international comparative analysis, the regional case study and the quantitative research through questionnaires. This methodological triangulation, together with the clear definition of the research questions (I) and the general objectives (OG) and specific objectives (SO) for each segment of the study, ensured a very faceted and detailed investigation of the issue, increasing the validity and reliability of the conclusions. What is new is that a detailed *regional empirical analysis* of the implementation of the integrity tools has been carried out.

Through the research carried out, investigations were carried out in all county seat municipalities in an entire region, offering a unique comparative perspective and highlighting possible regional models in ethical governance. Moreover, an original methodological approach to data collection was used, making extensive use of Law 544/2001 on free access to public information, by sending official requests to city halls and analyzing the responses received, in order to obtain internal administrative data on integrity practices. This technique provided authentic information about the institutional interior and a current x-ray of the functioning of integrity tools, a rare aspect in research so far. Complementary, the inclusion of the citizens' perspective (by probing the public's perceptions) alongside that of public officials is an important methodological technique, the dual internal-external approach recognizes that administrative integrity is also a problem of democratic perception and legitimacy, not only of internal compliance. Thus, the study reflects the multiple dimensions of integrity, both as a public governance practice and as a relationship of trust between the administration and the community.

On an *empirical* level, the thesis brings original data and findings for the Romanian space. The first detailed inventory of the integrity instruments existing in the county seat mayoralities in a region was carried out, highlighting not only their presence or absence, but also the concrete way in

which each instrument works in different local contexts. Successful examples were revealed (for example, Braşov, with exemplary practices of transparency and integrity reporting, Sibiu, with efficient interdepartmental coordination mechanisms on ethical issues) and, on the other hand, vulnerable areas that need improvement (e.g. the need to institutionalize ethical training programs in Alba Iulia, or a more transparent communication in Sfântu Gheorghe regarding integrity measures). By quantifying the phenomena (index of integrity incidents, index of institutional transparency measures, etc.) and corroborating them with contextual factors (size of the administrative apparatus, available resources, local organizational culture), the research provided explanations for the differences observed between municipalities, for example, it was found that municipalities with more consistent financial and human resources and that accessed organizational development projects managed to implement integrity tools more rigorously, suggesting that administrative capacity influences the level of integrity. The fact that, in all six municipalities analyzed, there are integrity plans aligned with the same national anti-corruption strategy and updated codes of ethics indicates an effect of uniformity and administrative maturation at the regional level, constituting a new empirical finding that proves the impact of national anti-corruption policies up to the local level.

Proposals and future research directions

As proposals and solutions, we did not want to reiterate known measures, but to include innovative ideas adapted to the current context, such as the creation of a regional/national network of ethics advisors for the exchange of good practices between mayoralities, the development of a standard format of annual integrity report for local administrations (according to the successful model implemented in Braşov), deeper integration of digital solutions (open-data portals, online incident reporting systems) in ethics management, or strengthening whistleblowing mechanisms with increased safeguards and awareness campaigns; proposing a model of integrity tests for employees in the local public administration, which can represent a valuable and original research direction, with direct practical applicability. Such an initiative would be in line with the logic of strengthening institutional integrity and could complement the existing mechanisms (codes of conduct, ethics advisor, integrity plans, etc.) with a tool for ex-ante and/or periodic evaluation of the ethical behavior of officials, an objective method of ethical screening of employees. There are models in other countries (e.g. the USA), where integrity tests (even simulated) have been introduced in public structures to prevent corruption and to educate ethical behavior. These integrity testing models could

include behavioral components, such as reactions to sensitive ethical issues in the field, realistic scenarios inspired by employee practice in the public system, indirect measures (analysis of tolerance for compromise, evaluation of perceptions about norms), constructive feedback, not only evaluation, but also learning tool.

Based on the results obtained and the dynamics of the research, several *relevant directions are outlined for deepening the field of ethics and integrity in local public administration*. A first direction aims to extend empirical research at national level, by applying validated tools in other development regions, in order to build a comparative image for ethical governance in Romania.

In the alternative, a future research direction could aim to analyze the issue of administrative ethics in the counties where the local public administration is the main employer. In such contexts, characterized by high economic dependence on public institutions, systemic vulnerabilities may arise regarding the observance of the principles of integrity in the recruitment and promotion process of personnel. This hypothesis is particularly relevant in the light of the legislative changes that occurred after 2013, which led to the restriction of the legal liability of mayors in certain situations. Thus, the research could analyze to what extent the existing ethical norms, as well as the institutional prevention mechanisms, manage to counteract the risks of favoritism, clientelism or conflict of interest in the field of employment in the local public administration.

We see that it is necessary to monitor the effectiveness of integrity tools, in order to analyze the dynamics of their application and their real impact on institutional behaviors. Another pertinent direction is to assess the impact of digitalization processes on institutional integrity, with a focus on decision-making transparency. Research can also be carried out, as we pointed out in our study for the development of a standardized model of integrity testing for public servants, with a formative and preventive role, adapted to the specifics of the local administration.

Depending on the legislative dynamics in the matter, but also on the institutional dynamics, then on the specific international framework, we can set as a future research direction an analysis in terms of wealth control and the impact of CCR decisions (past and present in the matter), including in relation to what Romania's accession to the OECD means.

A future research direction could also explore the relationship between ethical standards in public administration and human development indicators, such as standard of living and life expectancy, in states that have made significant progress in these areas. Investigating the connection between ethical governance, the quality of public services and the well-being of the population could provide a relevant perspective on the role that institutional integrity plays in strengthening sustainable development and reducing social inequalities.

Aspects regarding bibliographic references

The bibliographic references can be found at the end of the scientific paper (pp. 268-281). The bibliography of the doctoral thesis is structured as follows:

1. Books, articles, studies (classic or online journals) – 82 titles, including reference works, but also works with themes related to our theme, so that we can achieve a comprehensive and detailed image of the topic dealt with in the doctoral thesis;
2. Website – 55 references including reports, official websites of relevant institutions, regulations, studies and online articles, etc.;
3. National/international regulations, strategic documents – 92 landmarks comprising relevant normative acts, conventions, international agreements and treaties, draft laws, etc.

The bibliography has been rigorously selected, based on the relevance and timeliness of the sources, including fundamental works and recent research in the field. Scientific reference databases (WoS, Scopus, Google Scholar) were used, complemented with normative documents, institutional reports and international comparative studies, etc., to ensure a balance between theoretical approaches and practical applications. The selection criteria focused on academic quality, scientific impact and relevance to the research objectives.