

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration
Multidisciplinary Doctoral School
Doctoral Field: Administrative Sciences

**DOCTORAL THESIS
SUMMARY**

**Collaborative Governance and the Consolidation
of the Network-Type Mechanism. A Roadmap for
Romania**

Scientific coordinator: Prof. Ani MATEI, PhD

Author: Florin VĂDUVA, PhD candidate

**Bucharest,
2026**

I. The object of the research, the problem investigated and its relevance

The profound reconfiguration of the social, economic and institutional environment over the past decades has changed the way in which public policies are conceived and implemented. The problems currently faced by public institutions display a high degree of interdependence and generate effects that are difficult to anticipate, which has exposed the limits of the classical models of coordination, built either on hierarchical authority or on competition. In response, the specialized literature has treated collaborative governance as an alternative model, centered on attracting actors from outside the public sector and on forms of coordination grounded in interaction, deliberation and co-production.

The expansion of this field has, however, also produced a series of ambiguities that affect both theoretical construction and empirical application. The starting point of the thesis is the identification of a twofold knowledge deficit. The first is conceptual in nature and lies in the unclear use (at times even as synonyms) of the notions of collaborative governance, network governance and inter-organizational collaboration. The direct consequence is that the mere existence of forms of cooperation between organizations may come to be treated as proof of the existence of a network-type coordination mechanism. The second deficit is methodological in nature and consists in the absence of analytical instruments capable of establishing empirically whether the relations observed between a given set of actors correspond to network coordination or represent, on the contrary, an adaptation of hierarchical coordination or of coordination based on market principles.

The thesis therefore seeks to reduce this deficit by investigating the coordination mechanisms used in Romanian public administration and by assessing the extent to which they can be classified as network-type mechanisms in the sense of collaborative governance. The object of the research is constituted by the bidirectional relations between public institutions and organizations situated outside the public sector. For the latter, the thesis uses the term non-state organizations, a terminological choice justified by its capacity to bring together within a unitary analytical framework profit-oriented economic operators, non-governmental organizations, professional associations, supranational structures and academia.

The theoretical relevance of the topic derives from three considerations. The first concerns the topicality of the debate on strengthening the role of private, non-governmental, professional and academic organisations in public decisions, a debate in which several authors

have argued for replacing the paradigm of centralised, top-down coordination with collaborative approaches based on the autonomy of the participants (Rhodes, 2007; Stănică & Aristigueta, 2019; Hoxha, 2020; Temmerman et al., 2020; Van Gestel & Grotenbreg, 2021; Sorensen & Torfing, 2021). The stake is all the more visible at national level, where it has been found that civil society intervenes in the public policy cycle almost exclusively at the drafting stage and only in a consultative capacity (Stănică & Aristigueta, 2019, p. 199). The second consideration concerns the small volume of studies devoted to the feasibility of networks in states with young democracies, a topic on which the literature has issued an explicit call (Hoxha, 2020); the application of social network analysis, with its centrality indicators, to a domestic network remains an insufficiently widespread practice in Romanian academia. The third aims to remove certain theoretical confusions generated by the multidisciplinary character of the subject, which produces subtle differences of interpretation across fields (Scott & Thomas, 2016) and overlaps between collaborative governance and other types of governance (Wang & Ran, 2022).

In applied terms, the usefulness of consolidating network-type mechanisms likewise rests on several arguments. The involvement of non-state actors can enhance the legitimacy of public decisions in a national context marked by a low level of trust in public institutions (European Commission, 2025, p. 2) and by the erosion of the trust capital of political parties (Expert Forum, 2025, pp. 28–29). At the same time, constant interaction provides access to resources, information and expertise that are not available internally, while the capacity to mobilise resources and competences rapidly contributes to institutional resilience.

II. The research design. Questions, hypotheses and objectives

The undertaking is conceived as a monograph, whose chapters are articulated around a central question and developed through detailed argumentation. The approach is predominantly qualitative, of an exploratory-explanatory type, with normative dimensions. The exploratory-explanatory character makes it possible to capture the actual functioning of the networks mobilised for the delivery of public projects and policies, as well as the added value generated. The normative dimension results from the examination of the normative acts that constitute the reference framework for the participation of non-state actors.

The main research question is formulated as follows: To what extent and under what conditions can the coordination mechanisms of Romanian public administration be characterised as network-type mechanisms? Three secondary questions are subordinated to it:

- What are the defining characteristics of the network-type mechanism in the specialised literature?;
- To what extent does the case study analysed reflect the characteristics of the network-type mechanism?;
- What are the limits of, and the conditions for, consolidating network coordination in Romania?

The working hypotheses were formulated in a manner compatible with the qualitative specificity of the research. The central hypothesis holds that the presence of inter-organisational collaboration does not automatically imply the existence of a network-type coordination mechanism. The complementary hypotheses state that the coordination mechanisms of Romanian public administration remain predominantly hierarchical even in seemingly collaborative contexts, and, respectively, that the development of network coordination is conditioned by institutional factors and by the actual distribution of resources and power among actors.

The general objective of the thesis consists in evaluating and explaining network-type coordination mechanisms in Romanian public administration. It is detailed in four specific objectives: the conceptual clarification of collaborative governance and of network coordination; the comparison of the market, hierarchy and network coordination mechanisms; the operationalisation of the concept of network and its empirical testing; and the formulation of a model for consolidating the use of networks.

III. The research methodology

From a methodological standpoint, the research involved combining several approaches. Documentary analysis underpinned the identification and clarification of the specific concepts. Reference works in the field of collaborative governance and network theory were examined, alongside national normative acts, regulations and reports. This approach made it possible to

develop an analytical instrument that starts from the findings extracted from the specialised literature and proposes a universal matrix for assessing the extent to which the relations between actors reflect a network-type coordination mechanism. At this stage, the notion of network was broken down into dimensions converted into five analytical concepts, each with its own indicators: interdependence (exchange of resources, mutual dependence), collaboration (frequency of interactions), co-decision (equal input in decision-making), trust (the perception of the effective members of the network) and the autonomy of actors (the possibility for each member to establish its own courses of action).

In order to avoid a purely descriptive assessment, the evaluation based on the use of the aforementioned instrument is carried out on a three-level grid: indicators absent, partially present and present. Absence designates non-existent or sporadic relations, lacking institutional continuity and visible effects on the process. Partial presence corresponds to real but irregular interactions, dependent on context and insufficiently consolidated. Full presence indicates a stable, repeated and functional relationship, with observable results.

Subsequently, a case study was analyzed, an option motivated by the need to apply the instrument to a concrete example of collaboration. The case selected is the process of operationalizing the national competition for recruitment into the civil service, initiated by the National Agency of Civil Servants (ANFP). The choice is justified by the significant number of organizations involved, coming from the public, economic, academic, professional and non-governmental sectors, as well as from the European and international institutional environment. Unlike most of the projects carried out by Romanian authorities, this initiative entails effective inter-organizational collaboration, which brings it close to an undertaking conducted under the umbrella of collaborative governance.

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews, a method chosen both to capture the perceptions of the collaboration process and to obtain the data required for constructing the relational matrix. The interview guide comprises fifteen questions, of which fourteen are common to all participants and one is adapted to the specificity of each organization. Twenty-six persons from ten organizations present in the final form of the project were interviewed. The selection sought the representativeness of the network, the inclusion of the organizations presumed to be decisive by reference to their anticipated centrality, and the

presence of academia, which holds specialized expertise in public administration and governance models.

Finally, social network analysis was applied in the form presented by Andrew and Feiock (in Miller & Yang, 2008) to the initiative for operationalizing the national competition. The processing of the information was carried out by means of UCINET 6 software, starting from the binary matrix built on the basis of the answers to the first interview question, which sought to identify the organizations with which each actor interacted directly. The instrument made it possible to represent the network graphically and to calculate the centrality indicators at actor and at network level, namely degree, betweenness and closeness centrality.

IV. Considerations on the concept and models of governance

The first theoretical chapter of the thesis builds the conceptual foundation of the analysis, starting from the premise that any pertinent discussion of collaborative governance presupposes, beforehand, situating the topic within the broader discourse on governance.

A first clarification concerns the relationship between governance and government. The widespread perception according to which governance would represent an alternative to state institutions, in which public needs would be met exclusively through new actors, has been refuted by the reference literature. The notion of governance is indeed broader, since it brings into public processes actors that were previously foreign to them, yet the executive authorities remain the principal actors of public activity (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017, p. 21). In the most general terms, governance can be understood as the set of procedures through which power and authority are distributed and through which decisions are taken within a human community, with particularities derived from the historical, cultural, political, economic and psychological traditions of the group (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 2; Stern & Hellquist, 2017, p. 95; Baehler, 2023, p. 5).

The consolidation of governance has altered the way in which the mobilization of public resources is carried out. Previously, the state actor decided alone, or with a much reduced external contribution, and could rely only on its own resources. As the new ideas were internalised, a process punctuated by critical moments such as financial crises, budgetary constraints and the deficit of expertise and innovation, this practice diminished, while co-

production, understood as the process through which organizations from different sectors form partnerships and exchange information and resources in order to generate innovative solutions to social problems, gained ground (Ansell & Torfing, 2021, p. 221).

On this foundation, the chapter introduces collaborative governance as an emerging trend. In an early phase, the model was regarded as a last-resort solution by authorities, international organizations and associations (Ansell & Gash, 2018, p. 18), a reticence explicable through the lack of trust between sectors, the absence of previous experiences, resistance to change and the fear of losing power. Its actual emergence, observable at the beginning of the 2000s, has three drivers: the need of developing states to respond to the demands of the citizens they represent, the massive decline in trust in the centralised state recorded after 1950, and the realisation that, in an interconnected world, certain public tasks exceed the capacity of a single organisation (Donahue, 2004, p. 1).

The chapter reviews the main definitions. Collaborative governance has been described as the act of governing through which public organizations involve non-state stakeholders in the drafting and implementation of policies, as well as in the management of public projects and goods, having debate and consensus as central elements (Ansell & Gash, 2007, pp. 544–546), the interaction always exceeding the consultative sphere and facilitating the sharing of authority, multidirectional communication and reciprocal influence (Sonderskov, 2019, p. 322). In another formulation, the model brings together public, private and civic actors within decision-making processes and structures that transcend traditional organizational barriers, with the aim of generating public results inaccessible to a single organization (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 2). The participation of non-state actors is correlated with the strengthening of democracy (Barandiaran et al., 2023), while a relationship of interdependence is established between the parties involved, since the problems addressed have multi-sectorial causes and effects (Choi & Robertson, 2014, p. 495). Noting the absence of a unanimously accepted definition, but also the recurrence of certain elements, the thesis proposes a definition of its own: collaborative governance represents the framework of collaboration grounded in non-hierarchical coordination, deliberation and consensus among interdependent actors from the public, private and non-governmental spheres, intended to generate a response to a complex social problem that cannot be successfully solved by a single organization and whose effects are multi-sectorial.

The chapter also examines the rationales for participation. Collaboration is considered opportune when the associated costs are low, although in practice the decision is often taken on the spot, through trial and error, while actors cooperate in order to multiply productivity, information, legitimacy and resources (Donahue & Zeckhauser, 2011, pp. 63–172). The chances of a successful collaboration increase significantly when the participants share similar attitudes and values and occupy comparable positions within their organizations of origin (Muijs et al., 2010, pp. 18–19). Conversely, the main objections identified in the literature concern the difficulties of monitoring responsibility and accountability, the fear that one's own objectives will be substituted by those of the other participants, administrative customs and legal limits, resistance to change and distrust regarding the equitable reward of the effort invested (Freeman, 1997, p. 2; Bouckaert et al., 2016, p. 26; Ansell et al., 2020, pp. 575–576). As regards the benefits, successive studies have highlighted the increase in stakeholder participation and in the chances of long-term collaboration, the correction of deficiencies in competences and knowledge, the strengthening of trust between public organizations and their partners, the growth of citizens' trust in governmental policies and the enhanced legitimacy of public decisions and actions.

V. Managerial paradigms in the context of governance

The following chapter of the thesis starts from the premise that the managerial doctrines dominant in a given geographical and temporal context directly shape decision-makers' vision of the role of the state and of the involvement of non-state actors, thereby influencing the coordination mechanisms actually used.

New Public Management is analyzed as a reaction to the perceived inadequacy of the traditional bureaucratic model, considered suitable for the beginning and the middle of the twentieth century, but increasingly ill-adapted to the governing climate of its end. The paradigm brought organizational transformations such as results-oriented management, administrative decentralization, the redefinition of the relationship between taxpayer and citizen, the establishment of executive agencies, public-private partnerships, modern personnel management instruments, the reduction of public expenditure and, in numerous contexts, the privatization of state-owned enterprises (Matei, 2006, p. 125; Pollitt et al., 2007, p. 196). The associated

coordination mechanism is the market, through the promotion of competition within the public sector and between public and private providers, with the reconceptualization of the citizen as a client able to choose and to evaluate performance. The results obtained, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, did not, however, confirm the model's promise of universal applicability.

The Neo-Weberian State is presented as an effort to adapt the traditional administrative apparatus to contemporary requirements, seeking to increase professionalism, efficiency and responsiveness to citizens' demands (Evans & Rauch, 1999, p. 749; Drechsler & Kattel, 2009, p. 96; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017, pp. 22–25; Bouckaert, 2022, p. 3). The state retains its central position, while managerial instruments of private origin are integrated to a limited extent, in a complementary role. Coordination remains predominantly hierarchical, with clearly delimited authority transmitted through formal institutional channels. The significant change consists in the reorientation from strict compliance with procedures towards the quality of services and the real needs of beneficiaries, supported by a professional culture that values competence and responsiveness (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017, pp. 121–122; Bouckaert, 2022, p. 8). To this are added the use of participatory instruments complementary to representative democracy, particularly at local level, the shift of emphasis from ex-ante controls towards ex-post evaluations, and the redefinition of the civil servant's profile, which is called upon to exercise, alongside legal expertise, managerial roles that connect the normative framework with the practical concerns of the beneficiaries.

New Public Governance starts from the premise that the legitimacy of governmental action can be strengthened by extending participation in the drafting and implementation of public policies, in particular through the integration of actors from outside the state apparatus. This reconfiguration entails a relative diminution of the authority exercised hierarchically and, in parallel, the accentuation of horizontal relations, coordination being achieved through negotiation, deliberation and consensus (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017, pp. 22–25; Stănică & Aristigueta, 2019, p. 199). The rise of the model has been interpreted as a transition from a centralized, elite-led form of government, characterized by uniformity and top-down control, towards a decentralized, community-oriented model that is pluralist with respect to authority and decision-making (Osborne, 2010, p. 110, in Stănică & Aristigueta, 2019, p. 191). The direct consequence is the redefinition of roles. Elected or appointed office-holders perform network coordination functions, mediate divergent interests and facilitate compromises (Pollitt &

Bouckaert, 2011, pp. 168–170), while civil servants acquire an active role in animating these arrangements, which requires the reorientation of professional training towards competences in collaboration, communication and networking (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011; 2017, p. 95).

The chapter also analyses the secondary paradigms with indirect influence. Network governance is defined through the involvement of a restricted, persistent and structured set of autonomous entities in an activity of public interest, on the basis of contracts that are binding socially rather than legally, having as defining elements the patterns of exchange and the mobility of resources between independent actors, interdependence, constant interaction, as well as conflict, trust and institutionalization.

Multi-level governance entails coordination between authorities belonging to different administrative tiers, without a rigid relationship of subordination, the actors being in principle in equivalent positions (Panke & Stapel, 2024, p. 418). Authority, decision-making and responsibility are dispersed across interconnected tiers, without a dominant actor (Bouckaert et al., 2016, p. 24), while the networks existing within this framework have a predominantly administrative configuration, being composed mainly of public actors from different levels (Iancu, 2010, pp. 58–59).

Polycentric governance refers to the existence of several distinct and formally independent decision centers, which interact through competition, cooperation or shared conflict-resolution mechanisms, thereby generating relatively coherent patterns of behavior at the level of the system (Ostrom et al., 1961, p. 831). Local autonomy sustains institutional and functional diversity, while the viability of the system depends on the capacity to keep competition within functional limits and to manage the unequal distribution of costs and benefits (Ostrom et al., 1961, pp. 838-841).

Good governance, initially promoted by international organizations, is built on principles such as legitimacy, understood as the social acceptance of decisions and not as mere legal compliance, transparency, which entails both informing and involving citizens, accountability, and responsiveness within reasonable time frames (Keping, 2018, pp. 4–6; Stănică & Aristigueta, 2019, pp. 191–192).

Meta-governance, defined as the organization of the conditions for governance in the broad sense (Jessop, 1997, *apud* Erkocak & Acikalin, 2014, p. 80), does not introduce new

mechanisms, but harmonizes hierarchies, markets and networks through indirect forms of influence that preserve the autonomy of the actors.

A distinct subchapter (III.5) transfers the analysis to the national context, through an undertaking aimed at identifying the elements characteristic of each paradigm within Romanian administrative reality. The starting point is the thesis according to which the administrative reforms in Romania were determined mainly by the pressure of the European Union and pursued the professionalization of the civil service, decentralization and successive legislative amendments, with a weak collaborative dimension, visible in the limited participation of civil servants in the formulation of the measures and in the insufficiently developed character of public debates (Bouckaert et al., 2008). The proximity to the Neo-Weberian State is supported by the strongly legalistic administrative culture (Stănică & Aristigueta, 2019), by the maintenance of the state as the principal actor, of representative democracy as the source of legitimacy and of the distinct character of the civil service (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017), as well as by the dominance of the bureaucratic coordination mechanism. The historical legacy, marked by the negative image of civil servants, demotivating remuneration, clientelism, party favoritism and corruption, explains the recurrent orientation of the reforms towards professionalization, confirmed by the analyses covering the period 2000–2020 (Dincă & Mihaiu, 2019) and by the Civil Service Strategy 2022–2027. The elements specific to New Public Management appear fragmentarily and circumstantially. For instance, the reduction in the size of the state occurred predominantly in periods of economic instability, the central example being the economic crisis acutely felt in Romania in 2009.

As regards networks, their evolution went through two stages: in the period 1991–2000, closed structures operated, composed almost exclusively of civil servants and experts from within the governmental apparatus, while between 2000 and 2010 an effort of institutional development was recorded, oriented rather towards strengthening administrative capacity than towards the constitution of autonomous networks (Matei & Dogaru, 2011, pp. 95–96).

The overall picture is that of a hybrid system with a neo-Weberian dominant, in which the market occupies a secondary position and network coordination remains incipient.

VI. Coordination mechanisms in the architecture of governance

The following chapter of the thesis deals systematically with the three mechanisms, starting from the correspondence between each paradigm and its coordination instrument.

The hierarchical mechanism entails a clear division of tasks, with well-defined competences for each structure, and a formal system of subordination that establishes the paths of authority and of internal cooperation (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017, p. 72). Civil servants hold a status of their own, and the professional trajectory is stable and predictable, which confers continuity on public policies regardless of political change. Coordination is achieved through the exercise of authority, the measures being directed through administrative decisions, norms and official plans that reduce uncertainty and the margin of interpretation (Bouckaert et al., 2016, p. 35). The mechanism is suited to contexts that require institutional stability, predictability, objectivity and protection against political interference, but proves less appropriate where rapid reactions, flexibility and innovation are needed, since it favors compliance and standardized thinking. Centralized structures are considered slow and rigid in relation to complex problems (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017, p. 71), while the efficiency of the administration is affected by the monopolistic organization of service delivery (Bouckaert, 2022, pp. 5–6).

The market mechanism operates on the basis of competitive interactions, negotiations and agreements, the alignment of activities being achieved through prices, incentives and contracts, while coordination results from the mutual adjustments and concessions accepted by actors who pursue their own interests (Bouckaert et al., 2016, pp. 35–43). State control is limited, often indirect or ex-post, and by delegating as many tasks as possible the state relinquishes its position as direct provider of public services (Bouckaert, 2022, p. 2). The major difficulty stems from the incomplete compatibility between market logic and the way in which governmental decisions are taken. Where activities involve public responsibilities, asymmetrical relations and objectives that cannot be translated into economic language, incentives do not arise spontaneously but must be configured and steered by a central authority (Bouckaert et al., 2016, p. 41; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017, pp. 99–100). To this are added the priority orientation towards efficiency, which may conflict with equity, universal access or the protection of vulnerable groups, the externalization of costs onto persons who do not take part in the transaction, and the tolerance of power imbalances. A further structural limit derives from the non-profit-making character of many

public services, where the objective is not profit but the satisfaction of collective needs whose benefits are difficult to monetize.

The network-type mechanism is grounded in cooperation, solidarity, shared values and trust (Bouckaert et al., 2016, pp. 35–44; Victor et al., 2017, pp. 92–95), coordination being horizontal and not based on roles of formal authority (Bouckaert et al., 2016, pp. 44–45). The absence of formal relations of super- and subordination means that state actors cannot count on a decisive influence deriving from their institutional position (O'Toole, 1997, p. 44; Meier & O'Toole, 2006, p. 15), although some networks display an order in which one actor, most often a state actor, exercises the role of *de facto* leader (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017, p. 20). The life cycle of a network passes through four stages: formation, through the joining of actors and the definition of the problem; stabilization, through the refinement of the definition and changes in membership; reutilization, through constant collaboration; and expansion, through the consolidation of relations and the redefinition of the network's purpose (Mandell & Keast, 2007, apud Ulibarri et al., 2020, p. 618). Internal relations are, in their elementary form, dyadic, and those established with central actors, who hold more power, are more useful than those with peripheral actors (Brass, 2022, pp. 227–229). Among the factors of success identified are the constant rejuvenation of the network through the introduction of new actors, which generates creativity and, implicitly, innovative solutions (Soda et al., 2021, p. 36), as well as self-monitoring of one's own behavior (Brass, 2022, p. 228). The documented benefits include innovation in the delivery of public services, the strengthening of the sense that values are shared, the sharing and diversification of resources and the increased legitimacy of the solution adopted. The criticisms concern, on the one hand, the treatment of networks in a register that is metaphorical rather than empirical, with a high volume of descriptive or ethnographic studies in the early phase (Jones et al., 1997, p. 913; Victor et al., 2017, p. 96), and, on the other hand, the erroneous grouping under the umbrella of the term of heterogeneous realities, such as the interpersonal relations among civil servants or lobbying coalitions (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017, pp. 21–22). The causes of failure identified in the literature comprise the lack of innovative thinking on the part of state actors, the limited involvement of members, personal agendas, unrealistic expectations, the deficit of trust and the imbalance of information and expertise.

A distinct subchapter (IV.3.1) is devoted to social network analysis as a research instrument. It allows, first of all, the graphical representation of the actors and of their

interactions, the use of geometric shapes, colors and sizes making it possible to capture certain relational properties and to introduce algorithms into the analysis (Borgatti et al., 2022, p. 42). The vocabulary of the field was constituted by changing the meaning of certain common terms, the “point” designating, for example, the individual, the “line” the connection, and the “node” the individuals between whom links exist (Scott, 2012, p. 8). The mathematical description of the network rests on vertices and edges, the latter being either directional or non-directional (Borgatti et al., 2022, p. 27), while the data are organized in an adjacency matrix, which indicates the existence or absence of a connection between two entities and makes it possible to identify the overall configuration, including the indirect paths (Brass, 2022, p. 227).

Centrality has imposed itself as the dominant element of the analysis, being used both at the level of the actor and at that of the network. At the individual level, it indicates the relative strength of an actor by reference to the links held (Victor et al., 2017, p. 149), the actor with the maximum level being connected to all the others (Miller & Yang, 2008, pp. 769–770). At network level, the measure allows classification into centralized networks, in which a few actors hold degrees superior to the rest, and decentralized networks, with approximately equal degrees. The three established perspectives are degree centrality, betweenness centrality and closeness centrality (Miller & Yang, 2008, p. 768; Sandström & Carlsson, 2008, p. 510; Brass, 2022, p. 228).

Degree centrality is calculated by counting the direct links (Miller & Yang, 2008, p. 770; Liu et al., 2017, p. 3; Borgatti et al., 2022, p. 171) and can also be interpreted as an index of exposure, an actor with many links being more exposed to what circulates within the network (Borgatti et al., 2022, pp. 170–172).

Betweenness centrality evaluates the frequency with which a node lies on the shortest path between other actors (Miller & Yang, 2008, p. 774; Borgatti et al., 2022, p. 182). Actors with high values can establish bridges between unconnected alters and control the informational flow, including by blocking the dissemination of an idea (Brandes et al., 2016, p. 154; Liu et al., 2017, p. 3). Closeness centrality, a concept introduced by Freeman in 1979, represents the sum of all the geodesic paths from one actor to all the others (Brass et al., 1998, p. 21; Miller & Yang, 2008, p. 772; Borgatti et al., 2022, p. 178). A lower value indicates a more central position and, implicitly, the rapid receipt of complete information (Borgatti et al., 2022, p. 180).

VII. The consolidation of the network-type mechanism in Romania

The empirical core of the thesis moves the analysis to the national level.

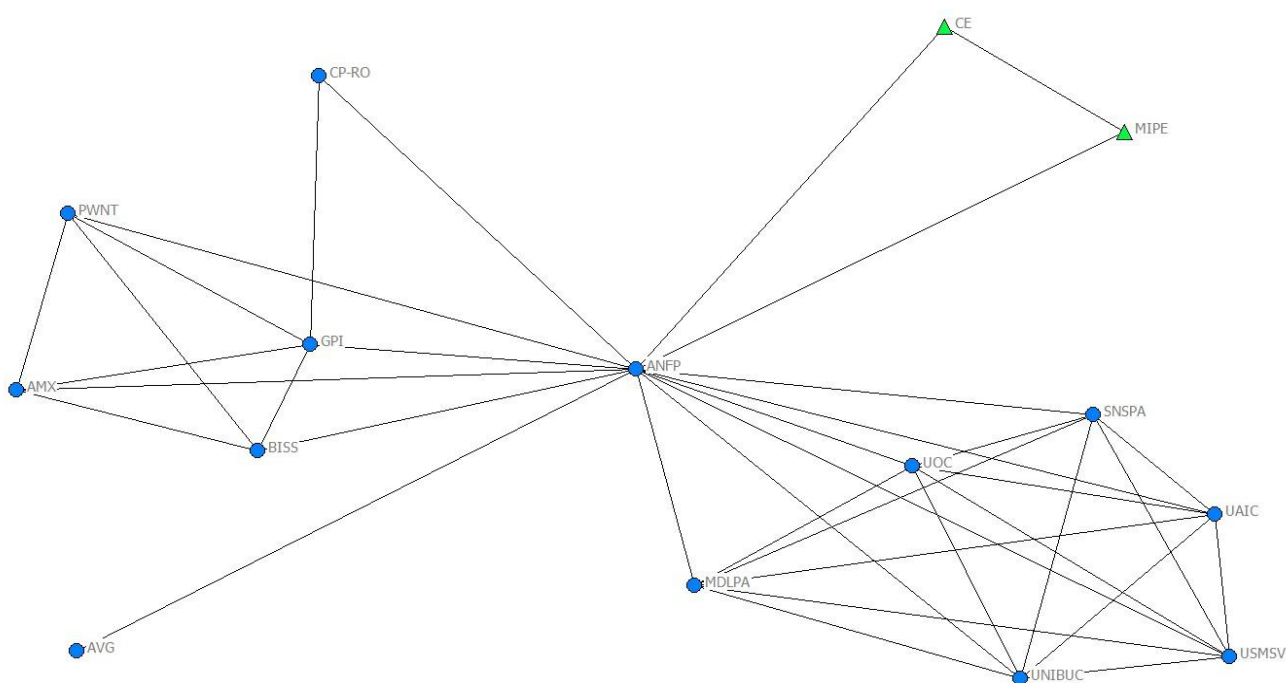
The first stage examines the main institutional processes through which organizations outside the public sector can intervene in public decisions in Romania: the legislative process, the drafting and implementation of public policies, public-private partnership, public procurement procedures and the mechanism of public consultations. The relevance of this undertaking is twofold, relating both to the observation of the actual effects of the mixed managerial paradigm identified and to the need to understand the existing logic before formulating any proposal for consolidation. The documentary analysis is complemented by the legislative analysis of the normative acts governing the relations between state and non-state actors, aiming to identify the legal conditions of participation, the limitations and the effective space for intervention.

In addition, the research proposes an instrument of its own for evaluating the effectiveness of participation, built on three criteria applicable to all the processes analyzed, each scored on a scale from 1 to 3. The first criterion, decisional influence, is assessed through three indicators: the right to formulate proposals, the binding or non-binding character of their consideration, and the possibility of participating in the implementation stage. The second, procedural accessibility is evaluated through the barriers generated by the complexity of the normative framework and through the associated administrative or economic costs. The third, the benefits of participation, is assessed through direct economic advantages and through the possibility of pursuing one's own interests. The scores are aggregated by arithmetic mean, and their interpretation is carried out on intervals: values between 1 and 1.74 indicate a low level of effectiveness, those between 1.75 and 2.49 a moderate level, and those between 2.50 and 3 a high level. The results show that, although formal mechanisms of participation exist, they do not consistently ensure real influence over decisions. Participation often remains consultative, and the contributions of non-state actors are not systematically integrated into the final outcome. Involvement is fragmented and unevenly distributed, non-state actors being more present in the implementation phase, where their contribution is stimulated by instruments such as public procurement, while having an almost non-existent role in defining the strategic or normative framework. The overall mean obtained is approximately 1.80, a value situated at the beginning

of the interval of moderate effectiveness, which indicates the existence of operational mechanisms, accompanied by the need to consolidate their practical application.

The second stage focuses the analysis on the operationalization of the national competition for recruitment into the civil service, presented first in terms of the context of its emergence, its evolution, its objectives and its main activities, on the basis of official public documents. The relational structure was built starting from the answers to the first question of the interview guide and formalized in UCINET 6, both for the initial configuration, corresponding to the pilot project, and for the extended form, the network not having been static throughout the project. The following figure presents the graphical representation of the network of the extended national competition.

Graphical representation of the network of the extended national competition



Source: The author, by means of UCINET 6 software

The comparative analysis of the two stages indicates a coherent evolution of the structure, but not in the direction of a more balanced distribution of roles. Although the project displays elements specific to the network mechanism, such as collaboration between organizations and the existence of direct links between actors from different sectors, the empirical structure reveals a strongly centralized form of coordination. The National Agency of Civil Servants

simultaneously accumulates the largest number of direct connections, the greatest structural closeness and the highest level of betweenness, and in the extended stage these characteristics are not merely maintained but accentuated. The finding is explicable through the fact that the institution initiated the reform and was responsible for translating it into practice, its position being consolidated by elements of formal coordination such as the drafting of projects with European funding, the co-optation of the majority of private actors through the public procurement procedure and the definition of roles through the tender documentation and the subsequent contracts. The stability of its position across all three centrality measures indicates an institutionalized character of its role as governance nucleus, while the increase in the level of centralization, accompanied by the almost complete disappearance of secondary brokers, shows the reduction of lateral links and the consolidation of dependence on the central actor, with the reinforcement of the network's unicentricity.

The data obtained made it possible to apply the conceptual scheme built on the basis of the specialized literature and presented in the methodological chapter.

Interdependence is assessed as partially present. Real exchanges of resources, information and expertise were identified, the agency depending to a certain extent on the technical providers for the development of the platform, and the latter on the institutional clarifications received, just as the project depends on academia for the drafting and validation of the content of the tests, without a symmetrical dependence of academia being documentable. The concentration of relations around the central node means, however, that access to resources, information and decision-making is filtered, which reduces reciprocity and brings the configuration closer to the logic of other collaborative arrangements, such as contracting through public procurement or public-private partnership.

Collaboration is assessed as present, being supported by the high frequency of the interactions, with almost weekly meetings and constant formal and informal communication. The intensity resulted from the need to ensure coherence between the technical, administrative and academic components, especially in the stages of development and testing of the platform, while the participants qualified as good practices the regular organization of meetings, the clarification of responsibilities and the use of informal communication as a supplement to the official channels.

Co-decision is not found. Although some decisions were discussed in joint meetings and certain technical solutions resulted from consensus, the general framework of the decisions was established by the agency, through the tender specifications and through its role as the authority responsible for implementing the reform. A significant part of the decisions was communicated directly or validated subsequently to preliminary discussions. Private actors decided more actively only within the technical sphere of their own activities, while academia benefited from autonomy within its own subgroup, without participating in the overall decisions, which configures a segmented rather than a collective decision-making mechanism.

Trust is partially present, built gradually on the direct experience of collaboration, on demonstrated competence and on the observance of obligations, having a relational character that differs from one partner to another. The emergence of additional protection mechanisms, such as confidentiality agreements, as well as the difficulties encountered in activities lacking contractual support, such as the variable involvement of academia, show that the relations were not founded exclusively on trust.

Autonomy is likewise partially present. The main parameters, the objectives and the rules of operation were defined beforehand through the tender documentation and through the contracts concluded.

Four findings emerge from the case study. First, the involvement of non-state actors is tangible, but placed within a framework defined and controlled by the state actor. Their participation is not accompanied by a balanced distribution of power.

Second, the relational structure highlights the constant concentration of connections, of brokerage and of access to information around the state actor, which is not merely the initiator of the project but also the structural nucleus of the entire arrangement.

Third, the operating logic is predominantly one of role and task, the interactions being determined by obligations assumed through tender specifications and contracts, while the elements associated with collaborative governance appear within an already established formal framework.

Fourth, trust exists, but is conditioned by demonstrated competence and by compliance with procedures. It does not substitute for formal control and does not generate an appetite for risk. The assumption of the latter remains limited to minor elements, which indicates a prudent

organizational culture, explicable through the concerns regarding accountability in the public sector and through the constraints of external funding.

The third stage (subchapter V.3) proposes a staged pathway for consolidating network-type mechanisms in Romania, structured on relative temporal benchmarks. Moment T0 groups the preconditions:

- increasing the predictability of the legislative process by returning to the exceptional character of Government emergency ordinances;
- strengthening the evidence-based foundation of regulation;
- adopting a law on interest representation and lobbying activity;
- replacing Government Decision no. 775/2005 on the procedures for the drafting, monitoring and evaluation of public policies;
- updating Law no. 52/2003 on decisional transparency.

These measures do not target networks directly, but they build the infrastructure of trust and transparency without which inter-organizational collaboration cannot be sustainable.

Moment T1 entails the professionalization of civil servants through training in the field of collaborative governance, with an emphasis on competences in negotiation, facilitation and inter-organizational work.

Moment T2 targets the internal dynamics of networks, through their constitution only around complex problems, the alignment of members and the mobilization of resources, as well as through non-hierarchical coordination, with the distribution of roles, the avoidance of an excessive concentration of power, the use of the unanimity rule for major decisions and the establishment of mechanisms for joint learning and periodic evaluation.

Each measure is associated with the institutional entity responsible and with the implementation instrument, distinguished according to the legislative, procedural or mixed nature of the intervention.

VIII. The conclusions of the research

With reference to the first secondary question, the analysis made it possible to outline a coherent set of defining features. The network-type mechanism emerges as a response to the

limits of the classical models, in contexts of high complexity, interdependence and institutional pluralism, without, however, replacing the other mechanisms, with which it can coexist. Its first characteristic is the interdependence of the actors, which is not formally imposed but derives from the nature of the problems addressed. On this basis, collaboration becomes a fundamental principle, entailing frequent interactions and contributions to the formulation of solutions. Co-decision constitutes a third feature, decisions resulting from negotiation and mutual adjustment, with equal input from the members. Trust is essential, since in its absence coordination costs rise and exchanges become limited. It is built gradually, through repeated interactions and the observance of commitments. Autonomy closes the set of characteristics. Members retain their organizational identity and their own decision-making capacity, while coordination is redefined as predominantly horizontal. Even when a public actor occupies a central position, it acts through facilitation and mediation, and leadership within the network has a relational character.

Corroborating these findings with the analysis in the chapter devoted to governance validates the first hypothesis. Collaboration represents a broader framework, which can take different forms, while the network-type mechanism appears only when it is accompanied simultaneously by interdependence, autonomy, collaboration, trust and co-decision. In the absence of these elements, collaboration remains close to contractual coordination, to public-private partnership or to other arrangements, which confirms that collaborative governance does not automatically generate network-type configurations, but functions as a general and flexible framework whose concrete form depends on the institutional context.

With reference to the second research question, the case study presents a mixed picture. Collaboration is present, interdependence, trust and autonomy are manifested only partially, while equal participation in decision-making is largely absent. The case analyzed cannot be qualified as a complete example of network coordination, but neither as a situation in which these characteristics are absent, falling rather within an intermediate category. This finding leads directly to the validation of the second hypothesis. Collaboration exists and functions at the operational level, but it unfolds within a framework strictly defined and controlled by the central state actor.

As regards the third secondary question, the limits identified are grouped on two levels. The first relates to the general organization of the involvement of non-state actors. More precisely, participation is predominantly consultative, contributions are not systematically

integrated, and involvement is fragmented and asymmetrical across the various stages, which restricts the possibility of developing network-type relations. The second level results from the case study. The strongly centralized structure, the predominantly contractual character of the interactions and the decision-making process remain under the control of the state actor. The conditions for consolidation presuppose a clear and stable normative framework, the development of the administrative competences specific to collaboration and the establishment of rules for the functioning of networks, in accordance with the staged pathway proposed. This conclusion confirms hypothesis number three, since the development of network coordination appears to be conditioned both by an adequate institutional framework and by an effective redistribution of resources and power.

Bringing these answers together, the research concludes that the coordination mechanisms of Romanian public administration can be characterized as network-type only to a minimal extent. There are elements indicating openness towards collaboration, such as the frequent interactions and the involvement of organizations from outside the public sector, but they are not sufficient to support the existence of a network model in the proper sense. Coordination remains dominated by hierarchical logic, and collaboration functions within a framework controlled by a central public actor, without a balanced distribution of decision-making and power. As regards the conditions, the transition towards authentic network coordination depends on a broad process, which presupposes clearer rules, capable of supporting real participation, the development of the administrative competences required for collaboration and, above all, a balanced sharing of resources and influence. In the absence of these elements, collaboration will continue to exist, but it will remain dependent on the pre-existing hierarchical structures.

The first specific objective was attained through documentary analysis and through the systematic comparison of collaborative governance with network governance, synthesized in subchapter IV.3.2. The second specific objective was accomplished in Chapter IV, through the comparison of the market, hierarchy and network mechanisms in relation to the associated managerial paradigms, an undertaking which highlighted that the mechanisms are selected according to the vision of the role of the state. The third specific objective was accomplished through the construction of the grid of indicators and through its empirical testing on the case study. The fourth specific objective took concrete form in the staged model of consolidation.

Through the integration of these results, the general objective can be considered attained. The conceptual analysis provided the framework for understanding and delimitation, while the empirical testing highlighted the difference between formal collaboration and authentic network coordination.

IX. The scientific contributions of the research

The first contribution consists in the conceptual clarification of the relationship between collaborative governance and network coordination, achieved by integrating the classical literature with recent perspectives and by adapting them to the context of Romanian public administration. The analysis shows that the two notions, although frequently used imprecisely, belong to distinct analytical levels: collaborative governance is a model for organizing the decision-making process, characterized by deliberation, co-production and the involvement of non-state actors, whereas the network-type mechanism is a specific mode of coordination, grounded in interdependence and non-hierarchical relations.

The second contribution is the operational analytical framework constructed and proposed for the evaluation of network coordination mechanisms. Through the empirical assessment of a number of essential dimensions, the differentiation between hierarchical, contractual and network coordination can be carried out with an increased degree of objectivity.

X. The limits of the research and future directions

The single-case character of the analysis offers a detailed perspective on a concrete process, but does not allow the generalization of the conclusions to the whole of the Romanian administrative system. The aim pursued was to apply the conceptual framework derived from the literature to an example of reform carried out, at first sight, in network form. From this limitation derives a first direction for continuation: the identification and analysis of other national initiatives involving forms of inter-organizational coordination, through similar methods, namely semi-structured interviews and social network analysis. Such an extension would allow the comparison of several cases and would contribute to establishing the state of affairs regarding network coordination in Romania, which remains a knowledge deficit. A second direction

concerns the extension of the research to other states in Central and Eastern Europe, the comparison of the coordination frameworks and structures being able to lead to the identification of features common to the region or, on the contrary, of relevant differences.