THE NATIONAL COMPETITION FOR FILLING CIVIL SERVICE VACANCIES:A JOURNEY INTO THE NEW PARADIGM OF CIVIL SERVANTS' RECRUITMENT

VĂDUVA Florin
The National University of Political Science and Public Administration
Bucharest, Romania
florin.vaduva.22@drd.snspa.ro

Abstract: Over time, Romania's civil servant recruitment process has faced various challenges, highlighting the need for reform. While the classic recruitment model upheld principles like transparency and meritocracy, it encountered several obstacles, such as bureaucratic inefficiencies and a focus on rote memorization rather than practical competencies. In response to these issues, the National Agency of Civil Servants (NACS) introduced a new model of recruitment aiming at shifting the focus to competency-based assessments and digitalization. This article explores the initial outcomes of this new model by gathering insights from NACS personnel and former candidates. Through a series of structured interviews, these groups shared their perspectives on the strengths and areas for improvement in the new recruitment model. The results reveal notable advancements while also pinpointing opportunities for further enhancement.
Keywords: Civil service, recruitment, reform.

Introduction

The quality of public services has a profound impact on our private lives, often in ways we may not readily recognize. From accessing quality education to benefiting from reliable infrastructure, or even simply feeling secure in our communities, the efficiency and effectiveness of public administration shape the opportunities available to us and the decisions we make daily. For example, the availability of a high performing healthcare system influences not just our health but also the economy, as people tend to make life choices like where to live and work based on the quality of available services. Similarly, the efficiency of local governance impacts whether businesses choose to invest in or withdraw from certain regions. As Otto von Bismarck once said, "With bad laws and good civil servants it's still possible to govern. But with bad civil servants even the best laws can't help", emphasizing the importance of capable individuals serving within public institutions. This connection between public services and civil servants highlights why the recruitment process is one of the most critical aspects of ensuring a well-functioning public sector.

In Romania, the recruitment of civil servants is conducted through open competitions, a process designed to guarantee transparency, competitiveness, fairness, and integrity. However, both Romanian citizens and government officials, along with the European Union and the World Bank, among others, have identified significant shortcomings that must be addressed. For instance, while the competitive nature of these exams provides certain assurances, the overemphasis on rote memorization of legislative texts over actual competencies has drawn criticism. In an effort to address these concerns, the National Agency of Civil Servants (NACS) introduced a new recruitment model in 2023. This

model, structured in two stages, represents a shift from traditional testing methods focused on memorization to a more competency-based assessment process, aimed at better identifying and selecting candidates suited for the demands of modern public service.

The goal of this article is to explore the perceptions of primary participants—namely, successful and unsuccessful candidates as well as NACS personnel directly involved in organizing the national competition—regarding the new recruitment model. Understanding these perspectives is helpful for identifying areas of improvement in upcoming rounds, especially in terms of organization, promotion and optimization of the competition's IT platform.

To gather these insights, a qualitative research approach was employed, centred on in-depth interviews. The interviewees included three civil servants from NACS, specifically from the Directorate for Civil Service Reform Operationalization, tasked with implementing this new recruitment model, as well as four candidates who participated in the national competition. Of these candidates, two were admitted and currently hold civil service positions, while the other two were not successful. Each group was asked a tailored set of questions: NACS employees focused on evaluating the organization and execution of the competition, while former candidates shared their experiences and views on the outcomes of the process. At the time of writing, several rounds of recruitment under the new model have taken place, targeting various levels of public service roles, including debutants (twice), assistants, directors, deputy directors, as well as high civil servants.

The state of play and the call for innovation in the recruitment of civil servants

The recruitment procedure in the civil service of Romania, applied for all categories of civil service positions until the introduction of the national competition and thereafter applicable only for certain categories (hereafter referred to as the classic recruitment procedure) was designed to ensure the hiring of the most suitable candidates, in accordance with principles such as meritocracy and transparency. In this sense, the filling of vacancies within public institutions was realized through a contest, announced and advertised through open channels of communication so that the information could reach any interested person. Any individual was allowed to apply, provided that he or she met the conditions of employment for the position to which they applied, conditions that are clearly communicated once the announcement of the contest is published. Additionally, given the public nature of the competition, this method allowed a certain degree of public scrutiny, while the verification of test results by specialists provided some assurance that one individual was correctly chosen over another (Carausan, 2012).

The classic recruitment procedure involves a series of formalities to be met by both the organizing public institution as well as the candidates. First of all, the public institution has to notify the National Agency of Civil Servants (NACS), the governmental organization responsible for civil service and civil servant management, prior to the publication of the competition announcement regarding its desire to fill a vacancy (Săvulescu, 2023). This announcement shall be posted both on NACS' website and the public institution' website (i.e. where the vacancy to be filled is located), at least 30 days before its deployment (date of the written exam) or exceptionally 15 days if the position is only temporarily vacant and is located at the executive level (G.E.O. no. 57/2019 on the Administrative Code; Săvulescu, 2023). According to existing legislation (Annex no. 10 of G.E.O. no. 57/2019), the same announcement shall include information related to the identification of the public

organization, identification of the position (i.e. title, professional grade and class, structure), date and time of testing, conditions for participation, registration period, bibliography and lastly the attributions of the position. Furthermore, a competition selection committee and a committee for settling possible appeals are formed. Generally, these will be made up of civil servants from within the public institution in question, but there may also be situations in which a NACS or prefect's institution official is assigned within these committees, e.g. for managerial positions (G.E.O. no. 57/2019).

In the classic recruitment procedure, candidates are required to physically assemble and submit their dossiers. In other words, the person wishing to undergo the examination will first check the competition announcement for the time period allocated for dossier assembling and submission, then make copies of each required document, place them in a physical file and proceed to the public institution office where the vacancy exists. In addition to these copies, the candidate will also have the original documents with him/her for comparison. Alternatively, he/she can directly present certified copies, thus avoiding the need of bringing the original documents. Once there, he/she will be greeted by the secretary of the competition selection committee, who will make a written record of the documents enclosed and, where appropriate, will ask the candidate to write the phrase "in conformity with the original" on certain copies.

Once the deadline for submitting dossiers has closed, the competition selection committee checks the content of the files to ensure that candidates fulfil all the conditions stipulated in the competition announcement. Subsequently, candidates whose dossiers are complete will be admitted and those with incomplete dossiers will be rejected. If a candidate considers that he/she has been wrongly assessed, he/she may lodge an appeal, which will be dealt with by the appeals committee. Once they have passed this stage, candidates may take part in the actual examination, which consists of a written exam based on the bibliography mentioned in the competition announcement, an interview and, where appropriate, an additional exam.

If an additional exam has been included, it will be taken first and only candidates who pass it may proceed to the written one. The interview will be attended only by those who have passed the written exam. During the testing procedure, dissatisfied candidates may lodge appeals which will be either admitted or rejected. In the end, the candidate with the highest score will be appointed (G.E.O. no. 57/2019).

While the classic recruitment procedure does help to ensure a body of professional civil servants, it is not without its weaknesses. Examining the manner in which human resource management (HRM) is carried out in the public sector, both national and international organizations, as well as experts from academia have pointed out various structural problems that lead to failure in fully achieving the government's mission in this particular area (Word Bank, 2020; NACS, 2022; 2023a; 2024a; The Romanian Government, 2023; Transparency International Romania, 2023; Săvulescu, 2023). Among them, the most urgent and impactful ones include:

the exams are designed in such a way that too much emphasis is placed upon memorizing and duplicating legislative texts and too little on assessing the actual competences of an individual;

the classic recruitment procedure implies a lot of human involvement, which sometimes leads to errors or preferential treatment;

politicization of public service and the existence of clientelist relationships;

lack of a unitary approach to HRM / fragmentation of HRM practices;
insufficient HR strategic planning;
ineffective forms of communication and advertising regarding competitions to fill civil service positions;
a constant ageing trend in the civil service with an average age of 49 in 2023;
job stability as the main factor of attraction rather than the opportunity to serve society;
the rather negative view of citizens towards the state in general and the recruitment of civil servants in particular;
the mandate and technical capacity of NACS needs to be clarified and improved.
In light of these structural issues, it has become clear that the classic recruitment procedure requires a major reform. To address these shortcomings and to ensure the necessary competencies in carrying out activities of general interest, a new model known as the National Competition for filling civil service vacancies was introduced in 2023.

The national competition for filling public service vacancies
The concept for this new recruitment model originated from a key deliverable of the World Bank, provided to Romanian authorities under the SIPOCA 136 project. This project aimed at developing an integrated strategic human resource management system capable of supporting a modern, high-performing, inclusive, and innovative public administration (NACS, N/A). One of the specific objectives of the project was to create a competency framework aligned with an objective and inclusive system for recruitment and performance assessment, based on performance indicators and salary policies within the public administration (NACS, N/A). The project beneficiary was the General Secretariat of the Romanian Government, in partnership with NACS and the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity. Implemented between November 2017 and September 2022, it was co-financed by the European Social Fund through the Administrative Capacity Operational Program 2014-2020 (NACS, N/A)
The deliverable (World Bank, 2020) outlines that: *„The new model for the central public administration will be structured in two main stages: (I) a national competition, as the first step, which leads to the creation of a pool of preselected candidates and (II) an on-the-job competition, organized by each public institution. (...) The national competition model is based on: a strategic human resource planning process, grounded in the necessary competencies; a clear sequence of steps, along with a solid distribution of roles and responsibilities for the relevant actors involved; an efficient publicity process that reaches the target audience; a streamlined, digitalized application phase that simplifies eligibility verification; transparent, merit-based testing focused on competencies; and a rigorous audit trail embedded in the IT tools intended for use.”*
Today, these elements constitute the foundation of the national competition model. At the same time, the deliverable addresses various aspects, ranging from workforce planning to both preliminary and advanced testing; from the introduction of psychometric assessments (verbal, numerical, and abstract reasoning) to the operationalization of testing and assessment centres (World Bank, 2020). Moreover, some features of the national competition such as the existence of two stages, the numerical, abstract and verbal reasoning, the placement of successful candidates in a pool of eligible individuals for selection, also point out to the EPSO recruitment procedure used be certain EU institutions, which seems to be one of the sources of inspiration for the new recruitment model.

The first mention of the national competition in the Romanian legislation occurred in 2019, with the adoption of the first-ever Administrative Code (through G.E.O. no 57/2019), which merged and supplemented the legislation in the field of civil service and civil servant. In this initial version of the Code, article 467 (3) c), stipulated that the competition for filling of state (central level) and territorial (county level) civil positions, except for those under special statutes, has two stages, namely the recruitment stage and the selection stage (G.E.O. no 57/20219). Together these two stages form the new civil service recruitment model. However, another stipulation of the Code, namely article 597 (1) d) stated that the above-mentioned provisions shall enter into force on January 1, 2022 (G.E.O. no 57/2019). Despite the fact that the period between the first reference and the date on which it was foreseen to enter into force seemed to be rather generous, the Romanian Government decided in 2021 (two days before January 1, 2022, to be precise) to amend the deadline, so that the two stages would be applicable starting September 30, 2023 (G.E.O. no 138/2021).

Another key legislative moment was marked by the adoption of Government Emergency Ordinance no. 191/2022, which introduced Annexes 8 and 9 to the Administrative Code. The new recruitment model is intended, among other things, to ensure the shift from the memorization testing paradigm to one in which the person's competences are being assessed. But how can something that is not defined be tested? Thus, the aforementioned Annex no. 8 establishes the framework of general and specific competences, i.e. it defines those competences that any individual who wants to hold a civil service position must have. According to this normative act (Annex 8 to G.E.O. no 57/2019), there are five categories of general competences, as shown in figure no. 1.

Figure 1. Categories of competences

Competence category	Competences
Personal efficiency	Problem solving and decision making
	Initiative
	Planning and organization
Interpersonal efficiency	Communication
	Teamwork
Social responsibility	Citizen orientation
	Integrity
Managerial competences	Performance management
	Team development
Leadership	Generating commitment
	Promoting innovation and initiating change

(Source: the author, based on the provisions of articles 8-9 of Annex no. 8 of the Administrative Code)

Additionally, the same normative act (Annex 8 to G.E.O. no 57/2019) establishes: descriptors and indicators for each general competence; that managerial competences are assessed only for managerial civil positions and those in the category of high civil servants; that leadership competences are assessed only for certain categories of managerial civil positions such as general director, deputy general director, director, deputy director, executive director, deputy executive director, as well as high civil servants; that specific competences are established at the level of each public institution, in compliance with the procedure set out in Annex no. 8.

In addition to the competences framework, G.E.O. no. 191/2022 also introduced Annex no. 9 to the Administrative Code, which sets out the organization and execution of the pilot-project for the national competition. The pilot-project was dedicated only to debutants and high civil servants, i.e. the two ends of the civil service spectrum. This annex provides in detail information related (but not limited) to: the method used by public institutions to forecast their personal needs (debutants and high civil servants), as well as the way in which NACS is informed; the content and the publishing space for the competition announcement of the pilot-project; rules regarding the formation of competition recruitment committees and the committees for settling any eventual appeals, as well as their duties; the specific tests for each stage and the manner to conducted them; rules on filling the positions reported by public institutions in the pilot-project; the manner in which interested individuals access the competition IT platform, create their account, build their dossier, apply for the competition, access practice questions and choose their testing centre; how the eligibility of candidates is verified; marking the exams, settling appeals, publishing the results and managing the group of admitted candidates; organization and conduct of the selection stage (on-the-job competition); audio-video recording of testing; appointment of civil servants.

All these aspects were taken into account during the actual implementation of the pilot-project, in the spring of 2023. Through the European-funded project SIPOCA 870, NACS inaugurated the new model of recruitment in the civil service, based on the introduction of two stages (recruitment and selection); on the launching of an IT platform where interested persons could submit their digital dossier; respectively on the first-ever testing of cognitive aptitude and general competencies defined in Annex no. 8 of the Administrative Code (in addition to testing knowledge in the field of public administration, equal opportunities between men and women, non-discriminatory treatment, digital competences and, only for high civil servants, communication skills in an internationally spoken language). Following the recruitment stage of the pilot-project, a total of 191 debutants and 21 high civil servants were admitted (NACS, 2023b). They did not automatically become civil servants but earned the right to participate for a period of three years in the selection stage, i.e. to participate to on-the-job competitions organized by the public institutions holding vacancies, a right that those who did not go through this procedure or who were rejected do not have.

The main advantage of piloting a project is to identify what is working well and what needs to be improved. And in order to avoid tunnel vision, NACS decided on commissioning an ex-post analysis of the pilot-project. Accordingly, Romania's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) included milestone 416, which called for the ex-post analysis of the national (pilot) competition to be carried out by the second quarter of 2023 (Council of the European Union, 2021). Benefiting from European funding, NACS co-opted Transparency International Romania through a public procurement procedure in order to conduct the ex-post analysis. Among the main findings of the analysis, the following can be listed (Transparency International Romania, 2023):

The pilot-project met to a high extent the executive staffing needs of public institutions and to a partial extent the staffing needs of high civil servants (due to the reluctance of public institutions to communicate their staffing needs for this category and due to the practice of filling positions through temporary appointments rather than through competitions).

The pilot-project addresses the levers, not the causes of the politicization of public administration (at senior management and high civil service level) and although it leads to increased professionalism, performance and integrity, the sustainability of the project depends on maintaining political will at high level in the medium and long term.

49% of the potential candidates surveyed by Transparency International Romania consider that the pilot was organized well or very well, while the actual candidates (80% of them) were generally very pleased with the project organization and transparency (with one exception related to the usefulness of training exercises).

The access to some of the information available in the competition IT platform needs to be rethink and better presented to members of the competition and appeals committees because it did not provide sufficient transparency in certain processes.

The estimated cost of recruitment through the pilot-project is efficient compared to historical cost estimates in the context of digitization of the recruitment process.

The recruitment model achieved is based on merit, which confirms that the pilot-project achieved its objectives, but needs to be supplemented by other reforms in order to ensure significant results.

This feedback may prove valuable in designing the next rounds of the national competition. The latest key legislative milestone places us in the current paradigm. In December 2023, the Romanian Government adopted G.E.O. no. 121/2023 which introduced Annex no. 10 to the Administrative Code. It sets out the rules for the career development of civil servants and thus regulates the extended national competition (i.e. all rounds of the national competition organized after the pilot-project). Thus, the new recruitment model requires two stages: the recruitment stage (also known as the national competition, organized by NACS) in which general knowledge and competences are assessed and the selection stage (also known as the on-the-job competition, organized by the public institutions that have vacancies) in which specific knowledge and competences are assessed. The new recruitment model is being implemented gradually, first for the central public administration and then, starting in 2026, for the local public administration. Until then, the classic recruitment procedure still applies for local public administration. The financing of the national competition rounds until 2026 is also based on the National Recovery and Resilience Plan with Milestone 417 stipulating the organization of at least two national competitions for at least 3 categories/grades of civil service positions annually (Council of the European Union, 2021).

From a procedural point of view, the new model starts with the elaboration by NACS of a recruitment plan for civil servants and its approval by Government Decision. This plan foresees the staffing needs of central and territorial public institutions for a period of two years (Annex no. 10 of G.E.O. no. 57/2019). Concerned public institutions will determine their personnel requirements (i.e. the number of vacancies and projected vacancies they wish to fill through the national competition) and will send it to NACS to be centralized (Annex no. 10 of G.E.O. no. 57/2019). The legislation in force (Annex no. 10 of G.E.O. no. 57/2019) also stipulates that once communicated, civil service positions cannot be filled by other means, such as conversion to contractual-based positions or to positions of another professional class/grade; transfer, definitive relocation; nor can they be reduced (except through institutional reorganization by reducing the number of positions). Moreover, for the first rounds of the national competition, public institutions concerned had to ensure (even through transformation, if necessary) a minimum of 10% of positions in the category

of debutants and assistants, out of the total number of vacant public executive positions (Annex no. 10 of G.E.O. no. 57/2019). One can thus observe NACS' attempt to address on the one hand the criticism regarding the lack of strategic HRM planning, and on the other hand the aging trend of the civil servants body. Subsequently, the announcement on the organization of the recruitment stage of the National Competition will be published in the Official Journal of Romania and on NACS's website (NACS, 2024b).

NACS has also pursued the digitization of the recruitment process and introduced a competition IT platform, where almost all the processes related to recruitment take place. Thus, the first step for interested individuals is to access the aforementioned platform, to create an individual profile by uploading various documents (which can be permanently updated), to identify the national competition (in the „available competitions" section), to assemble their dossier (by filtering the documents already uploaded in the profile) and apply for the competition (Annex no. 10 of G.E.O. no. 57/2019). According to the same Annex, the submission of the electronic dossier must be done within 20 calendar days from the competition publication's date and must contain: the application form (available on the platform); a copy of the identity card; proof of name change, if applicable; copies of the educational degrees; proof of employment period (with focus on the field of studies); copy of the master's degree in public administration, management or other studies useful for a vacant position (requirement for civil service management positions and those in the category of high civil servants); proof of completion of the training course for high civil servants organized by the National Institute of Administration (only for positions in the category of high civil servants).

Following the expiration of the 20-day period, the dossiers will be examined, again via the IT platform, by an eligibility verification committee to ensure that candidates fulfil all the conditions stipulated in the competition announcement. These committees are composed of three members, two of which are from NACS, and one of which is appointed either from the Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration (NACS hierarchical superior institution) or from the public institution that has the highest number of public positions foreseen in the Recruitment Plan (Annex no. 10 of G.E.O. no. 57/2019). After the examination, the committee will decide on the rejection or admission of the applicants and the results will be published, with the possibility of lodging appeals by dissatisfied candidates through the IT platform (Annex no. 10 of G.E.O. no. 57/2019). The appeals are settled by a special committee set up for this purpose in the same manner as the eligibility verification one. Afterwards, successful candidates can choose the testing centre where they will take the next exam (there are 9 centres in 8 regions of Romania), namely the preliminary testing (NACS, 2024b).

Within the preliminary testing the following requirements shall be assessed (NACS, 2024b): general knowledge in the areas of respect for human dignity, protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, preventing and combating incitement to hatred and discrimination, equal opportunities and equal treatment; general knowledge of public administration; digital competencies; candidates' cognitive abilities; general knowledge of written communication skills in a foreign language widely used in the European institutions, namely English, French, Spanish or German (only for high civil servant).

According to law (Annex no. 10 of G.E.O. no. 57/2019), the questions from the first two above-mentioned categories are developed by NACS representatives, in partnership with the Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration and members of academia

(university professors from faculties specialized in public administration). For digital and foreign language proficiency, NACS purchases test sets validated by a public or private entity specialized in that respective field, either from Romania or abroad, or by an educational institution with a relevant department (Annex no. 10 of G.E.O. no. 57/2019). Lastly, the legislation (Annex no. 10 of G.E.O. no. 57/2019) stipulates that cognitive abilities are tested using instruments endorsed by the Romanian College of Psychologists. For each subject, the items are single-choice grid questions and are administered on a computer provided in the testing centre, within a maximum of three hours (NACS, 2024b). For the preliminary testing, there are also competition committees and appeals committees. Following the preliminary testing comes the advanced testing. This is aimed at identifying the presence (and level) of the general competences set out in Annex no. 8 of the Administrative Code. However, it should be mentioned that the manner of conducting the advanced testing differs according to the category of civil service. Thus, for executive positions and for those of head of service, director, deputy director, executive director and deputy executive director (who do not manage public institution), the advanced testing consists of a situational questionnaire administered after the preliminary testing (Annex no. 10 of G.E.O. no. 57/2019). However, for general directors, deputy general directors, executive directors, deputy executive directors (who manage public institutions) and for high civil servants, the advanced testing takes place at a later date, in an assessment center where only candidates who have passed the preliminary testing are present (Annex no. 10 of G.E.O. no. 57/2019). There, candidates go through a series of individual and group exercises, such as case study and role-play, being evaluated by a series of experts through direct observation of behavioural indicators that constitute general competencies (Annex no. 10 of G.E.O. no. 57/2019).

After the final results are published, NACS manages the pool of admitted candidates via the competition IT platform. For a period of three years, these candidates have the right to apply for the on-the-job competition, which constitutes the selection stage. At this stage, specific knowledge and competences are examined for each job. According to the legislation (G.E.O. no. 57/2019), individuals who are already civil servants may also participate in this stage, as long as they fulfil the conditions of employment and the position they currently occupy is either in the same category, class and professional grade as the position for which they are applying, or higher. Otherwise, the civil servant in question will have to participate in a special session of the national competition, in which only the advanced testing takes place (G.E.O. no. 57/2019). During the selection stage, selection and appeals committees will also be established, consisting of civil servants form within the public institution where the competition is held, and for high civil servants, of five persons appointed by the Prime Minister upon the proposal of the Minister in charge of public administration (Annex no. 10 of G.E.O. no. 57/2019). The announcement of the competition, the submission of dossiers and the eligibility verification will also be carried out on the competition IT platform. In terms of testing, the written exam and the interview are mandatory during the selection stage, while an additional exam, aimed at assessing specific competences is optional (Annex no. 10 of G.E.O. no. 57/2019). Once the competition is over, the candidate with the highest score can be appointed.

With the new recruitment model fully outlined, it is important to understand how the different parties involved perceive and respond to this reformed approach. Assessing these

perceptions helps ensure that the model allows for timely adjustments that enhance the system's long-term effectiveness and fosters public trust.

A perception on the conduct of the national competition
The first group interviewed consisted of NACS personnel directly involved in operationalizing the new recruitment model.
With reference to the main difficulties encountered in designing and implementing the reform, the three civil servants emphasized:
Adapting the existing legislative and administrative framework to fit the new requirements set by the reform, in the sense of replacing some traditional practices in the recruitment process, which everybody knew, with some modern ones. Thus, resistance to change emerged, both administratively and politically. Extensive discussions were needed in an attempt to both persuade and promote the advantages of the national competition among management and human resources personnel within public institutions.
Financial and personnel constraints. The significant scale of the reform entailed costs that NACS would not have been able to cover in the absence of European funding instruments. Nevertheless, considerable effort on the part of NACS personnel was required to ensure access to these financial instruments. At the same time, the team dealing with the reform was not particularly numerous, which meant that the personnel were overburdened.
When asked to explain why the national competition is a necessity, NACS interviewees referred to countering speculation about illicit civil service hiring procedures through decreasing the human factor parot, increasing transparency and fairness, but also through changing the way of examination (from memory-testing to competence assessment). Rejuvenating the administration, which is facing an ageing trend, by bringing in open-minded, flexible and result-oriented people, was also brought into the discussion.
In relation to the collaboration between NACS and various stakeholders involved in the national competition's implementation, several strengths and areas for improvement were identified. Overall, a common strength highlighted across responses was the collective effort and shared commitment among the involved parties. In particular, the active involvement of academia was seen as crucial, providing support without financial incentives and strengthening trust in the project despite financial constraints. The collaboration also bolstered the credibility of the initiative, especially with the involvement of entities like the Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration and the National Institute of Administration, which provided critical support during the process.
However, the communication between NACS and the private organization that was co-opted through a public procurement procedure could be improved. There was a recurring concern about their understanding and integration of the administrative system's unique constraints. Issues with communication and synchronization between teams were also noted, affecting the execution and consistency of the national competition's advertising campaigns. This points to a need for better coordination and clearer expectations from the outset.
In regard to the development and utility of the competition IT platform, respondents recognized its importance as a vital tool for modernizing the civil service recruitment. A common theme among the responses was the acknowledgment that the platform represents a significant step forward in increasing the efficiency, accessibility, and transparency of the recruitment process. Furthermore, respondents noted that the platform is proof that

public administration is opening up to digitalization, signalling an embrace of technological advancements as a means to improve public services. The platform also facilitates higher levels of transparency by reducing physical interactions between candidates and the competition committee, and by eliminating out-dated practices, such as the reliance on paper applications. It was also highlighted that predicting all the functionalities required was difficult at the outset, but the piloting of the project provided valuable insights into areas needing improvement. Respondents pointed out that the on-going technical assistance through 2026 offers the opportunity to refine and update the platform in response to practical experiences during each competition round. To ensure the platform's optimal performance, continuous monitoring and adjustments were deemed essential to address technical issues and enhance the user experience.

In terms of advertising campaigns for the national competition, respondents were satisfied with their extensive efforts to persuade individuals to take part in the new recruitment model. A key positive theme was the multi-channel approach employed in the campaigns, which involved both online and offline strategies. These included brochures, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn, television appearances, and participation in job fairs and university visits. Respondents noted that these efforts resulted in a significant number of candidates applying for the debutant and assistant positions, with over 1,000 applicants. Additionally, respondents underscored that the campaigns were well-structured. However, while the general sentiment was that the promotion campaigns were successful, some opportunities for improvement were noted. Specifically, tailoring the messaging to different audience segments was suggested as a way to enhance future efforts, ensuring that the right information reaches specific groups.

Lastly, interviewees were asked (regardless of their affiliation to NACS) how they envision further civil service reform. Lastly, the interviewees were asked about their personal vision (meaning not the institutional vision of NACS) on how they envision the civil service reform to continue. They stressed (I) extending the model to include the local public administration; (II) launching digital competence development activities among local public administration in order to have the prerequisites for a successful take-up of the new recruitment model; (III) organizing public consultation sessions to involve citizens more actively in the reform process and to ensure that the measures adopted respond to the real needs of the community.

The second group interviewed comprised former candidates in the national competition.

In the first part of the discussion, candidates were asked to assess the usefulness of the reformed recruitment model, which introduced a second stage and changed the testing criteria and methods. Both successful candidates strongly supported the new model, finding the focus on different competences across stages appropriate. They agreed that testing cognitive abilities, IT skills, foreign languages, and public administration knowledge covered the needs of future civil servants. They also emphasized that the reform makes the testing process more rigorous, with one of them believing that it provides reassurance about the qualifications of those who pass it. The unsuccessful candidates also acknowledged the model's relevance and offered suggestions. One attributed her failure to inadequate preparation, not to the process itself, and recommended adding graphical elements throughout all of the IT section (not only for certain questions). The other suggested displaying a timer consistently across all tests to help candidates manage time effectively (e.g. missing from the cognitive abilities examination).

Next, former candidates were asked to give their opinion on how the national competition was organized. All four candidates agreed that the organization of the national competition was strong, with clear and transparent communication. Two of them noted that the candidate's guide was particularly useful. One of the unsuccessful candidates described the organization as well-managed and ethical, with no negative aspects to highlight. The other unsuccessful candidate suggested shortening the response time for appeals, given that test re-evaluations are also conducted through the IT platform, as well as the organization of the competition twice a year for the same professional category.

With reference to the competition IT platform, 3 out of the 4 candidates were satisfied, saying that it is intuitive and that information is easy to find. The fourth candidate did not agree and was dissatisfied with the platform. She considers that the platform is not intuitive enough, and has security mechanisms and other fields that make the process cumbersome. Afterwards, candidates were asked what the national competition experience meant to them. All interviewees saw the competition as a valuable opportunity to showcase their skills in a competitive environment. One highlighted how the focus on meritocracy and competitiveness boosted their confidence in the fairness of the process. Another candidate viewed it as a significant step in personal development, pushing them beyond their comfort zone. Regarding the other two candidates, while the process was emotional, they valued the exposure to topics that later became relevant in their careers, whether in public or private sector.

When asked to evaluate the advertising campaigns for the national competition, successful candidates generally appreciated their effectiveness. They praised the campaigns on social media for being well-structured and helpful in guiding them through the procedure. One of them suggested that more webinars/face to face events should be held before each round, in order to clarify vague topics. Additionally, they proposed including testimonials from unsuccessful candidates too, in order to learn from their experice. In contrast, the unsuccessful candidates had more mixed feelings. One noted that while the information effectively circulated within university environments, broader outreach could be improved. The communication channels employed (e.g. Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn) were considered adequate. The second unsuccessful candidate felt that the campaign had little to no visibility, only finding out about the competition through university colleagues.

When asked how their perception of the civil service had changed after the competition, one successful candidate remarked that they realized the role of a public servant requires more than theoretical knowledge. It demands strong communication, organization, and resource management skills, along with a focus on citizens' needs. Another admitted candidate and one of the unsuccessful ones stated that their positive perceptions remained unchanged, while the other unsuccessful candidate noted that the experience highlighted the professionalism within the field, motivating them to try again in the future.

When asked about potential changes to the recruitment model, one unsuccessful candidate suggested making the IT questions more applied, incorporating visual elements rather than relying solely on theory. The other unsuccessful candidate suggested reducing the amount of information on the IT platform and in the candidate's guide as too much detail can be confusing and cause delays, recommending that only essential information should be provided. One of the successful candidates recommended adding elements that test the candidates' ability to apply theoretical knowledge to practical situations (e.g. case studies

that simulate real-life decision-making scenarios). The second admitted candidate suggested extending the recruitment model to local public administrations as well.

Conclusion

The quality of public services is inherently linked to the competence and dedication of civil servants, making recruitment a key pillar of effective governance. As highlighted throughout this research, the classic recruitment system in Romania, while grounded in meritocratic principles, has faced several persistent issues. Among these challenges are the overemphasis on rote memorization in examinations, high levels of human involvement that lead to potential errors and/or preferential treatment, politicization of public service, lack of strategic planning and an aging workforce with a steadily increasing average age.

The new recruitment model, introduced in 2023 through the National Competition, addresses a significant portion of these deficiencies. The model introduces a competency-based framework, which is more aligned with the practical demands of public service roles. At the same time, introducing a recruitment plan addresses the need for strategic HR planning in public administration.

The perspectives of stakeholders involved in the national competition, as discussed in the article, provide valuable insights into the model's implementation. The organization of the competition was largely viewed as effective, with participants appreciating the transparency and structure of the process. However, areas for improvement were noted, particularly regarding the communication and coordination between NACS and external service providers (private actors). The advertising efforts, which included multi-channel campaigns through social media and universities, were generally well-received, yet suggestions were made to enhance outreach to broader audiences, particularly outside academic circles. For the candidates, the competition represented a meaningful opportunity to engage with a modernized recruitment process. Many saw it as a rigorous and transparent system that reinforced their confidence in public administration, though some recommendations were made regarding the content and structure of the testing, especially in terms of IT-related questions.

Looking ahead, the findings suggest that while the new model has brought substantial improvements, further refinements are necessary. These include enhancing communication and advertising campaigns and refining the IT platform in order to be more intuitive. At the same time, NACS should seek to reduce resistance to change among people within the political-administrative system and to extend the new recruitment model to local public administration. By continuing to build on these advancements, Romania can ensure a more capable and responsive civil service, better equipped to meet the needs of the public and to maintain the integrity of its institutions.

References:

1.   Carausan, M. (2012). *Drept administrativ. Volumul 1*. Economic Publishing House, Bucharest.
2.   Council of the European Union. (2021). *Annex to the Council Implementing Decision endorsing the assessment of the Recovery and Resilience Plan of Romania.*
3.   Brussels. Retrieved from NEW CID ANNEX ROMANIA RRF 13 09 2021 (gov.ro), accessed on 28 August 2024.

4.   Government Emergency Ordinance (G.E.O.) no. 121/2023, published in the Official Gazette of Romania, Part I, no. 1184 of 28 December 2023.

5.   Government Emergency Ordinance (G.E.O.) no. 138/2021, published in the

6.   Official Gazette of Romania, Part I, no. 1243 of 29 December 2021, as subsequently amended and supplemented.

7.   Government Emergency Ordinance (G.E.O.) no. 191/2022, published in the Official Gazette of Romania, Part I, no. 1280 of 30 December 2022, as subsequently amended and supplemented.

8.   Government Emergency Ordinance (G.E.O.) no. 57/2019, published in the Official Gazette of Romania, Part I, no. 555 of 5 July 2019, as subsequently amended and supplemented.

9.   National Agency of Civil Servants. (2022). *Civil Service and Civil Servant Management Report for the year 2021*. Bucharest. Retrieved from Raport mgm fp 2021_30.05.2022.pdf (gov.ro), accessed on 28 August 2024.

10.   National Agency of Civil Servants. (2023a). *Civil Service and Civil Servant Management Report for the year 2022*. Bucharest. Retrieved from GUVERNUL ROMÂNIEI (gov.ro), accessed on 28 August 2024.

11.   National Agency of Civil Servants. (2023b). *Final report on the conduct and results obtained by candidates in the recruitment phase (national competition) of the pilot-project*. Bucharest. Retrieved from GUVERNUL ROMÂNIEI (gov.ro), accessed on 28 August 2024.

12.   National Agency of Civil Servants. (2024a). *Civil Service and Civil Servant Management Report for the year 2023*. Bucharest. Retrieved from GUVERNUL ROMÂNIEI (gov.ro), accessed on 28 August 2024.

13.   National Agency of Civil Servants. (2024b). *The Candidate's Guide*. Bucharest. Retrieved from Ghidul candidatului.pdf (gov.ro), accessed on 28 August 2024.

14.   National Agency of Civil Servants. (N/A). *Developing a unified human resources management system in public administration*. Retrieved from SIPOCA136 - ANFP (gov.ro), accessed on 28 August 2024.

15.   Romanian Government. (2023). *The Government's Program 2023-2024 - Vision for the Nation*. Bucharest. Retrieved from [Document subtitle] (cdep.ro), accessed on 28 August 2024.

16.   Savulescu, C. (2023). *Organizaţia publică şi managementul resurselor umane - course material*. National University of Political Science and Public Administration, Faculty of Public Administration, Bucharest.

17.   Transparency International Romania. (2023). *Report on carrying out consultancy services in order to elaborate an ex-post analysis of the national competition (pilot)*. Bucharest. Retrieved from Analiza ex-post_v finala_v3_clean.pdf (gov.ro), accessed on 28 August 2024.

18.   Word Bank. (2020). *Deliverable 4.1. Definition of a model for national competition*. Report issued under the Technical Assistance Services Agreement for the Development of a Unified Human Resources Management System in Public Administration, Bucharest.