

University „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” Iași  
The Faculty of Economics and Business Administration  
The Doctoral School of Economics and Business  
Administration

## DOCTORAL THESIS

### **„AUTONOMY IN THE MANAGEMENT OF THE LOCAL PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION”**

#### **SUMMARY**

Scientific coordinator: **Professor Ph.D. Dumitru ZAIȚ**  
Ph.D. Student: **Petronela ZAHARIA**

„*One can govern from a distance, but one can only administer close at hand*”, is a famous statement made long ago by Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, and one that sets the ground for the initiation and the development of the present research. Without a doubt, the value of this statement resides in the fact that it manages to divide competencies within the public administration, separating the Central decision-making structures (distant) from the local government level (close-at-hand). Should you wonder what would be the point of this separation, the answer is as clear as day: to increase the efficiency of public administration by acknowledging the local power to make decision and to adapt them to the specific circumstances in each location. These are the circumstances and the essence of the endeavor to approach and understand ***autonomy in the management of local public administration***.

However, there are numerous theoreticians and professionals in the field who argue that an autonomous local public administration is open to the needs of the local community and meets those needs in an adequate manner.

Consequently, the following question is rather appropriate: *How does local autonomy influence the task of meeting the needs of local communities?*

In light of such evidence, the **purpose** of this research is to *analyze autonomy in the management of local public administration structures in order to relate it to the extent to which the needs of local communities are met.*

In this respect, the research aims to focus and reach the following **objectives**, defined both in theory and in practice:

- O*<sub>1</sub>: Understanding the research area allocated to the management of local public administration, which encompasses the research topic, by specifying the contents and highlighting its specific features.
- O*<sub>2</sub>: Developing a thorough analysis of autonomy by establishing its basic principles, defining its beginnings as well as by outlining the factors that may exert an influence on its proper development.
- O*<sub>3</sub>: Explaining the role the contents of autonomy by considering the set of regulations imposed on the organization and functioning of the local administrative system and by observing the structural elements and its position in the planning of local public resources.
- O*<sub>4</sub>: Examining the local administration organizational structures, the management of local public services, the issues related to the implementation of the new public management, as well as the premises of autonomy by referring to the actual circumstances in the Swiss and the Romanian local public administration, more particularly in the Neuchâtel Canton and the Suceava

County.

- O*<sub>5</sub>: Identifying the relationship between the variables defined for the sample that includes representatives of the local public administration: autonomy degree – extent of meeting local public needs; autonomy degree – involvement in the meeting of local public needs; amount of resources available in the local public administration – autonomy degree; professional experience in the system of the local public administration – autonomy degree.
- O*<sub>6</sub>: Highlighting the relationship between the variables under analysis in the sample encompassing members of the local community: autonomy degree – extent of local public needs met; quality of local public services – extent of local public needs met.

In order to develop the research in relation to the targeted purpose and objectives, we have suggested the following *hypotheses (fundamental and operating)* for validation:

- FH*: *There is a direct and positive relationship between the degree of local autonomy and the extent to which the needs of the local community members are met.*
- OH*<sub>1</sub>: There is a positive relationship between the degree of autonomy and the involvement of the local public administration representatives in meeting the needs of the local community members.
- OH*<sub>2</sub>: The amount of available resources in the local public administration has a positive influence on the degree of local autonomy.
- OH*<sub>3</sub>: The experience of the community representatives in the system of the local

public administration structures has a positive influence on the degree of autonomy while completing their tasks.

*OH<sub>4</sub>*: There is a positive relationship between the quality of the local public services and the extent to which the needs of the local community members are met.

*OH<sub>5</sub>*: There are significant differences between the opinions of the local public administration representatives and those of the local community members in terms of the extent to which the local public needs are met.

In order to reach the purpose and the targeted goals, while all the while trying to confirm/reject the suggested hypotheses, we have defined the appropriate *methodological coordinates* for the conducted research.

The reference model that can be applied to the conducted research is the *interdisciplinary pragmatic model*, while the approach is a *holistic* one, suggesting a *synchronic* approach. During our research, we have also considered the *constructivist methodological system* which allows one to resort to the *phenomenological approach* and to the *mixed interpretative-quantitative approach*. The interaction between the *positivist, constructivist and interpretative approach* defines the selected *epistemological option*.

The „correlation” quantitative-qualitative approach matches the purpose of the research, as these two types of approaches are complementary and originate into an *emic and ethic* perspective. The employment of the mixed *inductive-deductive* reasoning completes the suggested methodological approach.

As far as the *sampling* process is concerned, the acquisition of the necessary information to conduct the research had led to the occurrence of *two distinct samples*:

- ✓ Sample 1 defined for the representatives of the local public administration of the Suceava County;
- ✓ Sample 2 defined for the members of the local community of the Suceava County.

In order to create both samples, we have resorted to the *proportional stratified random sampling*, a criterion that enabled us to stratify the “administrative level” (in the case of the 1<sup>st</sup> Sample) and “the place of residence of the respondent” (in the case of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sample).

The first sample includes representatives from the structures of the local public administration (city-halls) who, at the time the questionnaire was applied, were employed as public officials, in management and executive positions.

In order to ensure the analogy of the collected information, the second sample included members of the local community from the same locations as the structures of the local public administration (city-halls) that have been selected for the development of the 1<sup>st</sup> sample.

A total of 116 respondents from among the local public administration representatives have taken part in the development of the applicative research, while 352 respondents belonged to the category of local community members.

The *collection of the data* required for our research study was based on the following techniques:

- *Mediated data collection techniques: official statistical reports, public documents, periodical reports;*
- *Direct observation data collection techniques: questionnaire based survey, observation.*

*Two questionnaires* have been applied during the survey, corresponding to the two samples mentioned earlier:

- ✓ Questionnaire 1 addressed to the representatives of the local public administration of the Suceava County;

✓ Questionnaire 2 addressed to the members of the local community of the Suceava County.

The *processing and analysis of the data* relied on such methods that are appropriate for a *mixed qualitative-quantitative approach*, as follows:

○ *Qualitative analysis: compared analysis, study of documents;*

○ *Quantitative analysis: summarizing, indicators, average sizes, dispersion and variance indicators, correlation, statistical analysis.*

We have resorted to the following *methods* during our research: *scaling, questionnaire application method (self-administered), classification, grouping and selecting, tabling, graphical representation.*

*The used research instruments are: the questionnaire, the assessment scale, the table, the graph, the diagram, SPSS and Excel data processing programs.*

This whole range of techniques, procedures and instruments justify the resort to *triangulation* as a complex approach that guides the research.

The paper is structured on two main pillars, a theoretical and a practical one, and is divided into six chapters that provide its consistency. The pages of the first three chapters are dedicated to the *theoretical* research, while the *applied* research is more coherently developed throughout the remaining three chapters, relying on the practical approach perspective on the research topic by integrating *two components*:

- The comparative analysis of the actual circumstances in the Swiss and Romanian public administration, particularly focusing on the Neuchâtel Canton and on the Suceava County;
- The survey on autonomy and its effects on the extent to which the needs of the local community needs are met in Suceava County, an approach

which is subsequently divided into two different directions:

- Researching the opinions of the local public administration representatives;
- Researching the opinions of the local community members.

At the *beginning* of the conducted study (**chapter I**), we have developed a theoretical framework that has smoothed the way towards understanding the chosen research topic. The detailed analysis of the various approaches to public administration in professional studies have revealed that there are two dimensions defining it: a *material-functional* one and a *formal-structural* one. Regardless of the angle one chooses to look at it, the mission of local public administration is as clear as day: meeting the local public needs.

*Management* is the activity that assists in the completion of this objective, as an activity that encompasses all managerial actions taken on a local administrative level and which enable the implementation of the regulations and the supply of local public services in order to meet the increasing demands/needs of local interests.

After covering the theoretical framework of our research, our attention was entirely focused on clarifying the nuances of *autonomy* (**chapters II and III**).

Briefly speaking, we have considered autonomy as the freedom local public administration representatives have in making decisions and acting towards meeting the needs of local communities. Such an approach was of real support for steering our research towards a more pragmatic direction, since the parties involved in the local administrative process found that the value of autonomy in practice was more important than its conceptual basis.

In order to fully understand autonomy, we have continued with *the analysis of its origin and evolution* in the

history of local public administration. Whether we have referred to Greek city-states, to Italian states, to the Roman Dacia province, to the underlying circumstances in the local public administration of Romania throughout various development stages, or to the European context, we have noticed a penchant for autonomy in the local administrative process.

The various nuances of autonomy have been completed by the identification of the *influence of various factors* that may affect its proper functioning.

The analysis of autonomy in relation to *natural factors* has prompted us to investigate both the natural potential and human nature as well.

The influence of *institutional factors* was another important issue (local administrative structure, local public services, and regulations in the field of local public administration) that may affect autonomy.

The conducted research and documentation has enabled us to identify a set of *conjectural factors* (the economic crisis, local development, politics, social organization), and also allowed us to demonstrate their effects on autonomy.

In an attempt to explain the influence of the *cultural factor* on autonomy, we have concluded that a strong cultural identity in the local administrative structures can discourage the involvement of central government structures, an advantage that provides management representatives with more autonomy in the local administrative process.

In order to understand the complex aspects of autonomy, we have continued with an analysis of the *role and contents* of the concept.

A subsequent study of the organization and functioning rules of the local public administration has



shown that each of these rules and all of them as a whole provide the support needed for autonomy.

After analyzing each of the three components that define its contents – organizational, functional and managerial – we have noticed that all three of them determine its proper functioning. A subsequent analysis of autonomy in terms of its effects on resources has shown that its real functioning is conditioned by the presence of human, material and financial resources at the disposal of the local public administration.

Our concern with an analysis of autonomy in the management of local public administration continued with a practical approach of the research topic.

*The first component of the empirical research (chapter IV)* consisted of a comparison between two distinct local administrative systems, a Swiss and a Romanian one, particularly in the Neuchâtel Canton and the Suceava County.

After the analysis of the administrative and territorial organisational structure and of the organisation of the public authority systems in these two administrative structures, we have concluded that:

- The organisation and functioning of both structures complies with the regulations in the field;

- The administrative and territorial structure in both locations has a trichotomic disposition;

- Each of the two systems has its own authorities that implement management procedures;

- The mandate of the local public authorities in both systems is of two years, except for the Presidents of the City Council in the Swiss administrative structure, who hold office for one year;

- The appointment of the authorities in both governments is done after an election process, according to the votes cast by citizens, except for the Council presidents

of the Swiss system who are elected by the council members;

- Both Swiss and Romanian authorities perform functions assigned to them in compliance with the law;

- The autonomy of both Swiss and Romanian authorities is acknowledged while managing the local public affairs;

- The management of local public affairs is performed by specialised structures in both administrative structures;

- Public authorities in both Romanian and Swiss administrations maintain close collaboration in their relationships;

We have encountered significant similarities in the management of public services as well, starting with the common principles of their organisation and functioning and continuing with the clear separation of the categories of services for each of the administrative levels and down to the hierarchical organisation of the service system on various structural levels, both in the Swiss and the Romanian administrative system.

While researching the implementation of the new public management, we have noticed that in both systems, the occurrence of difficult situations and the need for reformation have led to the introduction of the new public management, meant to ensure the efficiency and increased performance of both administrative structures.

An analysis of the premises of autonomy by relating it to both local administrative structures under consideration has revealed that:

- The separation of the national Swiss and Romanian communities into local communities has triggered the functioning of autonomy;

○ The availability of human, material and financial resources in both local communities has made the functioning of autonomy possible;

○ The appointment of the local administrative authorities by election by the members of the local community in both administrative structures (except for the presidents of the City Councils in the Swiss system) encourages the functioning of autonomy;

○ The allocation of complete accountability of the local authorities in the management of public affairs in both administrative structures ensures their autonomy in relation to central government structures;

○ The control of the activity performed by both Swiss and Romanian local authorities is conducted by closely observing autonomy regulations.

The conclusion drawn from these analyses is undisputed: even though the Neuchâtel Canton and the Suceava County are two territorial divisions belonging to two different countries, the conducted investigation has revealed insignificant differences, while the resemblances are quite outstanding.

*The second component of the practical research (chapters V and VI)* consisted of the questionnaire based survey that enabled us to collect significant data on how autonomy is perceived locally and how it affects the meeting of the needs of the local community members in the Suceava County.

The *analysis of the opinion of the local public administration representatives* has revealed the following conclusions:

○ The concept of *local autonomy* is familiar to them, and a high percentage believes its definition to be justified.

○ Respondents are acquainted with the utility of autonomy in the local administration process, and most of them believe it is *necessary*.

○ The analysis of the answers referring to the *degree of autonomy* has led us to conclude that the local public administration representatives in the Suceava County have an *average degree of autonomy*, and this statement has been confirmed by most respondents.

○ As far as the *importance of autonomy* in the performance of the tasks is concerned, most respondents believe it to be *important* and *very important* and they are convinced that it would improve their activity.

○ The analysis of the answers referring to *satisfaction in terms of degree of autonomy* in the carrying out of their tasks has shown that half of the respondents were *content* and *very content*.

○ The study on the opinion of the local administrative structure representatives in terms of their *involvement in meeting the needs of the local community members* has shown that most of them are involved *to a great extent*.

○ The analysis of the answers provided by the local administrative structure representatives in terms of the *resources available in the local public administration of Suceava* has shown that these resources are *averagely* available.

○ The structure of the sample of local public administration representatives has revealed that the largest category comprises the respondents with a 5 to 10 year *experience*.

○ To the representatives of the local administrative structures, *meeting the needs of the local community members* is *important* and *very important*, as most respondents have stated.

○ The analysis of the *extent to which the local public needs are met* has shown that, as local public administration representatives believe, the members of their community are *content*.

In light of these findings, and as a result of the conducted analyses of association and correlation based on the data recorded for Sample 1, *the basic hypothesis* we have relied upon at the beginning of our scientific approach was *validated*. On the basis of such findings, we have concluded that, as *the degree of local autonomy* increases, so will the *extent to which the needs of the local community members are met*.

The results of the conducted analysis have also provided support for the validation of the *research hypotheses OH<sub>1</sub>, OH<sub>2</sub> and OH<sub>3</sub>*, confirming the following:

○ As the *degree of autonomy* increases, so does the *involvement of the local public administration representatives in meeting the needs of the local communities*.

○ As the *level of available resources in the local public administration* increases, so does the *degree of local autonomy*.

○ The *greater the experience of the local public administration representatives*, the higher the *degree of autonomy*.

The research continues with the *analysis of the opinions of the members of the local communities*, and the conclusions we have reached are as follows:

○ The concept of *local autonomy* seems to be well defined.

○ Respondents say they are convinced of the *need for autonomy* for the proper functioning of the local public administration.

○ The members of the local communities believe that the *degree of autonomy in the local public*

*administration* is *average*, and more than half of the respondents have expressed their opinion in this respect.

○ In terms of the *local public services*, the analysis of the recorded answers has revealed that their *quality is neither good nor bad*.

○ Most of the members of the local communities have stated that the *meeting of their needs is important and very important* for their City-hall.

○ The analysis of the answers provided by the local community members in terms of the *extent to which local public needs are met* has revealed that they are *neither discontent, nor content*.

In order to corroborate the *basic hypothesis* and to check the *operating hypothesis OH<sub>4</sub>*, we have continued the association and correlation analyses with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sample. Their second run has once again confirmed the presence of a direct positive relationship between the *degree of local autonomy* and the *extent to which the needs of the local community members are met*. This result also confirmed and tested the *fairness of the basic hypothesis* of the present research.

The conducted analysis has indicated the presence of a direct positive relationship between the variable *quality of the local public services* and the variable *extent to which the needs of the local community members are met*, thus *confirming the operating hypothesis OH<sub>4</sub>*.

The understanding of the opinions of both categories of respondents in relation to the *extent to which the local public needs are met* has allowed us to compare their answers. The test statistical calculus for comparing the averages of two communities has highlighted significant differences between the opinions expressed by the two samples in terms of the extent to which the local public needs are met, a result that eventually *confirmed* the *operating hypothesis OH<sub>5</sub>*.

The conducted research enabled us to highlight the main ***contributions and findings***, both in terms of theory and practice, thus confirming its innovative character.

The relevant ***theoretical*** contributions advanced by our research are:

- *Summarising the theories in the field of management in local public administration.*
- *Designing a theoretical basis on autonomy.*
- *Developing a documentary research on the origins and evolution of autonomy.*
- *Identifying the critical factors affecting the functioning of autonomy.*
- *Highlighting the role of autonomy.*
- *Explaining the contents of autonomy.*

The ***practical*** contributions of the conducted research consist of:

- *The twofold development of the empirical research.*
- *Highlighting the resemblances and differences between the Swiss and the Romanian local public administration.*
- *Developing a research strategy that enabled the definition of the relationship between the local public administration and the meeting of the needs of the local communities in the Suceava County.*
- *Developing the data collection instruments.*
- *The gradual correlation of the defined variables in order to measure the degree of local autonomy, where applicable, with the other targeted variables.*
- *Highlighting the differences between the opinions of the two categories of respondents in terms of the extent to which the local public needs are met.*
- *Confirming, in both samples, the relationship between local autonomy and the meeting of the local public needs.*

We are aware of the fact that the conducted research has not exhausted all possible approached and we have thus drawn certain *new possible further research opportunities and directions*:

○ *The longitudinal analysis of the relationship between local autonomy and the extent to which the needs of local communities are met.*

○ *Extending the analysis to the North-East Region or even country-wide, as well as developing partnerships with Swiss researchers in the field.*

○ *An analysis of the repercussions of regionalisation on the functioning of autonomy and on the extent to which the needs of local communities are met.*

Looking back at the scientific research steps we have undertaken, we hope that, overall, the obtained results will join the existing research in the field and will bestow additional knowledge, all the while becoming a reference point for other researchers and other studies conducted in the same area of interest.