

MODELS AND TOOLS FOR A QUALITY APPROACH IN THE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Abstract: *This paper focuses on the quality approach in the public administration (PA) in the EU. The first section presents theoretical considerations on the modern approach to quality applicable in all areas of activity, including PA. The next two sections contain: an overview of the policy and models on quality in PA promoted in the EU; the main measurement instruments and statistical data on the quality of government in the EU. The purpose of the study is to systematize information on the quality approach in the PA at EU level, which will help academics, researchers and decision-makers better understand the quality models and tools currently used, and identify ways to improve them.*

Key words: *quality in PA; models for quality systems in PA; models for quality of governance, measurement tools for quality of governance*

1. Introduction

The present paper focuses on quality in PA, whose modern approach provides the necessary mechanisms for the systematic and integrative treatment of the complex issues of PA, with the aim to continuously adapt to new requirements, both in terms of offer and performance of services. The study is structured in several sections. The first part shortly describes the distinctive elements of the modern approach to quality, applicable in all fields of activity, including the PA domain. The next two sections present policies and models on quality in PA promoted in the EU in recent decades and the main measurement instruments and statistical data on quality of governance in the EU, respectively. The final conclusions summarize the evolution of the quality approach in the PA in the EU and underline the relationship between quality systems and the effective implementation in PA of the new models, generically named the New Public Management (NPM), respectively New Public Government (NPG) (Popescu, Mandru and Deas, 2021). The weak points and the main axes of future research are also presented.

The originality of the paper consists in describing the evolution of the quality approach

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in the PA in the EU, which illustrates the general trends of actions and the main models and tools used. The results of the study are useful for academics and researchers as a basis for improving quality models and tools in PA, and for decision-makers in EU Member States, respectively, helping them to better understand the EU framework of quality in PA, the national quality assurance systems must harmonize with.

The methodology of the paper consists of a large documentation including official documents on the PA quality in the EU, and other studies and research on this topic.

2. Modern Approach to Quality, Philosophy and Models

The concept of quality has many assigned meanings, as follows: “an essential or distinctive characteristic, property or attribute; character with respect to fineness or grade of excellence; superiority; excellence” (Dictionary.com, 2021). The specialized publications present different definitions and perceptions of quality, as well as their evolution over time (Fischer and Nair, 2009; Kostella, Tezel, and Patel, 2019). It is noteworthy the spectacular changes in the significance and approach to quality throughout the 20th century, the period in which the theoretical foundations of the modern approach to quality, generically called ‘quality management’, were laid.

Quality management is characterized by a holistic view of quality in organizations taking into account the products and services supplied, and also the processes on which their quality depends. Achieving quality management is a management issue and involves the implementation within organizations of a high-performance management system, which encompasses the systematic planning, doing/ implementation, control and improvement of quality. The purpose of quality management is to ensure the satisfaction of the requirements of customers and other stakeholders through systematic actions at organization level. Of note is also that this comprehensive approach involves the entire staff, not just the specialists in quality. As one of the pioneers of modern quality approach says, “Quality is everyone’s responsibility” (W.E. Deming).

The introduction of the expression ‘quality management’ dates back to the 1990s, and represents a collective output of theoretical and practical contributions of several specialists in quality (Mandru et al, 2011; Neyestani, 2017). The evolution in the movement for quality has culminated in the emergence of international standards for quality systems - the family of ISO 9000 standards (in 1987, the first edition), a globally recognized management framework which allows organizations everywhere to achieve success by promoting the quality management principles and methods. According to ISO 9000 standard (2015), quality management integrates the following basic principles: Customer focus, Leadership, Engagement of people, Improvement, Process approach, Evidence-based decision making, and Relationship management. These principles are the defining features of efficient management.

It is important to mention the existence of a similar philosophy of approaching quality, synthesized in the expression ‘Total Quality Management’ (TQM), which is extensively used both in theory and practice (Popescu, 2013; Rougan, 2015; Aquilani et al, 2017). The interest in TQM dates from the 80's of the last century; evaluation models were

created that support the organizations' actions in this regard. The best known are: the Baldrige model, introduced in 1987 in USA, as an evaluation tool for organizations at the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (National Institute of Standards and Technology, 2021), and the EFQM model, introduced in 1992, in the European Quality Award (European Foundation for Quality Management, 2021). These models, known as 'models of excellence', are used for external evaluations, and also for internal purposes (self-evaluation).

The ISO 9000 models for Quality Management Systems (QMSs) and the models of excellence were initially applied in the industrial sector, but have expanded in the services' sector, both in economic organizations and public institutions.

Regardless of the nature of the services delivered, the PA must take into account the best possible satisfaction of the population requirements in the conditions of the efficient use of public funds. These two aspects are in connection with the quality of services provided, which must become a priority for all institutions in PA. The demarches in this respect were enrolled in two major streams: focusing on measuring the quality of services, respectively a broader approach of the quality, from the perspective of the organization.

Regarding the evaluation of the quality of public services, the most used tool is SERVQUAL, created by Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985). In specialized publications, there are several applications based on this model, in education services, health, transportation etc. Some papers focus on measuring quality in administrative institutions using the SERVQUAL model coupled with other techniques (Ocampo et al, 2017; Rizq, Djamaludin and Nurhadryani, 2018). As these studies stress, such an approach allows the identification of the critical dimensions on which the management must focus in order to improve the quality of public services.

In essence, the SERVQUAL method involves a survey based on questionnaires, whose items are associated to the characteristics of service quality. But this kind of applications is the subject of scientific papers and is not commonly used in organizations (Foris, Popescu and Foris, 2018). More efficient is the systematic approach of quality by using ISO 9000 models or models of excellence. The application of these important regulations in PA implies that each organization operating in this field has to implement its quality system, which means developing mechanisms, structures, processes, and instruments for solving specific issues related to quality at organization level in a consistent and systematic manner (Popescu, Mandru and Gogoncea, 2017, p.19). In this case, the evaluation of the quality of public services is carried out continuously, through appropriate mechanisms and tools, including the systematic use of feedback methods.

The implementation of the quality system involves a special effort made by the PA organization, the top management being the driving force of a program of this magnitude that needs to be supported by all departments of the organization (Mandru, 2009). But the success of all this largely depends on the national framework of quality approach in PA. Today the involvement of the regional coordination bodies, like EU, is also important in addressing quality in PA, focused on the development of common quality policies, models and tools. Considering these requirements, the next section presents the main actions on quality in PA undertaken in the EU.

3. Actions on Quality in Public Administration in the EU: Policies, Models and Tools

The orientation towards quality represents a central axis at EU level, in recognition of the role that quality has not only in business, but also in the public domain (Dragomir, 2019, pp.43-44). The major benchmarks of the European approach towards quality in PA are shortly presented below.

- In 1995, 'A European quality promotion policy' was elaborated, aiming to establish "the overall framework and the anchor point for the development of the technical and political environment essential to the improvement of the quality of products and services, the competitiveness of European companies and the quality of life of the people of Europe" (European Commission, 1995, p.2). This document has two parts: the Strategic Vision of Quality for Europe, and the European Programme for the promotion of quality considering this vision. A distinct section of the Strategy refers to services, including the public sector. It is emphasized that the reference to the ISO 9000 standards by organizations can be regarded as a first step towards overall quality management. In addition, there are plans to create a network, as well as national and European associations in the field of quality. The main role of the network is to disseminate information and to act as a forum for discussions and co-operation between organizations, universities, associations of the member states, covering all aspects of quality.

The application of the strategy had the effect of implementing ISO 9001 in the PA in the EU member states, but the size of this approach is not given in official documents.

- In 1999/2000 a first product of the cooperation among EU national experts was created: the Common Assessment Framework (CAF). The CAF is a common framework for the assessment and improvement of PA in EU, inspired by the EFQM model. The model includes nine CAF evaluation criteria, presented in Table 1.

The CAF model has been improved and revised in several rounds; nowadays, the fifth edition, CAF 2020, is in force. Its implementation is done with the support of the CAF Resource Centre, created at the European Institute of Public Administration (EIPA), which works in cooperation with the network of CAF national correspondents. As public information states, currently over 3,000 organizations are using the CAF, and many countries have included the CAF in their administrative reform strategies (EIPA, 2022).

- In 2015, the "Quality of Public Administration – A Toolbox for Practitioners" was elaborated, this first edition being improved in 2017 (European Commission, 2017), based on discussions with member states, regional and local authorities, and social partners. As its authors declare, the Toolbox is intended to support European authorities in developing and delivering quality public policies and services, and is not limited to organization management. The document presents tools associated with seven themes, presented in Table 1. The Toolbox is available electronically and online, and helps EU countries to deliver successful PA strategies and operational programs, being one of the tools used in the European Semester process (European Commission website).

- The application in PA organizations of the quality models and tools mentioned above are recognizably components of the reform in PA, aiming to achieve good governance. High quality institutions are characterized by "the absence of corruption, a workable approach to competition and procurement policy, an effective legal

environment, and an independent and efficient judicial system. [...] strong institutional and administrative capacity, reducing the administrative burden and improving the quality of legislation” (European Commission, 2014, p.161). The expression ‘Good Governance’, also named ‘Quality of Governance’ (QoG), is a complex concept used to describe the high-quality and proper functioning of PA, with respect of democratic values and rules of a modern state (Rothstein, 2013, p.25). Currently there is no unitary vision, the concept being defined and applied in various manners by the World Bank, OECD, United Nations, European Commission, and other agencies and organizations (Gisselquist, 2012, pp.6-8; Taylor, 2016, p.5). The QoG definitions are generally presented through explicit lists of principles and specifications (Addink, 2017). In the EU, the concept of Good Governance has been gradually developed into legal acts starting with 2001, in the context of the vast PA governance reform launched by the European Commission (EC, 2001). A comprehensive view of the Good Governance is available in the “Recommendation on Good Administration” (Council of Europe, 2007), which refers to nine principles on which good governance is based, namely: lawfulness, equality, impartiality, proportionality, certainty, taking action within a reasonable time limit, participation, respect for privacy, and transparency.

- The concern for Good Governance occupies a central place in the implementation of the ‘Europe 2020 Strategy’ and the ‘Cohesion policy objectives’, associated with a new direction of action, entitled ‘Administrative Capacity Building’ (ACB) (European Commission, 2014; Pucher and Martinos, 2018). The ACB has the good governance as its final purpose, and takes into account improving the performance of public institutions (internal orientation), and also a more macro/ external context of the country (external orientation), which derives from the economic, environmental, social or health field (Smeriglio, 2015; Heichlinger, Thijs and Bosse, 2017). The defining aspects of ACB are found in three broad elements: policy (including structure), people and systems. Each of these elements is detailed in several dimensions among which there are measures to strengthen administrative capacity (see Table 1). As Heichlinger et al. (2017, pp.34-35) remark, many of the elements mentioned above can be found or are linked to the CAF model. In this way, the CAF model itself is an instrument to strengthen the QoG. It is also worth mentioning that the ACB demarche is closely related to public sector innovation, financially supported in the 2014-2020 period through the European Structural and Investment Funds, under thematic objective TO 11: ‘Enhancing institutional capacity of public authorities and stakeholders and an efficient PA’ (European Commission, 2021).

- In the context of increasing attention to the governance quality, some instruments have been developed for measuring, ranking and comparing the QoG across countries (World Bank, 2007; Gisselquist, 2013; Smeriglio et al., 2015; Charron, 2021, pp.93-114). Currently, several aggregate indexes are used worldwide.

The most widely used ones are: the six Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI), which have been published annually by the World Bank Institute since 1996; the European Quality of Government Index (EQI), developed by the Quality of Government Institute of Gothenburg University, which was assessed in 2009, 2014, 2017 and 2021, and is scheduled to be released every three to four years (European Commission, 2021; Aboubadra, 2021). These two composite indicators are presented in more detail in the next section of the paper.

Another model for assessing local governance was launched in EU in 2008, based on the 12 Principles of Good Democratic Governance defined in „The Strategy for Innovation and Good Governance at Local Level” (Council of Europe, 2008a). The European Label of Governance Excellence (ELoGE) was also developed, being awarded to local authorities/municipalities who can demonstrate their respect of the 12 principles measured against a benchmark (Council of Europe, 2008b). In 2009, a platform was created, the European Public Sector Award (EPSA), which, by systematically collecting examples, created a useful knowledge base for promoting good practices in PA. Annual EPSA competitions are also organized for the recognition of the best performers in European PA.

Recently a new methodological framework for assessing the state of PA was developed for the European Semester, namely ‘Performance of PA Assessment Framework’, which provides a systematic and coherent overview of the Member States’ performance based on indicators related to the determinants of the good PA and to how administration performs in practice (OECD&EU, 2018). The Framework is focused on the Principles of PA elaborated by OECD (2016) and consists of five pillars: Policy planning, policy coordination and policy development; Civil service and human resource management; Accountability; Service delivery; Public financial management. This instrument covers the national public sector or subnational governments and allows the possibility to evaluate the current state of governance and to measure progress in the implementation of reforms over time. Based on these criteria, a comparative overview across the EU Member States was launched in 2018 (European Commission, 2020a).

Concluding the previous presentation, Table 1 synthetically presents the main models for quality approach in PA. Those have evolved from organizational approaches to a more complex quality framework for national and regional governance systems. Although the determinants of these models are different, one can see the similarities between ISO 9001 and CAF, and also the common elements between models for quality systems in organizations and those related to Good Governance. There are also differences and similarities in terms of quality measurement. At the organization level, the quality system integrates specific methods and tools for the systematic evaluation of the quality of services, processes and overall performance. For the QoG, in addition to the regular evaluation focused on the model specific determinants, aggregate indicators are also used. In both cases there is a multitude of criteria and indicators by which quality is measured.

Models for quality approach in PA in the EU

Table 1

Quality Models and Tools		Determinants
Quality of Public Organization	ISO 9001	Customer focus; Leadership; Engagement of people; Improvement; Process approach; Evidence-based decision making; Relationship management;
	CAF	Enablers: Leadership; Strategy and planning; People; Partnerships and Resources; Processes; Results: Citizens; Employees, Social responsibility, Key performance results.
Quality of Governance	EU Toolbox for quality in PA	Policy making; Embedding ethical & anticorruption practices; Professional & well-functioning institutions; Improving service delivery; Enhancing the business environment; Strengthening the judicial systems; Managing public funds effectively.

Quality Models and Tools	Determinants
Administrative Capacity Building	<p>Policy: Strategic planning and evidence-based management; Stakeholders' involvement; Appropriate administrative structures; Simplification of administrative procedures; Management of partnerships; Results orientation; Socially responsible behaviour; Tackling corruption.</p> <p>People (HR): Professionalization of senior and leading civil servants/ managers; Modern HR policy and management.</p> <p>Systems and Tools: Total Quality Management Models; User/customer orientation; Management of Resources; Process management; e-Governance; Continuous improvement.</p>

The quality policies and tools promoted at EU level are applied in all member states, but their implementation differs from country to country, and must be distinctly analysed. A starting point in these analyses can be the results of measurements made at European level. The main instruments used in EU for measuring the QoG at national and regional level, and some statistical data are presented below.

4. Measurement Instruments and Statistical Data on Quality in PA in EU

This section focuses on the main instruments regularly used for measuring the QoG in the EU, and highlights their role in supporting actions to improve governance. Some statistical data are also presented.

- Eurobarometer surveys

In reforms for a modern administration, 'citizen focus' is one of the basic principles. According to Dragomir (2019, p.47), 'the citizen' position towards public institutions has evolved to the 'customer' status of public services, and from this perspective, citizens are the ones that need to be actively involved in the design, provision and improvement of public services. In this regard, the perception of citizens on the quality of public services and administration must be assessed, being an important indicator in the evaluation of governance performance and a trigger for further improvement actions. In the EU, regular surveys are performed by the Eurobarometer, the official polling instrument used to monitor the public opinion in Europe, addressing current subjects related to EU and its member states (European Parliament website).

The trust in governance is one of the elements included in the half-yearly Eurobarometer surveys, which reflects to some extent the perception of citizens on the governance quality and performance (Dragomir, 2019, p.48). In addition, other similar topics on the performance of governance were the subject of Eurobarometer surveys, e.g.: citizens' confidence in local and regional authorities; the trust in the EU and national governments related to measures taken to fight the Covid-19 pandemic etc.

Based on Eurobarometer data, comparative analysis can be performed to assess the overall quality and performance of government in EU member states (e.g. Thijs, Hammerschmid and Palaric, 2018). But, at national level, these data are only a starting point, helping decision-makers deepen the subject.

- Quality of Governance Index (QGI)

The EQI is a multi-dimensional concept, composed of three broad aspects of governance: corruption, quality and impartiality of public services and institutions. This indicator aims to measure the PA quality based on the survey on citizen attitudes and experiences regarding key public services in the regions of European countries, being useful in reducing disparities between regions (Charron and Lapuente, 2018; Ferrara and Nistico, 2019; Charron, Lapuente, and Bauhr, 2021).

The establishment of the QGI is done through large-scale surveys, based on a questionnaire with specific items associated to the three aspects mentioned above. In the last survey (2021), the relationship between the QoG Index and Covid-19 indicators is also presented (Charron, Lapuente, and Bauhr, 2021).

The results of the QGI survey are given by regions of each country, but there are also synthetic data: the global EU picture rendered by a graphical representation, which shows the countries in order of rank from top to bottom on the y-axis, and regional variation on the x-axis (Charron, Lapuente, and Bauhr, 2021, p.15).

The QGI has multiple uses. First of all, these indicators allows comparisons between regions of a country, which is important considering the discrepancies that exist between the regions of the same state, but also allows comparisons between regions of different countries. As the last survey shows, there is significant regional variation in some countries (e.g.: Italy, Spain, France, Belgium and Romania), while very little in others (Charron, Lapuente, and Bauhr, 2021, p.14). Likewise, the four editions of the index show the dynamic of the QoG, improvement or decline over the last decade. As the 2021 report states (p.2), it turns out an overall increase in the perceived QoG of European regions, but “the geography of QoG is slowly shifting, with many regions in Eastern Europe now surpassing regions in Southern Europe”. But in general, many high/low performing regions obtained similar scores in all the four EQI rounds. As the synthesis graph shows, Finland, Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands are at the top, and Hungary, Croatia, Greece, Romania and Bulgaria are on the last positions.

- Government effectiveness indicator (WGI)

Government effectiveness is defined as “the quality of public services, the capacity of the civil service and its independence from political pressures; and the quality of policy formulation” (World Bank, website, 2021). The WGI reports aggregate and individual governance indicators for over 200 countries and territories for the next six dimensions of governance: voice and accountability; political stability and absence of violence; government effectiveness; regulatory quality; rule of law; control of corruption. The data sources are a variety of survey institutes, think tanks, non-governmental organizations, international organizations, and private sector firms.

The WGIs are reported usually in standard units, ranging from -2.5 (weak government effectiveness) to +2.5 (strong government effectiveness). Figure 1 presents the WGI for the EU member states, for 2020 and 2019. As it can be seen, Finland, Denmark, Nederland and Luxembourg have the highest composite score in 2020, and at the other extreme, there are Italy, Poland, Bulgaria and Romania. It is not surprising that WGI average in rich countries is higher than in poor ones.

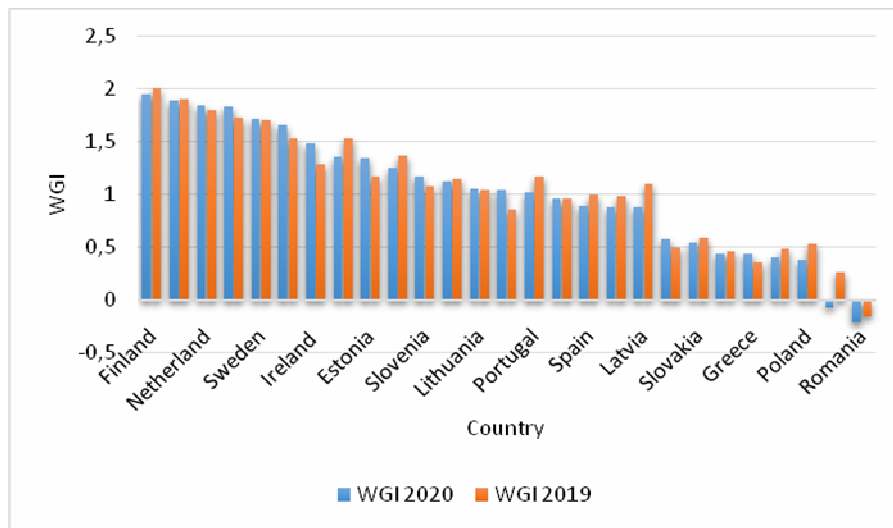


Fig. 1. *Government effectiveness indicators (WGIs) for EU countries in 2020/2019*
 (Source: <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/worldwide-governance-indicators>)

The annual establishment of WGI has multiple uses. According to Kaufmann (2021), WGI has contributed to a growing consensus that good governance is vital to the well-being of citizens, security and attracting investment. This has led to its use by rating agencies. Also, WGI represents basic information in many studies aiming to present comparative analysis between countries or to explore the possible relationship between WGI and other governance issues such as economic growth, well-being, managing a crisis situation etc. (e.g. Jiang, 2018; Tatar et al, 2021). Given that the WGI allows the analysis of the global situation and using criteria for each country, it can be a starting point for identifying the causes of deficiencies and establishing the appropriate improvement measures at the country level.

In the end of this section, it should be noted that the two synthesis indicators of QoG presented above are different, but there is compatibility between them, as it can be seen from the comparative analysis of the surveys' results.

5. Conclusion

The application of modern quality theories occupies an important place in the PA reform, ensuring the necessary mechanisms for the continuous adaptation of public services to new requirements.

As it results from this paper, the concern for quality has materialized in models and tools for planning, monitoring and assessing quality in PA at several levels: organizational, governance, respectively, and also at national, regional and local levels. Quality tools have been constantly improved, in the logic of continuous improvement. It is also important to mention the financial support of the actions related to quality in PA from European funds, which has made a major contribution to promoting quality in PA in EU member states. All central EU institutions have specific responsibilities for

developing and managing the PA quality system, being supported by other EU bodies and agencies and also by external institutions.

As the paper stresses, the quality models at organizational level and those applied at national and regional levels are different, but they have also common elements, which must be the object of a future work. It is also important to emphasize the relationship between the quality approach in PA and the promotion of modern management and governance philosophies, NPM and NPG. These doctrines imply new principles, structures and regulations on PA management and governance, implicitly leading to increased quality in the PA sector. At the same time, the implementation of quality systems offers a greater rigor in defining quality in PA and developing mechanisms for solving quality problems in a coherent and systematic way, supporting the real implementation of modern principles and methods of management and governance.

As it is shown in the paper, currently there are two models for quality systems in PA organizations, and several models and tools for QoG.

At the level of public organizations, the quality approach involves the implementation of quality systems, which ensure the systematic management of quality in organizations. In the EU, the most used quality models in PA organizations are ISO 9001 – QMSs, and CAF – a model of excellence specific to public institutions. But the results on the implementation of the quality system in PA institutions depends on the national quality framework in the PA, respectively on the coordination provided by the EU structures. As the analysis in this work shows, there are actions undertaken at EU level for the implementation of quality systems in PA institutions, including financial support, but there are no official executive reports related to this aspect.

In the last decade, the focus in the EU has been more on the QoG, as tools and models for planning, monitoring and assessing QoG at national, regional and local level were created. A positive aspect is the concern for the integration of the PA quality-relation actions in the EU's governing framework for economic policy coordination and supervision in the Member States. In this regard, several tools are used, including the systematic measurement of the QoG through composite indicators. These indicators are useful for the EU decision makers, but as already mentioned, they are also useful at national level, as a starting point in detailed analyses completed with improvement actions. The question is whether and especially how this analysis is performed at national level, if quality actions in PA are systematically planned and controlled. In other words, it is important to analyse the national system for quality in PA, its components and functioning.

Taking into account the above conclusion, the priority direction of the authors' future research is the national system for quality in PA.

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