

Bureaucracy – Angel or Demon?

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Abstract: After the 1989 Revolution, for 20 years, the Romanian public administration from has gone through deep changes, and not always positive ones. According to the current thinking, the activity of public administration is negatively influenced by a series of factors such as corruption, politicizing and bureaucracy. From this list, without having an exhaustive enumeration, a phenomenon which people face more in the daily life is the bureaucracy. This paper aims at analyzing, firstly, the way in which bureaucracy influences the activity of the administration, and if this influence represents a negative factor or it is just the wrong perception of this phenomenon, and secondly, we will identify the means by which bureaucracy makes the public administration activity more efficient in Romania.

Keywords: bureaucracy; public administration; efficiency; hierarchy

1. Introduction

Nowadays, bureaucracy is a very common term characterized, by the public opinion, mass-media, politicians as being one of the main reasons for the problems that the Romanian society faces, although, most of the persons using this term, do not have knowledge of its correct meaning, thus creating a state of confusion.

Thus, most of the persons using it consider that it is absolutely specific only to public administration (sometimes the term bureaucracy is used as a synonym for public administration), and not for the private sector. In other words, it is believed that it regards only the public dimension, excluding the private one. This is totally wrong – the reality proved that bureaucracy can be found also within the private sector (see the private firms from the 90's), even if they are at a much lower rate. Others understand bureaucracy as a group of persons activating behind a desk, no matter what the activity presupposes. As a general concept they all agree that bureaucracy is something very bad, which affects their lives in a negative way.

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The implementation in people's conscience of the conception that bureaucracy phenomenon is a "malefic" one, starts at early ages. Such an example is the cartoon *The Twelve Tasks of Asterix*¹. Among the twelve tasks which the heroes, Asterix and Obelix must solve, there is also *Find Permit A 38 in "The Place That Sends You Mad"*, a place represented by a building of public administration, which makes the citizens of Rome lose their minds. In fact, this task represents the fight of the two heroes against the bureaucracy from the administration of the Roman Empire. In this battle the civil servants do not help them, but on the contrary, they send them to civil servants who are of no use to them, or make them fill in tens of useless forms. The heroes win this battle using their own weapons: they invent an imaginary permit, A 39, which brings chaos into the army of bureaucrats taken by surprise by the existence of a new element, which was not mentioned within their internal regulations. In order to emphasize the difficulty of the battle against the bureaucracy, this is set on the same level with some other tasks such as winning some Olympic Games, or battles with monsters or ghosts.

In spite of the facts presented so far, there is still one question: If the bureaucracy from the public administration is so much blamed, why does it still exist? This question shows us that it is necessary to make some remarks regarding the connotations of this term, in order to understand if it is an entirely negative phenomenon, or it may have some positive aspects as well.

2 Defining the Terms

For a better analysis of the term "bureaucracy", we will present its definitions in the specialized literature. The Dictionary of the Public Administration presents a series of definitions where the bureaucracy is defined as a general phenomenon of formalizing administration, so that it functions according to its own rules, having no connections with the social demands. The same dictionary mentions the fact that in the science of administration, more opinions have been expressed regarding the fact that "bureaucracy" is the "administrative tool through which the governors keep their seats" (R. Bendix), the fact that the administration becomes "independent towards the political power" (Max Weber), or, according to J. Elul's opinion, the

¹ The Twelve Tasks of Asterix/Les Douze travaux d'Astérix is an animated feature film based on the Asterix comic book series. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Twelve_Tasks_of_Asterix).

fact that the power monopoly is controlled by the technocrats, by the “professional elite”. (Parlagi, 2000, p. 28)

The bureaucratic structures are in Weber’s opinion, “the most rational form of domination, formally speaking”, and their internal organization is based on three principles: on ranking (a ranking system of individual civil servants whose competences are settled by the legal regulations), of impersonality (the bureaucratic structure is a distinct, impersonal one of the persons that make it, the impersonality of these structures is the one that assures their good functioning, adjusted to the current demands; the bureaucracy must be dehumanized in order to be able to completely eliminate from the official activity “love, hate, and all that is personal, irrational, emotional and incalculable; and of specializing/forming functions (the contemporary evolution of the civil servant “requires nowadays a specialized intellectual staff, with high qualification, trained in their job”, the specialization defines the nature of the relationship between civil servants and the political power to whom they are submitted to). (Max Weber apud Alexandru, 2007, p. 143-144) Weber also considers that a civil servant’s work represents a career or a vocation, which consumes the individual’s working ability for a long period of time. Thus, the civil servant is protected by the arbitrary dismissal and has the function for a lifetime, having assured: the salary, the pension, and other stimulating means; the privileges and compensations are based on the individual’s position within the ranking. Weber’s system¹ regards a structure of the staff’s careers which assures the promotion within the ranking based on age and testing (Alexandru, 2008, p.191). Almost all the European states convinced themselves that the public function from the career system represents the “incarnation” of a bureaucratic organization which guarantees maximum of freedom and efficiency (Demmke, 2004, p. 84).

In the foreign doctrine, Ludwig von Mises (2006, p. 40) making references to the terms bureaucratic, bureaucrat and bureaucracy, mentions that these are obviously invectives, because “nobody refers to him/herself as being a bureaucrat, or defines his/her activity as being bureaucratic”. He claims that these terms have a pejorative connotation, always implying a disagreeing criticism of the persons, institutions or

¹ The researchers of the social sciences criticized Weber’s theory because it did not take into account the dysfunctional elements implied by the reality of the organizing act, it did not deal with the problem of bureaucratic responsibility, and it did not distinguish between the hierarchical authority and the professional one, and it also ignored the information aspects of the organization (Alexandru, 2008, p. 191).

procedures. Even more, bureaucracy is presented as being entirely harmful, having no place to stay in a perfect world.

From the above mentioned facts, it is obvious there are major differences among specialists' opinions, and also among their opinions and the citizen's perception of the concept of bureaucracy, thus being sketched two very different views regarding this term. The first one has as a starting point Weber's theory and it presents bureaucracy as being a system whose aim is to successfully and efficiently accomplish some objectives, respecting some pre-settled rules. The second one has as supporters the Weber's contestants, who consider that bureaucracy is a too strict interpretation and application of the legal norms. According to this point of view, the formal side of solving problems is emphasized, the legal provisions being strictly respected, but omitting their spirit.

3. The Analysis of Bureaucracy

In order to accomplish our scientific purpose, the adequate understanding of this phenomenon, we will analyze some of the aspects in which it is present, the causes of this phenomenon, its functioning, its positive or negative influence upon the public administration, the possibilities of stopping its negative effects etc.

According to Beetham (1998, p. 62), the existing fundamental differences from the public administration and the private sector, lead to different performance standards. Thus, the administration deals with the general needs of a society, so that it can respect both the political and the performance criteria, and also aims at fulfilling the citizens' demands.

In the case of public administration, in analyzing bureaucracy, we must start from the citizens' discontent, the direct beneficiary of the public administration services. What makes the citizens discontented? How do they have a direct contact with the bureaucracy? The answer to these questions can be given by the relationship between the citizen and the civil servant, which in most cases ends with the total discontent of the citizens with the services of the public administration, as a result of the civil servants' inefficient activity. These seem to "forget" that one of the main objectives of the public administration is contenting the citizen's demands, and they hide behind some legal regulations. All these determine the citizen to identify the civil servant with a bureaucrat, which is a big mistake. We agree with the opinion (Ivanoff, 2008, pp. 286-287) according to which, the civil servants are

not bureaucrats. Thus, the civil servant who, in order to fulfill his/her competences, attributions or responsibilities according to the law, to solve some problems, asks the citizens for certain papers or documents required by the law, cannot be considered a bureaucrat only because the petitioner did not understand what documents he/she needs to solve his/her problem. Professor Ivanoff considers that what makes different a civil servant from a bureaucrat is “first of all the moral conscience which is formed through learning values and settling the moral principles”. Opposed to the authentic civil servant, the bureaucrat considers his/her work as being lacked of satisfactions and full of frustrations, this idea being the result of “the conflict between what he/she does and what he/she considers to be done, according to his/her skills” (Ivanoff, 2005, p. 107).

According to Ludwig von Mises (2006, p. 48) “the ones who criticize bureaucracy make the mistake of directing their attacks only against only one symptom, and not against the cause of the evil”. More and more citizens direct their criticism against the civil servants, making them the direct responsible of their discontent, instead of directing their criticism against the ones who adapt laws, dispositions and regulations (for example the Parliament), and who change the civil servant into a bureaucrat, restricting his/her action plan.

As a conclusion, we consider that not all the civil servants are bureaucrats, but we do not eliminate the existence of a high number of bureaucrats from among the civil servants in the public administration of our country.

As far as the causes of the appearance of bureaucracy are concerned, (Demmke, 2004, p. 56) there have been identified and enumerated a series of important factors common to all the administrations in which the bureaucratic phenomenon is present. Without talking about an exhaustive list, the following factors are presented:

- too many rules;
- too much focus on procedures and too little on the objectives;
- too little competition within the public sector, and between it and the private sector;
- too little citizen orientation;
- too little mobility in the personnel policy;
- overlong recruitment procedures;
- focus on qualification and seniority instead of competence profiles and merit;
- too little focus on economics;

- too few incentives for good individual and organizational performance;
- a remuneration system which is too rigid;
- bad leadership and no clear accountability of managers;
- high personnel costs;
- slow decision-making procedures.

One of the most “provocative” dysfunctions of the bureaucratic behavior regards the continuous tendency of bureaucracy of spreading. This spreading of the bureaucratic institutions makes more difficult the decisional process, leading, in most cases, to inefficiency caused by the difficulties from the communication process, and also by the implied high costs (Cerkez, 2010, p. 134). What generates the continuous spreading of the bureaucracy? The modern state gradually assumes new tasks, offering more and more services to its citizens in the field of education, health, social services, communication, transport etc. These services lead to an expansion of the administration, very often the bureaucracy interferes with the activity of the political structures, government and representative bodies. In other words, bureaucracies do not only execute politics and apply norms, but they also interfere in the process of making politics and norms. (Fisichella, 2007, pp. 302-303)

The reduction of the administration proportions represented and it still does represent a problem within the political debate, having echoes among the citizens. The government’s aim is to reduce the number of civil servants during their own mandate, but, due to the arbitrary employments of the party, to corruption and nepotism, at the end of their mandate, it is noticed that the administration has the same big number, if not bigger as it was at the beginning, of employees, reason for which, the new government aims again at reducing bureaucracy. The economical crises from the last years generated a great number of unemployed, which determined the unions to ask for reducing their number by an increase of the public costs, which lead to an increase and not a decrease of the administration proportion. (Alexandru, 2010, p. 162) Under these circumstances we consider that the only viable solution is reducing, in a controlled manner, the number of staff. There is no measuring unit, no standard procedure which must be applied on all the structures of the administration. These cuts must be applied after studying each and every situation. The cuts may be of 10% - 90% in the overcrowded structures, or even of 100% when it is desired to dissolve some useless bureaucratic structures, or, if it is the case, an increase of the number of staff in certain structures so that the activity of the administration can be performed properly.

No matter how advantageous the re-organization would be, or how scientifically the work would be organized, if the cuts are only based on profitableness studies, the result will be inevitably, an over loading of the work for the civil servants who stay within the structure and are not fired, fact that will drastically lead to a poorer quality of their work, and of course of the quality level of the public services (Alexandru, 2010, p. 163).

The cause presented so far has determined the creation of a negative “reputation” for the bureaucracy, which also made the specialized doctrine to identify means of preventing this phenomenon, such as rationalizing the procedures and massive introduction of informatics in the public administration.

As far as the introduction of informatics into the administration is concerned, although we do not consider the “one and only desk” as being the “medicine of simplifying the procedure for releasing notifications” (Alexandru, 2010, p. 162) we must mention the major contribution of informatics in fluidizing and simplifying the working processes from the public administration, knowing that working in administration involves repetitive activities, which may lead to blockages and delays in solving the citizens’ demands.

We must also mention the fact that the process of bringing informatics into the public administration may be a trap, being the first step in making an electronic bureaucracy (*for example, wishing to create a database for the future, more than necessary data are required for solving the problem, or an error such as introducing error data, it can be deleted only after some supplementary procedures, that require special notifications etc.*).

4 Conclusions

Starting from the above mentioned facts, and trying to answer the title question – bureaucracy – angel or demon? – we consider that bureaucracy is the personification of a necessary evil, being at the border between good and bad, it can be an angel or a demon, being able to produce both positive and negative effects upon the relationship between the civil servant and the citizen. This statement starts from the bureaucratic structure, which in Weber’s views, is a rational, legal structure which can visibly improve the performances of the administration, efficiently solving the citizens’ demands. On the other side, any exception from Weber’s three principles (ranking, impersonality, specializing

functions), makes the bureaucracy turn from a positive element, into a negative one, becoming that invisible, malefic, negative effects maker, which in some writers' opinion must be stopped with any costs.

Professor Alexandru (2010, p. 163) considers that in Romania, due to the lack of some interdisciplinary serious studies which to analyze the state of distributing competences within the structures from the public administration, and that can be used in the process of re-organizing the administrative apparatus, in order to reduce the ranking levels and simplify the procedures, the stopping of the bureaucracy will be unscientifically based and differently applied on non-objective criteria, according to the manager's power of influence of the specific administration, who will be able to protect more or less his administrative apparatus from these staff cuts.

On the same manner, in the actual foreign doctrine (Olsen, 2005, p. 19), in the paper *Maybe It Is Time to Rediscover Bureaucracy*, the author considers that "rediscovering Weber's analysis of bureaucratic organization enriches our understanding of such questions and of public administration in general".

Up to now we can notice that also the Romanian doctrine do not stands in favor of stopping bureaucracy, but on the contrary, for "rediscovering" and why not applying it so that to be made new specialized structures able to support the citizen

To our point of view, the combination between bureaucracy and informatics can be considered as being the best solution for a transparent and efficient relationship of the administration with the citizens; informatics prevents bureaucracy from becoming inefficient. This is the way in which a simplified, fast and efficient flux of the documents can be achieved within the administration, and also the mass and un-discriminatory access of the citizens to the quality public services can be done on the grounds of a bi-directional communication – from the citizen towards the administration, and from the administration towards the citizen. This solution must be fulfilled by some professionals of the public administration, having specialized studies and a positive attitude towards work, who should place the public interest above the personal one.

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*** http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Twelve_Tasks_of_Asterix, date: 10.10.2011.