

PROFESSIONALIZATION OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION UNDER FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS: FORMAL STANDARDS AND OPERATIONAL OUTCOMES

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Abstract: *The professionalization of public administration is most often examined through normative standards and reform models aimed at building a competent, stable, and politically neutral civil service. However, such approaches provide limited insight into how professional requirements are operationalized under real conditions of public sector functioning, particularly in the context of long-term financial and managerial constraints characteristic of post-socialist countries. Addressing this analytical gap, the paper develops a conceptual framework that treats professionalization not as a single reform outcome, but as an institutional process shaped by financial management and human resource management practices. Particular attention is devoted to distinguishing between formal professionalization, based on normative rules and institutional standards, and operational professionalization, which emerges through everyday administrative decisions and organizational practices. Using a theoretical-analytical approach, the paper identifies four patterns of operational professionalization—procedural, defensive, selective, and project-based—which are interpreted as institutional responses to limited financial and managerial capacities and complex politico-administrative relations. The analysis also acknowledges the role of public sector accounting frameworks and related professional standards as institutional*

instruments that support transparency, accountability, and control within public financial management, thereby influencing the operational scope of public administration professionalization. The findings indicate that professional standards are applied, adapted, and reinterpreted differently in practice, depending on institutional capacities. The paper contributes by conceptualizing operational professionalization as the practical expression of public administration professionalization and by developing a model that links normative standards, the financial framework, and human resource management practices with professionalization outcomes in terms of efficiency and fairness.

Key words: *public administration, professionalization, financial management, human resources management, public sector accounting framework, institutional capacities*

JEL classification: *H83, J24, M40*

1. INTRODUCTION

The professionalization of public administration is one of the central topics in administrative reform. This issue is particularly relevant in post-socialist countries that have undergone processes of institutional transformation (Dobbins et al., 2022; Mojić et al., 2018; Meyer-Sahling, 2012). In public administration theory, it is difficult to find a

precise definition of professionalization. However, it is usually connected to transparent recruitment rules, the development of employee competences, merit-based systems of promotion and rewards, and the application of strong ethical standards in public administration (Dudová & Matušová, 2024; Aliushyna et al., 2022). From this perspective, professionalization is often presented in the literature as a normative ideal. Its expected outcome is a politically neutral, efficient, and accountable administration (Zolak Poljašević, 2026; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004). In practice, many administrative systems, particularly in post-socialist countries, show a significant gap between formally established professional standards and everyday practices (Meyer-Sahling, 2016; Neshkova & Kostadinova, 2012). This gap arises because normative frameworks are often developed in line with international principles of good governance, while their implementation takes place under conditions of limited financial resources and managerial challenges (Christensen & Lægred, 2025). Under such conditions, professionalization rarely unfolds as a linear reform process. Instead, it tends to take the form of a complex process of institutional adaptation.

A review of the relevant literature shows that the professionalization of public administration is often analyzed through normative models (Weimer, 2020; Rice, 1992), reform strategies (Dobbins et al., 2022; Meyer-Sahling, 2012), or formal institutional processes (Mujkanović, 2019). While these approaches define the goals and principles of professionalization, they provide limited insight into how professional standards are operationalized in the everyday functioning of public administration. In other words, in theory, professionalization is conceptually linked to what administrative systems should be (Weimer, 2020), while much less attention is paid to the outcomes of professionalization as they emerge in practice under various institutional constraints.

Among these institutional constraints, financial management and human resource management (HRM) play a particularly important role. Budget rules, planning cycles, and financial control mechanisms define the boundaries within which professional standards can be implemented. At the same time, HRM practices, such as recruitment, training, professional development, performance evaluation, and rewards (Zolak Poljašević, 2026), represent the concrete, operational form of defined professional standards. At this level, public administration professionalization is not only a normative concept but also part of everyday practice.

The main research problem in this paper arises from the limited theoretical distinction between

formally established professionalization and actual patterns of professional practice in public administration. The aim of the paper is to clarify more explicitly how professionalization is realized under conditions of financial and managerial constraints. The paper makes a clear distinction between formal and operational professionalization. Formal professionalization refers to the normative framework of public administration, while operational professionalization reflects its actual outcomes in practice. In addition, the paper contributes by developing a conceptual model that identifies four patterns of operational professionalization characteristic of the post-socialist context and links them to broader outcomes of public administration performance.

Accordingly, the paper is structured as follows. It first examines the concept of formal professionalization and its normative foundations. It then explains the role of financial management as a framework that shapes possible administrative action. The next section considers HRM as the mechanism through which institutional and financial constraints are translated into operational practice. The central part of the paper focuses on the conceptualization of operational professionalization and the identification of its main patterns. The final sections discuss the implications of these processes, summarize the key conclusions, outline research limitations, and suggest directions for future research.

2. FORMAL PROFESSIONALIZATION OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Formal professionalization represents one of the basic ways of establishing and improving professional activity within the public service. It is based on the normative definition of work standards, recruitment procedures, rules of professional conduct, promotion criteria, and reward systems. In this way, the concept and values of professionalization are incorporated into the institutional architecture of public administration. Through the legislative framework and internal organizational rules, required professional standards take the form of binding rules, and not just value-based expectations. Therefore, formal professionalization is most often viewed through the prism of compliance with prescribed standards of public administration (Pugh, 1989; OECD, 1997). This approach aims to ensure predictability in administrative action and to reduce the scope for arbitrary managerial decision-making.

Formal professionalization is grounded in the rational-legal model of governance, in which legitimacy is derived from prescribed rules and

institutionally defined authority (Hashimov, 2025). Within this model, professional integrity is more often tied to hierarchical position (Weber, 1978) than to individual performance.

Formal professionalization has an important stabilizing function. It enables a clear division of roles, the development of institutional memory, and continuity in public administration. On the other hand, the formal character of this management approach simultaneously determines its limits (Samuel et al., 2025). Although professional standards may be clearly defined, they remain tied to the legal and organizational level, while their actual implementation depends on the conditions under which public administration operates. Normatively prescribed rules do not automatically produce professional behavior in practice. They establish a framework within which professionalization may, but does not necessarily, be realized in practice (Sørensen & Torfing, 2024; Lawler & Hage, 1973).

In post-socialist administrative systems, formal professionalization has a particularly prominent role. During the transition process, post-socialist countries introduced extensive public administration reforms. These reforms included the adoption of laws, secondary regulations, internal rules, codes, and other reform documents aimed at strengthening and institutionalizing public administration professionalization (Meyer-Sahling, 2009a; Randma-Liiv, 2008; Verheijen & Rabrenović, 2007). As a result, professionalization was primarily advanced through the establishment of formal rules and procedures, which represented visible and measurable reform outcomes. However, the normative aspect of professionalization was not implemented in an institutionally neutral environment (Mojic & Jovančević, 2020). It should be emphasized that the administrative systems of post-socialist countries function under limited financial capacities and inherited patterns of administrative culture (Zolak Poljašević et al., 2025; Zaka, 2021), which constrain the effects of formally adopted solutions. Consequently, public administration professionalization in the post-socialist context often takes the form of an institutional minimum of professionalism. Standards exist and procedures are formally defined, but their consistent implementation remains partial and uneven (Meyer-Sahling & Yesilkagit, 2011; Jerre, 2001).

Based on the above, formal professionalization should not be viewed as the final stage of public administration development, but rather as a foundation on which actual patterns of professional practice are formed. Its effects depend on the system's capacity to provide stable organizational, financial, and managerial conditions for the

consistent application of professional standards. From a research perspective, the analysis of professionalization should not be limited to its normative framework. It also requires attention to the mechanisms through which formal professionalization standards are translated into operational administrative practices. This opens space for examining the role of financial management and HRM, which act as key mediators between formal professionalization and its real institutional outcomes and effects.

3. PROFESSIONALIZATION UNDER FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS

Financial management is an important factor for understanding how public administration functions. The concept of public financial management has entered broader academic use relatively recently, and the literature still lacks a universally accepted definition (Allen et al., 2013). Earlier studies emphasize the evolutionary nature of public financial management, noting its gradual expansion beyond traditional budgetary issues toward broader frameworks and models of public resource management. This framework includes revenue collection, expenditure control, public debt management, as well as the short, medium, and long-term fiscal implications of public policies (Cangiano et al., 2013). Building on this understanding, Andrews et al. (2014) define public financial management as “the way governments manage public resources (both revenue and expenditure) and the immediate and medium to long term impact of such resources on the economy or society.”

Public financial management influences decision-making processes, priority setting, and the allocation of responsibilities within public administration (Reynilda, 2025; Cangiano et al., 2013). At the same time, the complexity and costs of these processes are often underestimated (Jovičić, 2022a). Budget rules, annual planning cycles, and expenditure control mechanisms do not only determine the level of available resources. They also shape the time horizon of decision-making, the scope for strategic action, and the degree of autonomy of organizational units. In this way, financial management assumes the role of an institutional factor that directly guides managerial behavior (Sicilia & Steccolini, 2017).

Financial management in the public administration is based on a logic of predictability and control. Budget systems are designed to limit risk and ensure formal accountability in the use of public funds, but this orientation also produces a specific managerial rationality (Piatti-Fünfkirchen et al., 2019). Decisions are most often aligned with the annual budget cycle, with the expectation that

results can be clearly documented and financially justified within a single budget year.

This type of rationality has direct implications for public administration professionalization. Professional development, competence building, and organizational learning require continuity and stable investment conditions, while budget planning relies on short time horizons and procedural compliance. As a result, professionalization is often misaligned with the dominant model of financial management. Its effects are long-term and indirect, whereas public financial management systems prioritize visible and measurable outcomes. In this context, financial constraints do not relate only to the level of available resources, but also to the way they are used. Institutional rules are often designed to limit reallocation, reduce flexibility in cost management, and narrow managerial discretion in decisions on development priorities. Recent studies additionally indicate that the quality of public financial management and professional standards in the public sector is increasingly linked to the application of advanced accounting frameworks and digital technologies. Petrović, Tanasić and Radovanović (2022) emphasize that blockchain-based solutions in accounting and public finance can strengthen transparency, accountability and control mechanisms, thereby indirectly supporting professionalization processes even under fiscal constraints. Under such arrangements, priority is given to activities that can be quickly linked to budget execution, while investments in professional development remain exposed to delay or fragmentation.

In post-socialist administrative systems, budgetary capacities are often limited, planning is exposed to frequent change, and governance arrangements remain unstable (Bouckaert et al., 2011). Under these conditions, financial management assumes a central role in preserving institutional functionality, while the long-term development of administrative capacities is more difficult to sustain as a consistent priority. For this reason, professionalization under conditions of financial constraint does not necessarily indicate weak reform intentions or the absence of normative standards. More often, it represents a rational institutional outcome of systems operating within clearly defined financial and managerial boundaries (Demmke, 2017). Professional principles formally remain in place, but their application is adjusted to available resources, budget rules, and dominant control mechanisms (Varhatyi, 2024; Abduraimova, 2021; Elliott, 2020). Within such a framework, professionalization takes a form that differs from models found in more stable administrative

systems. It does not develop as a cumulative process of strengthening professional capacity, but rather as an adaptive pattern in which professional standards are continuously adjusted to financial constraints.

The traditional view of public administration as a poor manager can be challenged only by demonstrating that greater value for money can be achieved through the application of business-oriented financial principles in public financial management. For this to be possible, public administration professionalization must be treated as a capital investment. This approach is based on the assumption that public administration, in this case acting as an investor, should operate in a business-like manner without undermining its social role in society (Jovičić, 2022b).

The conceptual-analytical model developed in this paper positions financial management as the key framework that defines the boundaries within which public administration professionalization can be operationally realized. The following chapter shifts the focus to HRM as the mechanism through which financial constraints are translated into concrete managerial decisions and everyday administrative practices.

4. HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AS AN ADAPTIVE MECHANISM

HRM in public administration is traditionally associated with workforce planning, recruitment, training and competence development, performance improvement, and, more broadly, the strengthening of professional capacity in administrative systems (Saptura et al., 2024; Croitoru & Bercu, 2025; Obed Daniel, 2023). In both reform-oriented and normative approaches, HRM is often presented as a key instrument of public administration modernization, through which professional standards are embedded in everyday organizational practice (Zolak Poljašević, 2026).

However, such interpretations generally assume relatively stable financial and managerial conditions, which are rarely present in practice. Under conditions of limited resources and strictly regulated procedures, HRM lacks the space and autonomy to operate as a developmental tool. Instead, it functions primarily as an organizational mechanism that recognizes institutional constraints and translates them into the day-to-day functioning of public administration. At this level, prescribed rules, budget limits, and managerial priorities take concrete form and are operationalized through decisions on recruitment, staff allocation, the scope of professional training, promotion opportunities, and levels of material compensation. In this

context, the definition of professional roles and certification requirements becomes an important element of human resource management. Petrović and Tanasić (2020) point out that clearly defined professional positions and certification of management accountants contribute to strengthening professional responsibility and decision-making capacity, which is particularly relevant in public sector organizations operating under financial and institutional constraints.

In public administration, decisions related to personnel are more often a response to immediate organizational needs than the result of strategically defined policies, which makes the role of human resource management primarily adaptive. Instead of acting as an instrument for strengthening professional capacities, which is often propagated as a desirable model in theory and reform documents, HRM most often serves to adjust to existing financial and procedural constraints. Recruitment is directed toward filling essential functions, training is implemented selectively, and reward systems remain strictly tied to rules of budgetary discipline (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017; OECD, 2016). Under financial pressure, training and professional development programs are frequently deprioritized (Elliott, 2020; Jewson et al., 2015), which further weakens the capacities of administrative systems.

Some research indicates that financial constraints and institutional pressures lead to the ad hoc application of HRM reforms, in which specific HR instruments are adjusted independently rather than integrated into a strategically aligned whole (Demmke, 2016). In addition to financial constraints, institutional resistance to change, which is particularly pronounced in post-socialist contexts, also contributes to the fragmentation of HR practices (Zolak Poljašević et al., 2025). In post-socialist administrative systems, these constraints are closely linked to strong political influence over personnel management (Zolak Poljašević et al., 2025; Soni et al., 2025; Ramić & Omanović, 2018). As a result, the scope of HRM action is shaped not only by formal budgetary rules, but also by informal patterns of political decision-making.

Based on the discussion so far and previous research, it can be concluded that HRM in public administration balances between formal professional standards, financial constraints, specific organizational cultures, inherited administrative patterns, and political expectations. This significantly shapes the way HRM is applied in practice. In other words, HRM does not function as a neutral instrument for operationalizing professional norms and standards, but rather as a mechanism of selection, filtering, and adaptation.

Although professional requirements are not entirely abandoned under such constrained conditions, their application tends to focus on those areas that are institutionally feasible and politically acceptable. This dynamic creates space for the analysis of operational professionalization, which is examined in detail in the following chapter.

5. OPERATIONAL PROFESSIONALIZATION AS AN INSTITUTIONAL OUTCOME

Operational professionalization refers to a form of professionalization that develops in the practice and may diverge from formally established normative standards in public administration. This perspective corresponds to the distinction between professionalization *de jure* and professionalization *de facto*, which is already well established in public administration theory and is important for understanding the actual outcomes of reform processes (Schuster, 2017; Meyer-Sahling, 2009b). In this paper, operational professionalization is not treated as the opposite of formal professionalization, but as its practical outcome. It represents a form of professionalization that emerges at the intersection of normatively defined standards, financial constraints, and organizational instruments through which HRM is carried out in practice.

One of the key differences between formal and operational professionalization lies in the function of professional standards. In the case of formal professionalization, professional standards primarily serve to establish a framework of legitimacy for administrative action. They also have an important symbolic function, as their existence signals the professional character of public administration. By contrast, within operational professionalization, professional standards are continuously adjusted to everyday administrative work. In this sense, their role is mainly guiding rather than binding, as they indicate a desired direction of action. The distinction between the formal and operational functions of professionalization has long been recognized in the literature. Meyer and Rowan (1977), for example, explain this separation through the concept of decoupling between formal structures and actual organizational practices.

This perspective on professionalization is particularly important in the context of post-socialist countries, where normative frameworks are often well developed in formal terms, while operational capacities remain limited. Under such conditions, specific patterns of professional practice emerge that cannot be fully explained by

existing models of public administration, such as New Public Management or Good Governance.

Empirical research in Central and Southeast European countries shows that public administration professionalization often takes hybrid forms, in which formal merit-based rules coexist with adapted and informal patterns of personnel management (Gajduschek & Staronova, 2023; Meyer-Sahling & Mikkelsen, 2016). This configuration of influencing factors shape different forms of professionalization in practice, which are treated in this paper as distinct patterns of operational professionalization. Based on the literature review, four characteristic patterns of action can be identified in post-transition public administration systems. Based on their main features, these patterns are defined here as procedural, defensive, selective, and project-oriented models of professionalization.

The first of the four identified models, or patterns, of operational professionalization is linked to procedural forms of public administration action. This model is particularly prevalent in practice. In this model, professionalization is primarily associated with formal legality, compliance with prescribed procedures, and correct administrative conduct, which corresponds to the logic of the legal-bureaucratic approach in public administration (Weber, 1978). Within this framework, professionalization is expressed through the consistent application of rules and procedures. Unfortunately, in practice the focus often shifts away from the substance and effects of decisions. Instead, attention is directed toward their formal correctness and compliance with the existing normative and procedural framework (Bovens, 2007; Mashaw, 2006; Olsen, 2006).

The model of procedural professionalization is reproduced in practice through specific HRM processes and activities. One of these is recruitment. In public administration, recruitment processes are often reduced to the verification of formal qualifications and compliance with prescribed requirements. The assessment of candidates' actual competences is pushed into the background and, in some cases, omitted altogether. Accordingly, the level of professionalization of recruitment is measured primarily through the administrative correctness of recruitment and selection procedures, rather than through an assessment of candidates' actual ability to perform administrative tasks effectively and competently.

A similar logic is present in the area of training and professional development. Training activities in public administration are frequently organized to meet formal requirements rather than to genuinely enhance employees' professional

capacities. As a result, employees formally confirm their professional development through participation in training programs, without this necessarily being accompanied by improvements in knowledge and skills or changes in work practices.

In the field of rewards and promotion, procedural logic is reflected in formally prescribed criteria and conditions for advancement. Professional integrity is often understood as the ability to function within established rules, rather than as the capacity for independent professional judgment and action. It should be emphasized that, within this model of professionalization, HRM does not act as a corrective to procedural rigidity. On the contrary, it contributes to its institutional reproduction by establishing patterns of acceptable conduct and behavior among public administration employees.

The second model of operational professionalization stems from defensive patterns of behavior and action in public administration, commonly referred to in the literature as defensive bureaucracy (Lorenzoni, 2023). In this model, professional behavior is oriented toward minimizing personal and institutional risk (Ashforth & Lee, 1990; Hood, 2011). This is due to accountability systems in which incorrect decisions are highly visible and potentially sanctioned. As a result, decisions are made cautiously, with strong reliance on hierarchy, written documentation, and formal approvals. Such patterns of action function as organizational strategies that allow public administration employees to disperse and mitigate individual responsibility (Artinger et al., 2019; Hood, 2011). At the same time, public administration professionalization is expressed and reinforced through conflict avoidance, strict adherence to formal competences, and the limitation of personal responsibility. While this defensive form of professionalization contributes to administrative stability, it simultaneously reduces the system's capacity for proactive action and innovation (Lorenzoni, 2023; Hood, 2011).

Within this model of professionalization, HRM practices implicitly contribute to the formation of defensive behavior among employees in situations involving potential accountability. Performance evaluation is one HRM practice through which the previously discussed mismatch between formal structures and actual organizational practices becomes visible. In many public administrations, performance appraisal regulations formally include criteria such as autonomy at work, initiative, creativity, communication skills, and adaptability to change. While these criteria give performance evaluation systems a modern and professional

appearance, they rarely lead to real change. In practice, behaviors involving greater autonomy, initiative, or deviation from established procedures are not recognized as genuinely desirable. As a result, performance evaluation in many public administration institutions is reduced to the formal completion of appraisal forms, while signals about truly acceptable professional behavior are communicated through implicit norms. In this way, formal evaluation systems that encourage creativity and initiative are overridden by organizational culture norms that define desirable behavior as problem avoidance, respect for hierarchy, and the preservation of system stability.

The same defensive logic is reproduced through promotion systems. Formal rules link professional advancement to competence and performance, but actual career development often depends on long-term presence within hierarchical structures, loyalty to superiors, and willingness to adapt to existing work patterns. Taking responsibility, acting innovatively, or departing from established routines is rarely institutionally recognized as a basis for career advancement.

The defensive model of professionalization is also reflected in training and professional development programs. In many cases, the primary goal of training in public administration is not the acquisition of new skills, but the reduction of the risk of incorrect action. Such training focuses on detailed familiarization with rules, regulations, and the limits of permissible behavior. Through these HRM activities, employees gradually internalize implicit messages about which actions are organizationally acceptable and which involve personal risk and should therefore be avoided. Overall, the defensive model of professionalization is not imposed through explicit rules. Instead, it is shaped through everyday patterns of administrative practice.

The third model of operational professionalization identified in this paper is associated with the selective or uneven application of professional standards. In other words, the application of these standards varies depending on institutional visibility, the intensity of external oversight, and, in many cases, the sources of funding in the administrative areas subject to professionalization. Although professional standards are formally presented as universal, their operational application is highly differentiated, particularly under conditions of external pressure (Bromley & Powell, 2012). In the post-socialist context, selective professionalization is most evident in administrative segments exposed to increased monitoring by international institutions. The literature describes this phenomenon as the emergence of the so-called “islands of excellence”

within institutions and administrative units linked to EU-related processes (OECD, 2018; Meyer-Sahling, 2012; Goetz, 2006). However, existing reports and empirical studies indicate that such excellence rarely spills over to the rest of the system. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that professional standards are more consistently operationalized in areas that are subject to stricter procedures and external monitoring. In contrast, in parts of the system that are less closely supervised, professional standards often remain at a formal or declarative level. This differentiated application of professional standards is characteristic of systems operating under resource constraints and persistent overlap between administrative and political logics of action.

As in the previous models of operational professionalization, HRM also plays an important mediating role in how professional standards are applied in practice in this case. Selective professionalization can be observed in recruitment and staff allocation processes, where employees with greater experience and professional expertise are reassigned to organizations with higher institutional visibility or to units responsible for key reform tasks. In this way, professional capacity is not developed systematically across the system, but selectively concentrated in specific segments of public administration.

Professional training and development represent a particularly suitable HRM practice for the selective professionalization pattern. Access to specialized training programs and learning opportunities is typically directed toward employees working in priority organizational units. In other, less visible parts of public administration, training activities are less intensive and have a more limited impact on employees’ professional development. As a consequence, some organizational units gradually develop specialized knowledge and a higher degree of professional autonomy, while other parts of the system remain at the level of minimal professional requirements.

Just as HRM does not act as a corrective to procedural rigidity or defensive bureaucracy, in this form of professionalization it also functions as a mechanism for reproducing the selective application of professional standards.

The fourth model of operational professionalization is closely related to the previous one and emerges in the context of the increasing reliance on projects as a mode of organizing work across different sectors (Midler, 1995; Maylor et al., 2006; Packendorff & Lindgren, 2014), including public administration (Hodgson et al., 2019). In this pattern, the

application of professional standards is linked to time-limited projects, donor-funded programs, and external initiatives, while the professionalization process itself takes place outside regular administrative structures. In this case, professionalization does not appear as a planned and long-term process, but rather as a secondary effect of project-based activities (Jalocha, 2024). Project-oriented professionalization is characterized by its temporary nature and weak institutional integration, which means that newly adopted professional standards are rarely implemented across the public administration system as a whole. In post-socialist countries, administrative systems have limited capacity for systematic strengthening of professional structures. As a result, project-based professionalization often functions as a substitute for more permanent forms of professional development (Meyer-Sahling, 2012).

In the model of project-based professionalization, HRM practices acquire a situational and time-limited character. Specific HRM activities intensify during project implementation phases. This includes targeted training, the introduction of new work tools, and the establishment of professional standards aligned with project-specific rules, procedures, and donor requirements. These HRM activities do not result from an internal institutional strategy, but rather represent an operational response to predefined project objectives and timelines.

For this reason, such practices often lose continuity and institutional support once the project cycle ends. As a consequence, a fragmented pattern of professional development emerges, in which certain employees, teams, or organizational units achieve visible progress, while the administrative system as a whole does not undergo a stable and cumulative transformation.

Project-oriented professionalization points to a specific institutional paradox. On the one hand, it confirms that public administration has the capacity for professionalization under conditions of secured funding, clear rules of action, and strong external oversight. On the other hand, it clearly highlights the lack of sustainability of professional standards in the absence of long-term budgetary support and their integration into formal HRM policies and practices.

Following the detailed elaboration of the four models of operational professionalization, it can be concluded that procedural and defensive professionalization contribute to the stability and predictability of the administrative system. Selective and project-based professionalization allow higher professional standards in specific

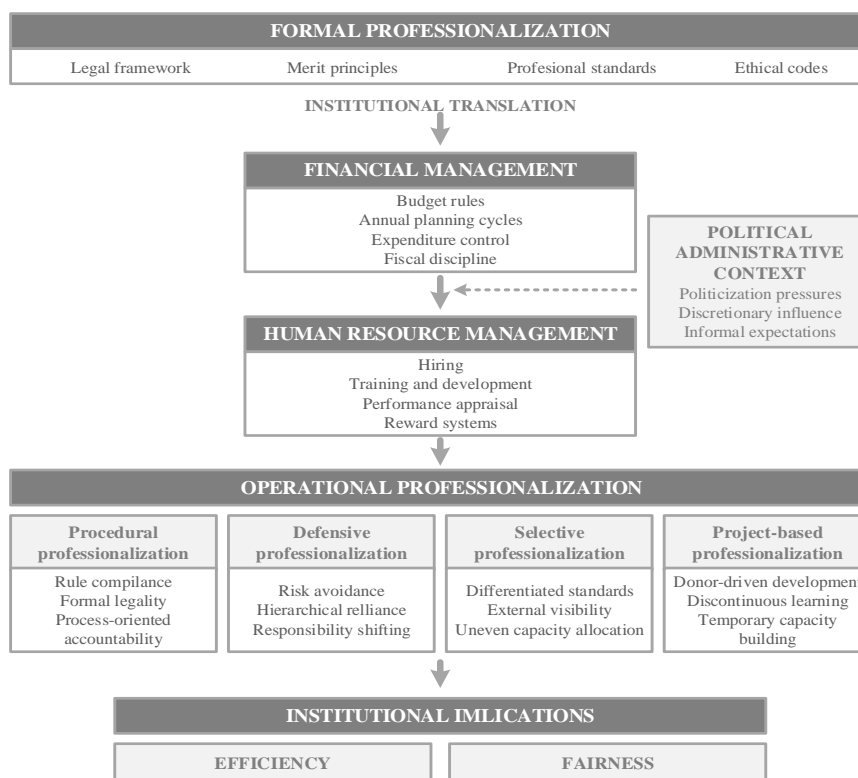
segments of the system, but they also generate internal asymmetries and discontinuities in the quality of governance.

The described models of professionalization do not exclude one another. On the contrary, they often occur simultaneously, creating complex patterns of professional practice within public administration. Their effects can be assessed through broader public administration outcomes. The discussion below examines the effects of operational professionalization on two outcomes that are central in public administration theory: efficiency and fairness (Olsen, 2006; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). Efficiency resulting from operational professionalization is primarily procedural in nature (Olsen, 2006; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017; Peters, 2018). Under conditions of limited budget and strict financial discipline, professional practices are directed toward maintaining system stability and ensuring compliance with prescribed procedures. Administrative systems develop forms of professional action that are compatible with existing financial and managerial constraints. However, such forms rarely lead to significant performance improvements. In this context, public administration efficiency is not measured solely by outcomes, but by the system's ability to endure and function within given institutional boundaries.

Similar effects of operational professionalization can also be observed with regard to fairness in public administration's treatment of citizens. Traditionally, professional standards in public administration are associated with consistent rule application, impartiality, and equal treatment of public service users (Bovens, 2007; Mashaw, 2006). However, operational professionalization and its practical forms ensure equality of rules and procedures, but not necessarily equality of outcomes. This is particularly evident under conditions of limited resources and uneven organizational capacities (Goodin, 1988). Operational professionalization therefore produces a form of fairness that is procedurally consistent but limited in practice. In other words, public service users are formally treated as equals, but remain unequal in practice.

The analysis presented in this section of the paper clearly demonstrates that professionalization of the public administration cannot be understood as a simple linear process. Instead, it reflects a dynamic interaction between normative requirements, financial constraints, and organizational mechanisms through which professional standards are translated into practice. The conceptual model of public administration professionalization developed in this paper is presented below, with the aim of illustrating and integrating these relationships in an analytical way.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Public Administration Professionalization under Institutional Constraints



Source: Authors

The presented model illustrates that professional standards defined within the normative framework do not translate directly into practice. Instead, they are first filtered through the financial framework and then operationalized through HRM practices. The model also acknowledges the role of the political-administrative factor, which acts as an external influence shaping the operationalization of professional standards. Overall, the model provides a basis for understanding professionalization as an actual institutional outcome, rather than solely as a normative objective of administrative reforms.

CONCLUSIONS

Professionalization of public administration cannot be understood as a simple outcome of normative design or reform interventions. The analysis developed in this paper shows that normatively defined professional standards are modified in practice under the influence of financial constraints and, often, political-administrative factors. Their operational form is realized through HRM practices and instruments. Ultimately, public administration professionalization evolves in line with the system’s actual capacities.

By explaining the concept of operational professionalization, this paper contributes to understanding the gap between normative

expectations and actual administrative outcomes. It shows that under conditions of limited resources, professionalization takes different forms aimed at preserving the basic functionality of the administrative system. Procedural and defensive models of professionalization support institutional stability and predictability, while selective and project-based models lead to uneven and discontinuous application of professional standards. These patterns can be viewed either as deviations from the professionalization process or as rational system responses to long-term financial and managerial constraints, as well as political influences. The described patterns of professionalization are characteristic of administrative systems in post-socialist countries, where high normative requirements intersect with limited capacities for implementation.

The theoretical contribution of this paper lies in shifting the analytical focus from formal professionalization to the question of how professionalization functions under real institutional conditions. In the analysis developed in this paper, professionalization is not treated as a normative ideal, but as a dynamic process of adaptation that produces specific and partly ambivalent outcomes. The proposed conceptual model provides a basis for systematically examining these relationships and offers an

analytical framework suitable for further empirical and comparative research.

However, this paper has certain limitations. The conceptual model is derived from a theoretical-analytical approach and does not include empirical validation of the identified models of operational professionalization in specific public administration systems. In addition, the analysis primarily draws on the experience of post-socialist countries, which limits the generalizability of the findings to administrative systems with more stable financial and institutional capacities. Accordingly, future research should focus on empirical validation of the proposed model through case studies or appropriate comparative analyses. An additional relevant research direction involves a deeper examination of the relationship between the identified models of operational professionalization and the political-administrative framework.

In conclusion, this paper confirms that professionalization of public administration cannot be viewed as a normative category separated from institutional reality. Its actual scope depends on how professional standards are applied in practice under financial and managerial constraints. Understanding this dynamic is a prerequisite for a realistic approach to public administration reform that does not treat professionalization as a normative ideal or a merely declarative objective.

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