

Emerging Markets Queries in Finance and Business

Citizens' satisfaction with tariffs and methods of payment for services provided by local public authorities. Empirical evidence in Romania

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Abstract

In the context of a sharp decrease in the citizens' standard of living, and of the increase in unemployment and the need to upgrade local infrastructure, public authorities throughout the country face some major challenges. On the one hand, they have to ensure the cash flow needed to support current and new investments and, on the other hand, manage properly the local tax and duty receipts. As the international visibility of localities cannot be increased unless thoughtful and well-funded investment plans are implemented to remediate local infrastructure, local public authorities must see that citizens are still satisfied with the level of taxation and the public services provided. Local public authorities must prove fully responsible with the public money and grant low-income people the possibility to pay taxes by installments. Additionally, they must innovate, granting citizens various methods of payment of taxes and duties due: at the cash desk, through bank transfer or by credit card. Within the research conducted among local public authorities in Transylvania, the authors attempt to highlight to what degree these objectives are implemented in localities studied by decision-makers, as well as citizens' degree of satisfaction with these objectives.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of Asociatia Grupul Roman de Cercetari in Finante Corporatiste

Keywords: citizens' satisfaction; public authorities; well-funded investment plans.

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1. Introduction

As local public authorities tackle the burning issue of funding investment and infrastructure projects, they also have to face a major challenge, namely, meeting the citizen's requirements and demands about tax reduction and the provision of money for local current expenditure. Against this background, one major problem is how to content and satisfy citizens given that available resources are becoming increasingly scarce, local taxes and duties rise and new community services need to be introduced.

Although the complex issue of contentment and of increasing citizens' satisfaction with local services and particularly the level of taxation are high on the agenda of politicians and local representatives, actual steps to develop and implement strategies in this regard are almost completely absent. This aspect has scarcely been dealt with by the scholarly literature as not many studies set to identify citizens' level of satisfaction with the services provided by local authorities and with those provided by state-owned or private companies under the control of the municipality. Various authors deal with the types of services provided by local public administrations, and with how aware citizens are of these services, but no comparative analysis whatsoever has been performed for any particular region. The only scientific studies identified so far have been the ones dealing mainly with citizens' contentment and/or satisfaction with various types of services provided in a particular locality. Nevertheless, there are no studies comparing regions or localities of different sizes.

Therefore, a research study covering one of Romania's development macro regions—Transylvania—and showing how citizens of different types of localities (villages, small, midsize and large cities) perceive and appreciate the level of satisfaction with local taxes and duties and the level of general contentment with various types of services provided by authorities appeared highly interesting, relevant and representative. At the same time, the authors attempted to emphasize citizens' level of contentment with different means of paying local taxes and duties.

Through their research, the authors attempt to fill a gap in the Romanian scholarly literature by highlighting a number of managerial and scientific implications that help local authorities and administrations develop proper strategies in their attempts to satisfy citizens.

Following an overview of the main directions of research on local administrations, types of services provided and the level of taxes and duties in Romania, the authors describe the research methodology and the operationalisation of concepts to be assessed by citizens. The paper concludes with the main results, conclusions, research limits and the future directions that other authors should focus on. The present paper exhibits a high level of novelty as regards the topic addressed, the comparative approach and the managerial implications of results.

2. Local public administrations

The transition to the market economy brought about many economic, social and political changes in Romania, affecting not only the companies in the private sector, but also the public institutions as well as the local and central public administrations. The private companies and organizations had to "learn" way more quickly the new market conditions and adjust thereto accordingly, thereby having to perform their activities in a different way. By contrast, public administrations exhibited certain organic and structural resistance to changes. It was only much later that public administrations understood the market and citizens' behavior. Naturally, the changes underwent by these institutions affected mainly the technical and legislative organization and operation so that all processes may be aligned with the related European norms and regulations. The extent to which public authorities operate by the principle of institutional modernity and of process effectiveness, draw close to, and develop a proper relationship with, citizens and adjust to their particular demands represents another issue that must be dealt with properly.

An important problem, even a challenge, for the Romanian public administration is the promotion of a marketing orientation. All the departments and institutions of the central or local public administration must pursue the complete satisfaction of people's needs of public services. However, they are not really oriented towards achieving this goal or towards focusing their efforts and concerns on the citizen-customer. At the moment, these institutions have to handle new challenges that compel them to adjust to the citizens' needs and demands.

Citizens generally ask or expect public administrations to find new solutions for increasing the effectiveness of citizen service and for improving the processes taking place within public administrations, such as the reorganization of functions and services, easier access to services, the possibility of online payments, and receiving advice from the staff of these institutions etc. As part of their citizens-oriented strategy, some local public administrations set up district/quarter municipalities, opened up quite modern help desks, created modern means of communication, such as webpage's (<http://www.domnuleprimar.ro>), blogs or social network pages (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Primaria-Municipiului-Hunedoara/424352390939805?fref=ts>) and implemented various projects to support citizens and local communities. Mention should be made here of the project "Adopt a Green Space" launched by the Cluj-Napoca City Hall aiming to improve the quality of green spaces with the help of the Cluj-Napoca community (Primăria Cluj-Napoca, 2013). Municipalities also took steps to get citizens involved in social and cultural events such as "City Days" or communicate with them via radio or TV programs advertised online (<http://www.ziledecluj.ro/#>).

Public administrations attempted to meet these challenges as best as possible. One of the main objectives on the agenda of policy makers over the last years has been to increase the administrative transparency and to demonstrate openness towards citizens. Remarkable progress has been made in this regard, as new laws and procedures have been added to the legislative framework, whereby the access to public information and the compulsoriness of decision-making transparency have been regulated. The openness showed by public administrations was also aimed at developing a strategic triangle community—public administration—university as an increasing number of public administration decision makers have come to understand the actual role and importance of training and teaching institutions in the development of the local community, the attraction of new investors, the increase of local businesses etc. Another concern for public administrations is fostering a closer collaboration with various local, national or international institutions and organizations, forging strategic partnerships with other administrations and, in particular, ensuring a sustainable development of the local community. An important goal pursued by any leader of a local public administration is how to properly promote the administration and organize and manage various cultural, social and educational activities that strengthen the relationship among the citizens of the community and attract tourists (Transylvania International Film Festival (TIFF), The International Students Film Festival (FFEST), The International Stand-up Comedy Festival, SoNoRo International Chamber Music Festival, Napoca Folk & World Music Festival etc.).

3. Local public services

Generally speaking, public services are activities serving the general/public interest, being provided by local or central public administrations. These activities are sometimes entrusted to private companies subject to regular administrative oversight. Public services may be viewed as special activities that must be regulated by empowered local or central authorities. However, such services cannot be the exclusive affair of the private sector.

The public service represents a regular and continuous non-profit-making activity aimed at serving the general interest. It acts in the interest of an entire group of people (community) either nationally or locally and fulfils the strategic objectives of the authority in charge. In the European Union, public services represent an exemption from free competition, thereby creating the possibility to provide services for the general public.

The management of the public service is performed in compliance with the current legislation and under the responsibility of central or local authorities. It is an activity that serves the general interest of the community for which it is performed. Institutionally, the public service is registered as a private or public legal entity whereby an activity of general interest is performed.

The category of public services includes all utilities of general interest provided under the management, coordination and responsibility of local public administrations of communes, towns, cities or counties. Generally, these public services meet the needs and requirements of the local community. Public services mainly consist of (Dabija, 2013, pp. 26-49) water supply; wastewater sewage treatment; harvesting, drainage and disposal of rainwater; centralized production, transportation, distribution and supply of heat; waste collection; public lighting; the management of public and private properties of administrative and territorial units; local public transportation and the like.

4. Citizens-oriented public institutions

Within the traditional bureaucratic system the public authority alone directs the public activities according to what it perceives to be the needs of the citizens. The end-users of the public services were captive as they “benefited” from the services and also from the failures of public utilities, without any possibility to choose. Things changed in time and the users of public services have taken on the role of “interlocutors” in the relationship with the public institutions. Therefore, a new type of user has emerged, that is, the consumer and backer who asks questions, demands explanations and criticizes public institutions when s/he believes the decisions made have not been the most advantageous for the general public.

Although not all public services generate direct profit for public administrations, the citizens who benefit from these services must be regarded as customers because they are contributors to the state budget from which they said administrations are funded.

An important goal of public administrations is finding a way to improve their relationships with the citizens. This entails increasing the quality of public services and enhancing the capacity of the local community to identify the community needs and make decisions to satisfy them etc. Therefore, the use of modern information and communication technology enables public administrations to change the quality of services provided to citizens and other public organizations and institutions. For instance, this includes the advantages provided by the software applications such as e-Government, Administration to Business (A2B), Administration to Administration (A2A) etc. Among the advantages, one may mention the reduced time to access the public resources and the elimination of paper consumption because entire procedures are only conducted via the online system etc. These elements fully contribute to gaining citizens’ trust and streamlining public services. Many public authorities and administrations use such systems and web pages whereby various taxes can be paid. In Romania, most big municipalities have implemented such systems available to citizens (A2C) and other companies alike (A2B).

The use of the Internet by the public authorities has the classical advantage of availability because the information is available online round the clock and transactions can be conducted smoothly.

In order for the Romanian public administrations to perform marketing-oriented activities, the market-specific concepts must be integrated and a holistic approach to citizens must be adopted at all decision-making and management levels of the institution. To achieve this goal, the following measures must be implemented: organization of activities that help understand and acknowledge the need for the public administration to address the actual market requirements; the practical activity should be oriented towards the satisfaction of these requirements and the provision of an appropriate organizational framework; integration of the main communication flow in the field of public administration marketing in Romania ; officials who, according to their job description, interact with the public should develop this ability, given that they represent the interface between the administration and the citizen; reducing the pressure exerted by the high inflow of public on the

public administrations; cutting the red tape; setting up help-desks outside public institutions so as citizens may be better informed; educating people to interact with public institutions via distance communication means: telephone, mail, internet; interior decoration of public institutions and the creation of a comfortable and pleasant atmosphere; increasing the awareness of the activities conducted by public administrations.

5. Quality of public services

The quality of the service provided by a company/organization may generally be defined as the difference between consumers' perception of the institution's performance and his/her expectations. The application of the concept of quality to the local or central public administration encompasses the conformity between service supply and the citizen's demands or the creation of significant advantages, that is, added value for the service. Thus, the quality of the public service is the result of the comparison between what the citizen expects from a public institution and what s/he gets in reality. Quality is satisfactory when performance is in line with, or above, the citizen's expectations. This will make him/her state his/her contentment and show a favorable attitude towards the public institution and its services.

An important goal of many public administrative officials is to change the citizens' expectations so that these may be in line with the institution's available offer of public services. Theoretically, unless the service provided meets completely the citizen's requirements, the institution is believed to deal with a "problem customer" whose expectations are "unrealistic/inappropriate".

Ensuring the service quality is a significant challenge not only for a private company but also for a public institution and a local or central public administration, respectively. The analysis of service quality must be performed against the following three elements:

- potential quality comprises all prerequisites contributing to the service supply—technical equipment and ambience characteristics, staff qualification, proper logistics, placement of desks etc. Staff qualification should include in particular the fostering of proper knowledge, abilities and competences (specialty, social etc.). Additionally, potential quality includes the demands imposed by the citizen-customer. These demands refer to the extent to which the civil servant is, or should be, able to adapt to the customer's requirements during a conversation (flexibility in service supply).
- process quality contains activities taking place throughout the service supply. These activities express the extent to which staff manages to interact effectively with the customer and behave in a friendly manner towards him/her. Other relevant aspects pertain to the period of personal selling or the waiting time at the help-desk, tax payment counter etc.
- result quality refers to the extent to which service may contribute to achieving the expected result. Attention is therefore paid to the extent to which the service supplied by public administrations and, implicitly, by their officials meets or exceeds the expectations of the citizen-customer. Other potential results refer to the improvement of the image of the public administration, the achievement of the indicators concerning tax collection, the collection of fines etc. (set performance) or the increase of the service usefulness as a whole and better customer service.

Viewed as a multidimensional construct, service quality includes up to ten characteristics: efficiency, receptiveness, competence, access, politeness, communication, credibility, safety, understanding of customers, tangibility. Service quality efficiency refers to the supply of the service in a correct manner, in compliance with the performance standards previously promised or set by the organization. The receptiveness of service quality represents the institution's desire to help the citizen-customer by supplying the service as quickly as possible. Competence of service quality presupposes knowledge and ability on the part of the staff that conveys or supplies the service while access refers to how easy it is for the customer to come into contact with the

supplier—the public institution. Of major importance for the service supply and quality are the aspects contributing to the favorable perception of the service. Therefore, communication with customer in the sense of timely outreach in a common language, proper politeness in the form of respect, decorum and kindness, supply of rigorous and credible information and commitments, conveyance of the feeling of safety in supply by removing all dangers or reducing risk and doubt as well as the proper understanding of the consumer by making important efforts to know him/her and his/her needs represent important strategic actions. Last but not least, of major importance for a qualitative supply are some tangible elements such as buildings, equipment, staff and the means of communication.

Additionally, as far as public services are concerned, quality is assessed against the availability, completeness and accuracy of informative materials about public service and their components, as they are provided by local and public administrations. When assessing the service quality, a citizen will naturally take into account his/her past experience with the same or similar service suppliers. Moreover, the citizen will also make decisions according to the performance of private companies, attempting to make proper comparisons and voice critical opinions if some service components fall short of his/her expectations or the staff of the public administration are not as helpful, kind and customer-oriented as that in the private sector. To form an opinion about the service supplied by the public administration, the citizen will make decisions based on the information from other sources (friends, acquaintances, relatives etc.) and will also consider the ambiance in which the public service is provided and the conditions met in advance.

The improvement of the public service quality should be an important objective of all central or local public administrations and the decisions made to this effect should target various aspects, some of which are as follows: changing the mentality of people working in the public administration as decision makers or executive officials so as to approach the citizen as customer according to the pattern set by the private companies; ongoing training of public officials and the streamlining of the operational logistics; providing modern IT equipment that should ensure the smooth development of processes, the proper transfer of information and streamline supply; improvement of communication tools and techniques to provide citizens with timely and relevant information; paying increased attention to tangible elements that the citizen comes into contact with so that these may be attractive and help build a positive image about the service of the public administration; supply the public service with utmost correctness, in compliance with the ethical and deontological norms and keep the promises and the completion deadlines; utmost responsibility on the part of public officials in the form of receptiveness and desire to answer carefully and skillfully to the customer's demands; provide citizens with accessibility to the public service, that is, ensuring public authorities can easily be contacted; setting appropriate working hours; public officials' exhibiting greater kindness etc.

6. Research methodology

The main goal of the research was to highlight the citizens' level of satisfaction with the general services provided by local public administrations, the level of local taxes and duties and the ways in which citizens may pay them. To achieve this objective, the authors conducted an empirical study using the survey technique based on the face-to-face questionnaire administration.

The survey was conducted on citizens from 32 localities in nine counties of Romania. The research included services provided by public administrations of very large cities (Rom: municipii) (Cluj-Napoca, Sibiu), large cities (Alba Iulia, Bistrița, Satu Mare, Râmnicu Vâlcea or Botoșani) as well as of smaller localities (Turda, Gherla, Dej, Cugir, Rodna) or even communes (Acățari, Agnita, Anieș, Bodești etc.). The total number of collected questionnaires was 720 (Table 1).

Table 1. Breakdown of valid answers by counties and locality size

County	Locality size (number of inhabitants)											
	Rural		10-20.000		50-60.000		95-110.000		Over 150.000		Total	
Frequency	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Alba	18	2,5	5	0,7	25	3,5	-	-	-	-	48	6,7
Bistrița-Năsăud	13	1,8	35	4,9	-	-	47	6,5	-	-	95	13,2
Botoșani	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	0,4	-	-	3	0,4
Cluj	9	1,2	60	8,3	15	2,1	-	-	261	36,2	345	47,9
Hunedoara	-	-	-	-	45	6,2	-	-	-	-	45	6,2
Mureș	5	0,7	5	0,7	-	-	-	-	40	5,6	50	6,9
Sibiu	-	-	22	3,1	25	3,5	-	-	25	3,5	72	10,0
Satu-Mare	5	0,7	20	2,8	-	-	20	2,8	-	-	45	6,2
Vâlcea	5	0,7	-	-	-	-	12	1,7	-	-	17	2,4
Total	55	7,6	147	20,4	110	15,3	82	11,4	326	45,2	720	100,0

The authors applied the quota sampling according to gender and age group, based on the data provided by Romania's Statistical Yearbook of 2010. The sampling was generally conducted within these quota but minor deviations from the initial population were recorded. The research was conducted on 377 women (52.4% of respondents) and 343 men (47.6% of respondents). As Table 2 indicates, most people are aged under 25 (19.4% of the sample).

Table 2. Breakdown of respondents by age group

Age	No. of answers	Percentage
under 25	140	19,4
25 - 35	138	19,2
36 - 45	133	18,5
46 - 55	117	16,3
56 - 65	104	14,4
over 65	88	12,2
Total	720	100,0

In most respondents' households live 2 and 3 people, respectively (28.3% and 28.6%) while 20.4% of households are made of 4 members. In terms of education, 47.1% of respondents stated they have a higher education degree (39 people), 24.6% a high school degree and 10.8% have a vocational school degree. When asked about whether they own a car, 51.3% of respondents gave a positive answer while 48.7% a negative answer. 31.8% of respondents live with their marriage partner and children and 28.8% only live with their partner (having no children). 16.9% of respondents still live with their parents. As regards the monthly net income, it ranges between 800 and 1700 RON for 42.9% of respondents and is below 800 RON for 17.4%. The question on income was declined by 16.7% of interviewees.

The following hypotheses were tested within the research:

- H1: Respondents' satisfaction with the cash payment is greater in small and rural localities;
- H2: Respondents' satisfaction with the credit-card, internet banking or the money transfer payment is greater in large and very large localities;

- H3: Respondents' perception of the services provided by local public administrations varies across localities;
- H4: Citizens' level of satisfaction with infrastructure works, street cleaning or street lighting is greater in the large localities than in the small ones;
- H5: Respondents believe the management of parks, public spaces and agro-food markets is better organized in the small localities than in the large ones;

7. Results

7.1. Respondent's satisfaction with the payment method of public services

Respondents were asked to show on a five point scale their level of satisfaction with the preferred payment method for services provided by local public administrations (1—high dissatisfaction; 5—high satisfaction). Respondents' assessments vary according to location (rural vs. urban locality) and the size of the locality. As Table 3 indicates, respondents' average assessments of the payment methods differ significantly.

- Cash payment: The contributor may pay with cash at the counters of city halls, postal offices, CEC Bank or of other banks. Respondents from rural areas prefer the cash payment at the counters of the local public administrations (average assessment 3.82). A similar but less intense trend was noticed in the case of smaller cities with a population between 10,000 and 20,000 inhabitants (average assessment 3.73). On the other hand, in large and very large cities such as Sibiu, Târgu Mureș or Cluj-Napoca, cash payment is preferred to a lesser extent (average assessment 3.20). This shows people in these localities are familiar with other methods of payment as well. The reason behind this choice likely lies in the citizen's coziness (consumer pays the public administration services when s/he makes other payments), proximity (postal office, CEC or other bank offices are closer than the public institution) or the flexible working hours (the possibility to pay in week-end or late in the afternoon). Therefore, the working hypothesis H1—respondents' satisfaction with the cash payment is greater in small and rural localities—can be validated.

Table 3. Respondent's satisfaction with the methods of payment of local public administration services

Size locality (thousands inhabitants)	Cash payment...			Payment by...			
	.. at the City Hall counter	... at the Postal Office	... at CEC or other banks	... credit card	... banking transfer	... internet banking	... payment kiosks
Rural	3,82	3,61	3,62	3,22	3,13	2,95	3,05
10-20	3,73	3,68	3,76	3,66	3,55	3,26	3,34
50-60	3,59	3,77	3,78	3,98	3,85	4,05	4,12
95-110	3,20	3,17	3,70	3,65	3,15	2,94	2,94
over 150	3,20	3,13	3,34	3,75	3,57	3,54	3,41
Total	3,41	3,38	3,56	3,61	3,54	3,46	3,44

- Other methods of payment: Respondents' answers to the question about the level of satisfaction with the payment of duties, taxes and bills for services of local public administrations via other methods than the cash payment differ considerably (Table 3).

The most favorable assessment (the highest average) of the payment by card, bank transfer, internet banking or payment kiosks was recorded in localities with 50,000 up to 60,000 inhabitants. We believe the inhabitants of these localities assess favorably the modern methods of payment due to their advantages (flexibility, time

saving, transaction simplicity, etc) and possibly because citizens are somewhat encouraged by public administrations to use these methods. A surprising result has been noticed in the case of rural localities and cities with 95,000 up to 110,000 inhabitants. Citizens of these localities exhibit a rather similar assessment of the modern methods of payment of local taxes and duties. While the inhabitants of the rural areas and small cities are expected not to be familiar with the modern payment methods due to population ageing and the lack of infrastructure, an extra analysis is called for in the case of large cities. Admittedly, the population of these cities may be as “old” as that in the rural areas, thereby confirming the lack of interest in the modern methods of payment. Last but not least, to conduct a more careful analysis, the number of non-answers as well as respondents’ age and level of education must also be taken into account. It is rather to be expected that adult and young people with a high level of education should be familiar with these methods of payment and prefer them accordingly. On the basis of these results, the hypothesis H2 can be confirmed, according to which respondents’ satisfaction with the credit-card, internet banking or the money transfer payment is greater in average-sized and very large localities while the satisfaction of citizens in large localities is similar to that of citizens in smaller localities, the smallest satisfaction being recorded in the rural localities.

7.2. Respondent’s satisfaction with the services of local public administrations

When interviewed about the various types of services provided by local public administrations (management of agro-food markets, parks and other public places, tax collection, car parks, street cleaning, public lighting, public transportation etc.), the respondents living in large cities of 50,000 up to 60,000 inhabitants were, quite interestingly, the ones who assessed most favorably all types of services provided. A possible explanation for this general perception may lie in the fact that local administrations do their job quite well in these cities. The inhabitants’ low demands may also account for this phenomenon since life in a small-size city is rather quiet and the number and complexity of problems is reduced. In other words, citizens do not have big expectations from their local administrations as they are relatively satisfied with their standard of living and are not eager to notice any evolution of the way city halls manage various services. Finally, it is possible that the inhabitants of these cities may have modest expectations about these services.

Upon analyzing the assessment of services provided by rural public administrations, it can be noticed that rural inhabitants exhibit a particular level of dissatisfaction with a number of services. Respondents’ average assessments of social services (cafeteria), local public transportation, car parks, and tourist assistance are low (below 3). This is probably due to the municipality’s lack of vision in the management of the public budget and the rather acute shortage of financial resources and investment funds and programs that should contribute to the better development of these services. The mayors or decision-makers of many localities lack the vision about the opportunity to develop their localities as their own concern is to live at subsistence level. However, according to the answers average, rural inhabitants stated their satisfaction with the infrastructure works, likely because they have very small expectations about the access to services and the utilities they should or might benefit from.

A comparative analysis shows that the citizens of cities with 95,000-110,000 inhabitants have identified shortcomings with refurbishment, renovation etc. services (2.71), and tourism assistance (2.85), infrastructure works (2.93), tax collection (2.90), car parks (2.99), street cleaning (3.05) and online access to information (3.05). The assessments are most unfavorable in these localities likely because of their status. The citizens would like these localities to vie with the large cities and become a sort of regional capitals like the university centers Cluj-Napoca, Timisoara, Iași etc. However, investments are limited or are completely absent because of limited possibilities to attract them and because mayors have grandiose visions about building impressive city halls instead of earmarking money for infrastructure and for meeting the urgent needs of localities. Thus, respondents’ assessments could be viewed as an act of blame and punishment on mayors. The extent to which mayors and other officials of local administrations are aware of the real problems and shortcomings faced by

their localities represents another issue for debate. Although the citizens of cities with 95,000-110,000 strong did not provide the most favorable assessment for any of the public administration services (as averages indicate), it may be stated that they are satisfied with the parks and public spaces services (3.71), street lighting (3.70) and the organization of special events (3.80).

The respondents from cities with over 150,000 inhabitants (Table 6) appear to be satisfied with the infrastructure works (2.85) and the available car parks (2.74). The social services (3.04) and the specialized assistance (refurbishment, renovation etc.) are viewed by citizens as problematic while the park and public places management services (3.51), the organization of social events (3.61) and the online access to information (3.41) are assessed more favorably because the citizens of the large cities have stated their satisfaction with the services provided. The surveyed large cities are capable of constantly improving these services due to the existence of universities, local opportunities and the municipality's clearer vision for future development. On the other hand, the assessments made by the citizens of these localities must be understood as critical about what could further be accomplished but has not been accomplished. This may be the result of the comparison with the large Western European cities where these citizens may have travelled before. Last but not least, to conduct a more detailed analysis, the average age of the citizens should be taken into account. Generally, it has been noticed that the younger people are, the readier they are to make critical and severe assessments of local administrations.

Therefore, the hypothesis H3, according to which respondents' perception of the services provided by local public administrations varies greatly across localities, can be confirmed. While citizens of medium-size localities made relatively favorable assessments, huge gaps exist between the assessments made by the rest of the citizens.

Unexpectedly, respondents' level of satisfaction with the infrastructure works, street cleaning and public lighting is greater in rural and small localities than in large and very large cities. This may be accounted for by the fact that respondents' perception of these services vary considerably across citizens. Thus, the respondents from small and rural localities demonstrated a lower level of perception than those from large and very large localities. To put it differently, the expectations of citizens from small and rural localities are much lower than those of citizens from large and very large localities. Certainly, it is possible that a rural or small locality is easier to manage/run but, upon comparing objectively these localities with their foreign peers, one may easily see that the infrastructure in the Romanian localities is way less developed and, although public lighting exists, it is not conspicuous. These facts lead to the rejection of hypothesis H4 according to which citizens' level of satisfaction with infrastructure works, street cleaning or street lighting is greater in the large localities than in the small ones.

According to respondents' opinion, city officials score better on the management of parks and public places than those of rural localities (Table 6). The most favorable perception is that of citizens from medium-size localities (50 to 60 thousands inhabitants, average assessment 4.04), followed by that of respondents from small localities (10 to 20 thousand inhabitants). These results appear to be natural because it is much easier to maintain few, and relatively small, public places (as is the case of small and medium-size cities) by contrast with those of large and very large localities. A favorable opinion about agro-food markets was recorded in the case of small and medium-size localities (3.95 and 3.66, respectively) while respondents' opinion was less favourable in the case of large and very large localities (3.32 and 3.24, respectively). The relatively low average assessment of public spaces in rural localities leads to the conclusion that there is not much to assess in these localities because the number of such places is very small (2.32). The administration of rural localities should pay more attention to the development of such spaces. Given citizens' assessments, the hypothesis H5 can only be partially confirmed. Therefore, respondents believe the management of parks, public places and markets is better organized in small and medium-sized localities than in large and very large localities. The only exception is represented by the rural localities where the assessment is very low.

Table 4. Respondent's satisfaction with the services of local public administrations

Size of locality (thousands inhabitants)	Rural	10-20	50-60	95-110	over 150	Total
Online access to information	3,04	3,32	3,68	3,05	3,41	3,36
Management of parks and public places	3,38	3,89	4,04	3,71	3,51	3,68
Management of agro-food markets	2,35	3,66	3,95	3,32	3,24	3,45
Specialty assistance—refurbishment, renovation	3,07	2,99	3,51	2,71	3,07	3,08
Tourism assistance	2,67	2,74	3,63	2,85	3,14	3,06
Tax collection	3,35	3,50	3,79	2,90	3,13	3,29
Street cleaning	3,49	3,50	3,94	3,05	3,24	3,40
Street lighting	3,84	3,84	4,01	3,70	3,54	3,71
Infrastructure works	3,46	3,08	3,44	2,93	2,83	3,03
Organisation of special events	3,53	3,87	4,11	3,80	3,61	3,76
Car parks	2,00	3,01	3,83	2,99	2,74	3,01
Social services (cafeteria etc.)	2,95	3,05	3,16	3,11	3,04	3,06
Public safety	3,56	3,55	3,80	3,33	3,20	3,41
Local public transportation	2,76	2,90	3,82	3,12	3,15	3,17
Other services	3,00	4,14	4,25	2,33	2,89	3,39

7.3. Respondent's satisfaction with money/financial aspects of the local public administration

Respondents' satisfaction with the financial aspects typical of local public administrations varies tremendously across the types of surveyed localities. Therefore, as Table 7 shows, the surveyed citizens give the highest score to the "economic success" (modernization of infrastructure, attraction of European funds, signing public-private partnerships etc.), followed by the strong financial status (reflected in the failure to change local taxes and duties over time, keeping control over prices and the access to some public services like waste collection, heating etc.), the management of public funds, and the level of taxes levied by public administrations of medium-size localities (50,000 to 60,000 inhabitants). Respondents' average assessments are higher in the case of these localities than in the case of small and rural localities, on the one hand, and the large and very large cities, on the other. The scores are not unusual in the case of rural and small localities because their municipality have limited, if any, resources to make such investments. As regards the medium-size localities with 50,000 to 60,000 inhabitants, the citizens' demands are not great and the municipalities manage to attract funds and make some investments. However, the inhabitants' demands are great, as are their expectations, in the case of large and very large localities. At the same time, the problems encountered by the municipalities of these localities are more complex, partly due to the fact that many big projects are underway. Last but not least, the inhabitants of these localities are more difficult to satisfy because their experiences, aspirations and desires are many and very different.

Table 5. Respondents' satisfaction with money/financial aspects of the local public administration

Size of locality (thousands inhabitants)	Rural	10-20	50-60	95-110	over 150	Total
seems to be economically successful.	3,16	3,15	3,84	3,20	3,12	3,23
seems to enjoy a good financial standing.	3,16	3,27	3,92	3,21	3,27	3,35
seems to make rational decisions on the management of the public budget.	3,11	2,93	3,475	2,71	2,78	2,93
the level of taxes is kept constant in time.	3,13	3,37	4,46	2,88	2,77	3,04
provides a good ratio between the levied taxes and the benefits for the community.	2,95	3,03	3,72	2,71	2,65	2,87
manages the public budget with responsibility.	2,91	2,84	3,80	2,56	2,56	2,75
charges lower tariffs for the services provided than I had expected.	2,62	2,63	3,95	2,15	2,39	2,53
charges lower tariffs for the services provided than other administrations.	2,75	2,71	3,26	2,46	2,59	2,71
its tariffs and taxes help me save money.	2,51	2,39	3,02	2,06	2,28	2,41
offers sufficient methods of paying for the services provided.	2,40	2,83	3,39	3,00	2,97	2,97

8. Conclusions

Public institutions may benefit from applying a marketing approach and mentality when defining their mission, solving problems and obtaining results. The administration may change from a traditional institution loosely connected to the public into a modern institution establishing a strong contact with the public and providing services of increased value in exchange for the contributed money. The objective of implementing marketing into local and central public administrations is to develop a strong relationship between citizens and the administrative institution. This relationship will be influenced by the following strategic orientations: paying full attention to the citizens' orientation towards obtaining higher satisfaction through service quality; customization of the public service in compliance with the customers' individual requirements; reducing the time needed to distribute the public service; increasing the transparency of relationships with customers so that they may experience firsthand the added value and quality of the public services; expanding the partnerships with the citizens-clients; collaboration with the civil society. As the current empirical study highlighted, the citizens' level of satisfaction varies according to localities, which consistently entails implementing different strategies by local administrations. We also believe it is necessary and useful for public administrations to exhibit a better customer/citizen-oriented adaptation so as to meet his/her needs and desires. Therefore, a good starting point would be the adoption of some models, the creation of partnerships with various Western cities, or cities from other countries, the use of brainstorming to help develop localities and asking citizens' opinion more frequently. Last but not least, we believe the citizens' level of satisfaction with local public services should increase in the future as public administrations contribute to shaping a proper satisfaction and developing attractive cities. The smaller the locality, the smaller the expectations and the perception of services is better, even if these do not exist or exist to a very small extent. In other words, citizens of small and rural localities prefer to adopt a laudatory and appreciative stance towards the municipality and do not make comparisons with what could be a better organization of things. Naturally, their relatively positive perception may be accounted for by their being used to the situation that not all utility poles are lit in their locality, this being a normal thing that does not call for any remedy. At the same time, this perception may be the result of the fact that the citizens of these localities do not know or are unable to make proper comparisons (either with

larger localities or with foreign localities that they do not know at all). In other words, their values level or the comparison standard is much lower than that of citizens from large localities. The assessment system of citizens from rural areas and small localities is inferior (due to reduced possibilities for comparison) to that of citizens from large and very large localities as the latter category have access to more information and can make comparisons much easier. We believe the future research in this field will have to better emphasize how the citizens of the localities concerned may state their opinions on how cities and city halls in particular have to adapt to the new market conditions, make investments and improve their offer of public services for the community.

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