Trust in public institutions in Romania. In what manner does the state intervene?

Bulau - Olaru Ioana Gabriela
Babes-Bolyai University, Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Ranta Ana Elena
Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Stanica Viorel
Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Abstract: Despite the common portrayal of local administrations as impartial enablers of political decisions, the Romanian experience demonstrates that profound tensions between elected representatives and professional civil servants significantly influence local governance. This paper utilises longitudinal data (2013–2025) from INSCOP Research, Transparency International, and OECD reports to analyse how institutional trust fluctuates in response to political polarisation, administrative reforms, and the quality of local decision-making. Despite the occurrence of incremental improvements in transparency and digitisation, Romania remains a "semi-consolidated democracy" where public administration frequently oscillates between political subordination and technocratic insulation.

The present study explores how responsible administrative practices, grounded in transparency, accountability, and participatory mechanisms such as participatory budgeting, can mediate tensions between expertise and representation. The argument is made that the absence of mutual trust between elected and non-elected officials perpetuates citizen disengagement and weakens democratic legitimacy at the local level. Methodologically, the paper combines secondary data analysis with qualitative case studies to identify institutional arrangements that enhance citizens' confidence in governance amid uncertainty.

The Romanian case study offers a valuable contribution to broader regional debates on how to balance administrative rationality with political responsiveness without eroding democratic legitimacy. The paper proposes that the principle of responsible public administration should be situated at the core of governance reforms.