Managers not Measures: How Informality Sustains Performance Management Reforms in Hybrid Bureaucracies

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Abstract: While employee performance management (EPM) has been a popular reform within the broader New Public Management (NPM) toolkit, evidence of its impact on staff motivation and performance has been mixed (Bowman, 2010). At the same time, the suitability of NPM tools in countries with high levels of informality and politicization has been repeatedly questioned (Nõmm & Randma-Liiv, 2012; Schick, 1998; Schuster et al., 2020). Nevertheless, such reforms have been ubiquitous, including in CEE (Hajnal & Staronova, 2021).

This paper investigates the adoption and consequences of EPM in Romania—a relatively recent democracy characterized by a hybrid administrative system that combines Weberian legalism, NPM-style managerialism, and persistent clientelism. Drawing on analysis of the legal framework and survey data from the Romanian civil service (World Bank, 2020), it shows that while formal compliance with EPM procedures is high, the system operates as a ritualistic, control-oriented exercise. Pay and promotion are largely decoupled from appraisal results, and nearly all employees receive top scores. The result is a formal system that mimics the hard logic of performance management but lacks both fairness and motivational effect.

Paradoxically, informal managerial practices—such as unmandated feedback, symbolic rewards, or creative uses of discretion—emerge as the main channels through which EPM acquires meaning and motivational value. These practices compensate for the dysfunction of the formal system and represent a form of informal adaptation or everyday resilience through which managers preserve a minimal level of motivation and integrity despite politicization and legalism.

The paper argues that such informal practices can create resilience in politicized, hybrid and constantly changing systems (Bouckaert et al., 2025), adapting reform instruments to local cultures and institutional constraints. The findings also hold lessons for digitalization efforts: without addressing incentive structures and compatibility between digital tools and institutional logics and capacity, which are particularly pronounced challenges in CEE, informal practices become essential in sustaining digital reforms and maintaining public service delivery – even in the most advanced digital bureaucracy (Møller, 2025).

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