



BOOK REVIEW: PEOPLE OF THE “SYSTEM”. UNWRITTEN RULES, COMPROMISES AND SURVIVAL IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION, BY DRAGOȘ-VALENTIN DINCĂ¹

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Abstract. *People of the “System”. Unwritten Rules, Compromises and Survival in Public Administration*, by Dragoș-Valentin Dincă, offers an unconventional journey into the inner workings of Romanian public administration, drawing on professional experience, institutional observation, memory and a kind of humour that makes even its dysfunctions easier to endure. This review deliberately adopts a personal perspective, also because the author and the reviewer belong to the same generation of public administration graduates and were classmates at SNSPA. Beyond its memoir-like dimension, the book opens a highly relevant discussion about the relationship between formal legal rules and informal practices, between merit and acceptability, between reform and institutional self-preservation, as well as about the individual's ability to pass through institutions without becoming captive to their mechanisms. The book's principal merit lies in its refusal to treat the “system” as an abstract entity and in its decision to return people to the centre of the administrative explanation. In this sense, Dragoș Dincă's volume is not merely a book about public administration, but also one about character, adaptation, institutional memory and the limits of compromise.

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1. A book I cannot read merely as a reviewer

There are books one reads with a pencil in hand and books one reads with memory wide open. People of the “System” belongs, for me, to the latter category. It is difficult to place Dragoș Dincă exclusively in the role of an author whom I am expected to assess methodically, from the safe scholarly distance normally required of a reviewer, because there is a shared history preceding this book. We were classmates at National School of Political Studies and Public Administration SNSPA, at a time when Romanian public administration itself was still learning, very much on the move, what it wanted to become, while we were learning, with the seriousness peculiar to students, how it was supposed to function. Those were years in which we drew institutions into diagrams, divided competences, learned principles, functions and procedures and still enjoyed the privilege of believing that, if a rule was written clearly enough, reality would somehow have the good manners to comply with it. Professional life later offered us an elective course, much longer and with no possibility of skipping the seminar: institutions do not live in books. They live through people.

Enough years have passed for the joke to become almost philosophical. Dragoș, my former classmate, now writes a book about the “people of the system,” while I, his former classmate, review it after both of us have had more than enough time to enter institutions, leave them, manage them, observe them, attempt to change them and, at times, simply endure them. Had someone told us during our student years that we would eventually find ourselves here, we would probably have asked for the bibliography. Today, we know that the bibliography would not have been enough. In the meantime, we have both discovered that there are laws, procedures, organisational charts and job descriptions, but there is also something else, never published in the Official Gazette: that remarkably solid body of unofficial norms expressed through formulas such as “this is how it is done,” “this is not the right time,” “we shall see,” “let us not rush” or, in more sophisticated institutional language, “I do not believe there is yet sufficient predictability for this decision.” The translation varies. The outcome is strikingly familiar.

For that reason, I cannot pretend that this review is entirely impersonal. Nor do I want it to be. Behind the law professor reading this book today stands the public administration student of those years, and behind the university manager stands the person who learned very early to judge institutions through the people who inhabit them. In this respect, my first model did not come from a textbook. It was my father. From him I learned, long before I could formulate the idea academically, that an office does not automatically lend value to the person who occupies

it; sometimes, if we are fortunate, it is the person who lends value to the office. It is a distinction I have carried with me throughout my career, and one that returned insistently to my mind while reading Dragoș's book. Because, in a different form, his entire volume is precisely about the distance between the institution and the person who inhabits it.

2. The system does not live in a secret room. Fortunately. Or perhaps unfortunately.

The word “system” has enjoyed an extraordinary career in Romania. We use it when we do not know exactly who is to blame, when we suspect that someone knows more than we do, when something does not work or, paradoxically, when it works suspiciously well for the wrong people. “The system” decides, blocks, promotes, removes, retaliates and, if one listens to public conversation long enough, probably controls the weather as well. It is such a convenient explanation that it almost seems a pity to ruin it. Dragoș ruins it. And rightly so.

His book begins precisely with a refusal of mythology. There is no secret room in which a few people sit around a table directing Romanian public administration through a giant control panel. In a way, that would be comforting. At least we would know where to send the official letter. The “system” described by Dragoș is far more ordinary and, for that very reason, far more difficult to change. It is produced by institutions, by people, by their reflexes, their fear of making mistakes, accumulated experience, compromises and informal rules that emerge somewhere between what the law says and what a person can, wants or dares to do. The system does not stand above people. The system is continuously produced through people.

This, I believe, is one of the genuine contributions of the book. Dragoș does not write as a disappointed former insider seeking retrospective revenge on public administration, nor as a reformer promising to fix everything within the first hundred days. It is far more interesting than that. He looks at institutions with the irony of someone who knows them too well to idealise them, but also with a certain professional affection that only people who have spent a long time within a field can still retain. His characters are not exclusively heroes or villains. Some are outstanding, others mediocre, some highly competent, others impressively gifted at avoiding any responsibility whatsoever, but most are simply people attempting to survive within an institutional environment that simultaneously demands initiative and caution, speed and procedural cover, reform and the careful preservation of existing balances.

3. The password is “password” and other advanced lessons in public administration

The book possesses a quality encountered less often than it should be in literature on public administration: it is genuinely enjoyable to read. Dragoş does not establish his authority through sentences sufficiently complicated to make the reader feel guilty for failing to understand them. He prefers stories. Some have precisely that form of administrative humour no work of fiction would dare invent for fear of appearing implausible. An institution receives a software application, does not use it for two years and then discovers, when an inspection finally arrives, that nobody remembers the password. The password was, naturally, “password.” Had Kafka spent a little time in Romanian public administration, he might have abandoned literature and started writing audit reports.

Then come rabbits transported in luggage to training sessions, meetings, official visits, strategies, reorganisations, electoral programmes, institutional encounters and one memorable trip to Arad culminating in a “speech” lasting only a few seconds, a politically colourful backdrop and a spit-roast better organised than the conference for which the journey had been made. Elsewhere, institutional offices are transformed into small jungles of plants brought in, cultivated, inherited and moved around along with staff, departments and successive reorganisations. The image is excellent: institutions change, leaders come and go, organisational charts are redrawn, yet the ficus survives. Sometimes I suspect that, in a truly serious history of Romanian public administration, office plants would deserve at least a footnote.

The humour does not diminish the seriousness of the observation. It makes it more visible. Behind the forgotten password lies an unused public investment. Behind the conference attended by almost no one lies a form of institutional simulation. Behind the succession of strategies lie resources, time and, quite often, professionals who genuinely tried to do things properly. Dragoş is intelligent enough not to over-moralise these episodes. He allows them to speak for themselves. The reader laughs and then, with a slight delay, realises that perhaps there was not that much to laugh about. It is an extremely effective technique and probably one of the reasons the book manages to say serious things without becoming heavy.

For those of us who studied public administration at a time when Romania’s institutional transformation appeared to follow an almost inevitable upward path towards modernisation, these episodes also have a nearly sentimental dimension. One recognises the language, the human types, the meetings, the optimism surrounding the beginning of a new project and that

mysterious loss of energy occurring somewhere between launch and implementation. One even recognises the characters without knowing their names. Everywhere there is the indispensable colleague who knows exactly whom to call, the manager who discovers the institution only after being appointed to lead it, the civil servant who has witnessed enough reforms not to unpack his metaphorical suitcase before checking whether the latest one survives six months and, inevitably, the person capable of explaining in exquisite detail why something cannot be done. Occasionally, one wonders what might happen if the same intellectual energy were invested in discovering how it could.

4. From the “right person” to the “acceptable person”

Of all the ideas in the book, one remained with me more strongly than the others: the distinction between the right person and the acceptable person. It appears near the beginning and subsequently functions as a key to the entire volume. The right person is the one we would choose if competence, experience, suitability and the institution’s best interests were the only criteria that mattered. The acceptable person is someone capable of passing through the network of balances, preferences, relationships and sensitivities without creating excessive turbulence. Sometimes the two are the same person. The problem begins when they are not.

At this point, Dragoş’s book leaves the territory of anecdote and reaches one of the fundamental problems of institutions. Every organisation requires compromise in order to function. Law itself is, to a certain extent, the civilised architecture of compromise among freedoms, interests and limits. But compromises are not all equal. There is the compromise that makes cooperation possible and the compromise that transforms the exception into the rule; the compromise that protects the institution and the compromise through which the institution gradually forgets its own purpose. A system that continuously selects “acceptable” people may achieve stability, but it risks paying for that stability through the loss of initiative, competence and courage.

Perhaps this is precisely why the idea sent me back once again to the model I received at home. My father gave me a simple measure that professional life later complicated but never succeeded in erasing: it is not enough to occupy a position; one must be worthy of it. I have always looked at academic, administrative or managerial offices through this lens. An institution does not become better simply because the organisational chart is correct and the procedure legal. It becomes better when the people entrusted with authority understand that authority is, first and foremost, an obligation. It may sound idealistic. But sometimes idealism is not the opposite of realism. It is the only reason one bothers trying to change reality.

Seen from this perspective, the “acceptable person” should not be demonised. Institutions sometimes genuinely need people capable of building bridges and reconciling conflicting interests. Yet the question left behind by the book is whether, by repeatedly applying this criterion, we eventually begin to design institutions that no longer seek excellence but merely the absence of discomfort. And an administration excessively afraid of discomfort will inevitably avoid precisely those decisions through which it might evolve.

5. Written law and the other law

For me, as a lawyer, one of the book’s most fertile dimensions is the relationship between written rules and unwritten rules. Law lives with a certain methodological optimism: we assume that we can identify the applicable rule, interpret its meaning and explain the legal effects that follow from it. We need to proceed in this way; otherwise, we would no longer have law but improvisation. Yet institutions are not populated by rules. They are populated by people who apply rules. Between text and behaviour there inevitably opens a space.

That space is filled by institutional culture, memory, reflexes, fears, personal relationships, experience of previous inspections, accepted tolerances and the small taboos of every organisation. It is there that “the other law” develops. It cannot repeal formal law, yet it can profoundly alter its practical effects. Two institutions may apply exactly the same statute and produce almost opposite administrative experiences. Two departments within the same institution may interpret the same procedure with completely different degrees of flexibility. Sometimes the difference is not legal. It is human.

Dragoş’s book is at its best when describing this frontier zone. The civil servant who prefers paper is not necessarily an incurable nostalgic. He may simply have learned that paper protects him. The person asking for one more signature is not always lacking in courage; he may be the product of an environment in which any individual assumption of responsibility can, years later, become the object of a hostile interpretation. When the risk is personal and immediate while the benefit is institutional and distant, caution ceases to be merely a defect and becomes a rational survival strategy. This does not mean it should be accepted. It means we cannot change it unless we first understand it.

This distinction is, I believe, essential for any serious discussion of administrative reform. The legislature can change a legal rule overnight. Institutional culture does not read the Official Gazette at the same speed. It moves much more slowly. This is how we end up with institutions

reformed in law while remaining almost untouched in behaviour. A title changes, two departments are moved, a digital platform is created, modernisation is announced, and the old reflex quietly finds itself a new office.

6. Reforming reforms and the remarkable resistance of institutions to enthusiasm

Dragoş writes convincingly about reform precisely because he no longer appears seduced by the word. In Romanian public discourse, “reform” has been used so often that it risks becoming one of those terms that mean everything and, for that very reason, almost nothing. Every new political cycle arrives with its own reform, every new leadership discovers that the old structure needs reorganising, every reorganisation generates organisational charts, committees, procedures and, very probably, a PowerPoint presentation in which all arrows point reassuringly in the right direction. Reality, however, has the annoying habit of refusing to fit into PowerPoint.

One of the important ideas of the book is that resistance to reform does not always manifest itself through opposition. Silence can be far more effective. Everybody agrees, nobody says no, the project moves forward and yet its speed gradually slows until it becomes geological. Questions arise, approvals are needed, clarifications are requested, new priorities appear, leadership changes and, occasionally, another reform arrives just in time to replace the previous one. It is almost an administrative perpetual-motion machine: we reform the reform before discovering whether the first reform ever worked.

The author also captures the deeply human nature of resistance. Reform redistributes power, responsibility, comfort and risk. Benefits may be collective and visible in several years; the risk borne by the person signing the document is individual and begins today. From this emerges an institutional logic that political discourse sometimes too easily interprets as laziness or bad faith. There is, of course, laziness and bad faith as well. It would be naïve to pretend otherwise. But the systemic explanation is much more interesting: some apparently irrational behaviours become perfectly rational when viewed from the perspective of someone trying to survive within an institution.

This is also one of the few areas in which I would have liked Dragoş to go even further. His material is rich enough to support, in the future, a broader theoretical conceptualisation of the informal rules of Romanian public administration. From the stories in this book, one could extract typologies, mechanisms and perhaps even an explanatory model capable of comparison with other administrative cultures. I say this not as criticism, but as a sign that the book leaves

behind more questions than it found at the entrance. For a book, that is a considerably greater compliment than the convenient claim that it has “exhausted the subject.”

7. From classmate to fellow member of a generation

While reading the book, I repeatedly had the feeling of returning to a conversation that had begun a very long time ago. Not because we shared identical professional experiences, but because we began in the same intellectual laboratory. During our years at SNSPA, public administration was explained to us through concepts. Afterwards, each of us followed his own road and discovered public administration through people. Dragoş came to observe it from academia, consultancy, public projects and from inside a position of public authority. I moved through law, legal practice, academia, university leadership and institutional management. Looking back, the differences between our paths make this encounter more interesting, not less relevant.

Perhaps this is also why, while reading the book, I sometimes hear not only the voice of the present-day author, but also an echo of the student from those years. There remains the same kind of curiosity: why do things work this way? Only now the question is no longer addressed to the professor standing at the front of a classroom. It is addressed to the institution itself. And institutions usually reply through stories.

I would like to believe that we, too, have changed without completely losing that reflex. Experience has the unpleasant habit of making us harder to impress, but it may also have the advantage of transforming youthful idealism into a more pragmatic form of responsibility. We probably no longer believe that a good law can transform an institution by itself. Yet neither should we accept the opposite conclusion, namely that institutions cannot be changed. Between naïveté and cynicism lies a more difficult territory, inhabited by those who know how hard change really is and continue to attempt it nonetheless.

8. How not to become a person of the system

The book’s final major merit is that it does not end where it would have been easiest to end: with a verdict on institutions. After discussing offices, public officials, competitions, organisational charts, motivation, procurement, politics, reform and unwritten rules, Dragoş turns the question back towards the individual: how does one avoid becoming part of the system in the worst sense of the term?

This may be the most difficult question in the book. Institutions do not transform us through one dramatic act of conversion. Nobody wakes up one morning announcing, “from today onwards I shall abandon my principles.” Things happen slowly. You accept one exception because the situation appears special. The second time, there is already a precedent. The third time, it becomes practice. After long enough, something you once found intolerable at the beginning of your career may begin to look merely like “realism.” Moral boundaries rarely collapse spectacularly; most of the time, they move only a few centimetres at a time.

Perhaps this is where my reading becomes most personal. Beyond our studies, careers and offices, I believe that at the end of a professional life there remains a question much simpler than all the organisational charts we have passed through: what kind of person did you become while trying to succeed?. Offices pass. Terms come to an end. Titles lose their shine remarkably quickly once separated from the person who carried them. What remains is how you treated people, what you built and which boundaries you refused to cross.

Dragoş does not preach, and that is an advantage. He does not offer a handbook of administrative purity. It would not be believable. He proposes something much more mature: understand the system without becoming dependent on it, know its rules without confusing them with truth and be capable of compromise without one day discovering that you have compromised yourself. The distinction is delicate, but within it probably lies the entire ethics of institutional life.

9. Instead of a conclusion: Dragoş, who are “they,” after all?

When the book is closed, one irony remains, quietly prepared by its title. We begin reading by asking who the people of the system are, almost as if we were about to discover some separate species. By the end, the answer becomes uncomfortably simple: they are public officials, civil servants, advisers, professors, consultants, managers, those who sign, those who do not sign, those who change something and those who prefer not to take the risk. Sometimes, they are us.

Perhaps this is the best challenge Dragoş offers his reader. It is easy to speak about the system in the third person. “They” do this, “they” do not want that, “they” block everything. It is far harder to accept that institutions are built every day from the sum of individual choices, including our own. The system does not begin somewhere far away. It begins the moment one of us decides whether to say yes or no, whether to assume responsibility or pass it on, whether

to choose the right person or merely the acceptable one, whether to respect a rule for the meaning it carries or merely for personal protection.

For this reason, *People of the “System”* is more than a book about Romanian public administration. It is a book about the relationship between the person and the institution, between character and office, between rule and behaviour. It is serious enough for the specialist and free enough for the reader who has never opened an Administrative Code. It combines observation, experience and precisely that amount of self-irony without which, I suspect, neither public administration nor academic life could be crossed in complete intellectual health.

For me, however, the book contains something else that cannot easily be measured by the conventional instruments of a review. While I was reading it, between Professor Dragoş Dincă in 2026 and the printed page, my classmate from SNSPA three decades ago appeared from time to time. And I found myself thinking that perhaps, without realising it, we were already studying for this book back then. Only the most important part of the course was still to be taught after graduation: by institutions, by the people we encountered, by our own mistakes and by the passing of time, which forced us to recognise the difference between what is written in a law and what happens when that law finally reaches human hands.

And if I had to compress the entire volume into a single question, I would not ask how we can defeat the “system.” That would be too simple and, after reading Dragoş, even slightly childish. I would ask something else: how do we build institutions in which the right person can finally also be the acceptable person? If we ever succeed in doing that, perhaps we will stop talking quite so much about “the system.” And Dragoş will have to write another book. Knowing him, I do not think that would necessarily be a problem.