DETERMINATION OF INTERMEDIATE BARRIERS PREVENTING THE TRANSFER OF PERFORMANCE OF APL MANAGEMENT IN THE DIRECTION OF RURAL SPACE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract:

In recent years, the Republic of Moldova has passed through a process of change at the level of the administrative system. These changes, in the situation in which they were actually operated, were intended to contribute both to the development of rural areas in the Republic of Moldova, and to increasing the performance of LPA management of level I. However, at the community level, a negative image was created about public institutions, in general, and specially about their ability to respond to the real needs of society. However, to some extent, the failure of the Strategy can also be attributed to the quality of the document itself. We must admit that the priorities set were influenced by the need to align national policies with the standards and rules of the European Union, in order to implement the principles of good governance. For these reasons, the public administration reform Strategy has proven to be ineffective, due to its uncertain role in the general policy framework and the lack of a control and evaluation framework.

In order not to assume the role of judge and critic, identifying the shortcomings of the local public administration as simple citizens, observing only the effects, and abstracting the causes, we set out to identify the problems faced by the local public administration of the first level directly from the source. For this purpose, a questionnaire was developed to consult the opinion of its representatives.

Keywords: *local public administration, management, human resources.*

JEL Classification: *M1, K23*

INTRODUCTION

The reform of the local public administration is one of the urgent problems to be solved in the Republic of Moldova. The most curious thing is the fact that even before the drafting of the Public Administration Reform Strategy, about ten years ago, "the authors of the decentralization strategy elucidated a series of deficiencies characteristic of local public administration, among which we will list the following: the reduced capacity of the local authorities in the rural environment to provide public services, the role being reduced to one of representation, and not of providing actual services; reduced capacity for strategic planning and for administration of various resources at the level of local public authorities of level I; the lack of functional performance of local public authorities caused by staff limitations and faulty human resource management practices; relatively passive participation of the population in the electoral and decision-making process; the low degree of representativeness of local elected officials" (HINȚEA, Călin-Emilian, 1999). This thing becomes very dramatic in the conditions in which we are forced to note that local public administration faces the same problems

and challenges, including at the current stage, and all the listed challenges constitute a significant impediment in the direction of achieving performance at the level of LPA management

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The questionnaire was designed using Google Forms tool and distributed on a proportionally stratified sample consisting of 50 mayors from rural localities of the Republic of Moldova, respectively 15 mayors from the northern area, 15 mayors from the southern area and 20 mayors from the central area. The questionnaire contains 5 general questions with open text about the mayor (name, contact details, the locality he represents), 5 closed questions with a unique answer to specify (the geographical area in which the represented locality is located, the number of the population in the locality, the length of service in LPA, the number of mandates and studies held) and 22 basic questions intended to contribute to the formation of a clear vision regarding the real possibilities for the development of rural space in the Republic of Moldova through the transfer of LPA management performance. Among the main questions it can be found single-answer closed questions and attitudinal scales, single-response matrices, and 3 open questions with personalized text. When establishing the attitudinal scales, we opted for semantic differentials and the Likert scale, and open questions were provided for consulting the personal opinions of the survey participants.

RESULTS AND DISSCUSION

The period of completing the questionnaire was May-August 2020, a period marked by the restrictions imposed by the pandemic, in which we encountered numerous impediments in the process of physical data collection, a fact that led to its subsequent application through the use of digital tools. We must mention that the survey process was preceded by a period of sample observation, which still managed to take place in a physical format, but which clashed with the reluctance of the mayors towards the study started by the author. The reluctance of the mayors was also felt during the survey carried out through digital tools. Under these conditions, however, we were able to accumulate the planned number of responses, including according to the initial stratification of the sample.

We note that the vast majority of mayors are serving their first and second terms – 36% and 38%, respectively, with 14% of the surveyed mayors in their third term, the rest already holding either their fourth or fifth term. The work experience in LPA varies starting with people who have been active in the field for up to 5 years - 28%, between 5 and 10 years - 46%, and over 10 years - 26%. It should be mentioned that among those interviewed, a person who has been active in these structures for 32 years was also identified. Thus, the average length of service in LPA compared to the total number of people interviewed is 8.36 years. Also in this context, we would like to mention that 66% of the total number of mayors who were surveyed have higher education, and 8% - master's degree (figure 1), a fact that is certainly appreciated positively, in the context in which we are referring to the increase in performance LPA management, or the human factor returning a significant role.

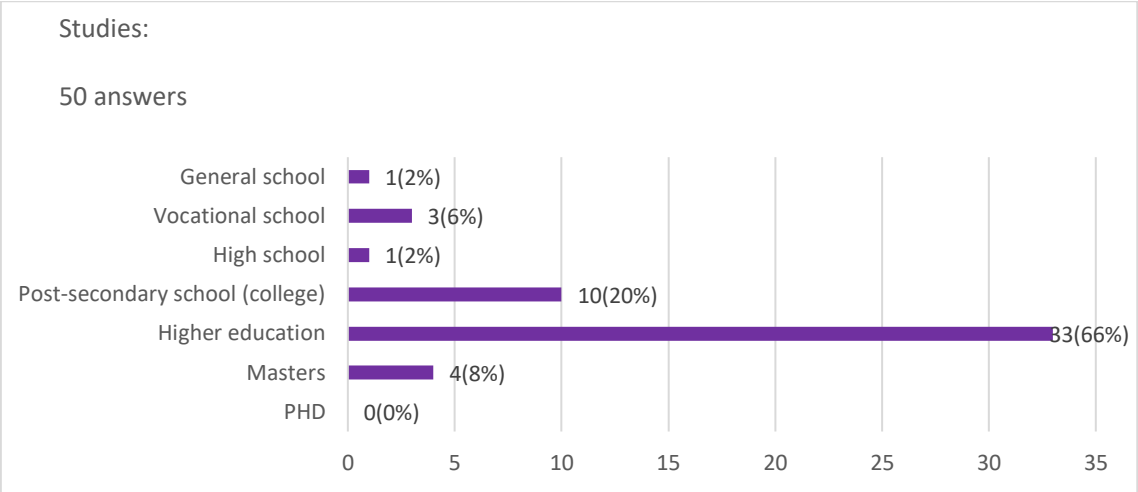

Fig. 1. The studies held by the interviewed staff of LPA level I

The mayors are mostly completely and partially satisfied (figure 2.) with the performance of the institution they represent (22% and 72%).

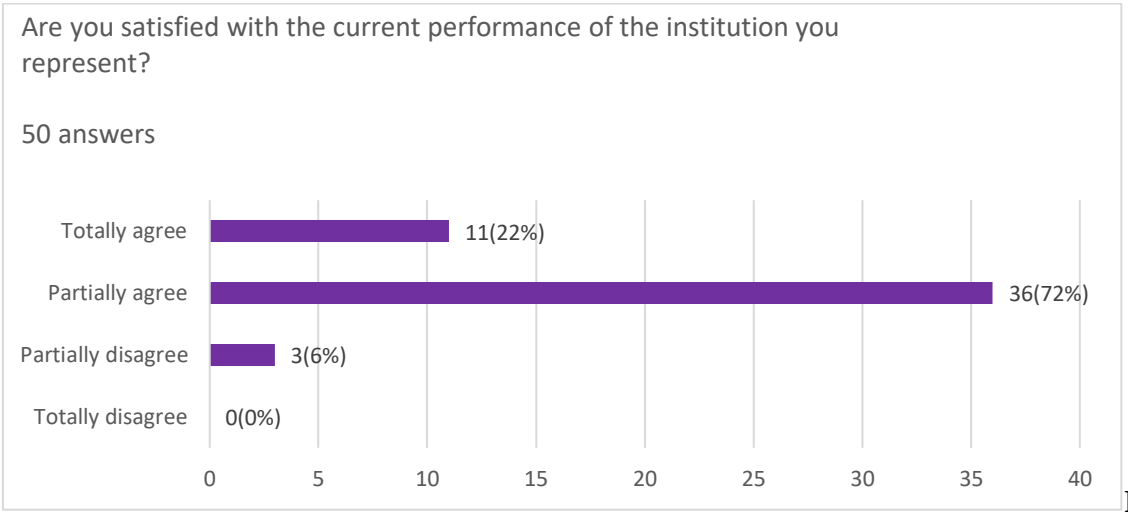

Fig. 2. The degree of satisfaction of local community representatives regarding the current performance of the represented institution

However, we allowed ourselves to determine the degree of satisfaction of the local elected officials with regard to the current performance of the institution by applying a score from 1 to 4, a score also applied in the case of evaluating the performance of civil servants based on legal principles.

Table 1. Determination of the final score in order to assess the degree of satisfaction of local elected officials with regard to the current performance of the institution

The options offered by the attitudinal scale	**The number of respondents**	**Score awarded for option**	**Total accumulated score**
Totally agree	11	4	44
Partial agreement	36	3	108
Partially disagree	3	2	6
Totally disagree	0	1	0
Total:	**50**	*	**158**

Final score: 3.16 points	Qualifying: Good

Source: Developed by the author based on data from the Report generated by Google Forms

Thus, analyzing the results in table 1, we find that the qualification of the mayors' self-evaluation is "good" and not "very good". Under these conditions, we can say that the mayors collide with certain barriers that prevent them from increasing their performance.

We would like to mention here that in order to enhance management performance, LPAs of level I must be able to effectively manage the few resources they have, but also to attract external resources for the simple reason that the management of resources allocated by the state or collected from taxes and fees are not performance.

Another major barrier preventing Level I LPAs from contributing to rural development is the high degree of politicization. Politicization implies "an action by which political significance is given to a situation lacking this characteristic; it is an abusive practice to attribute a political character to phenomena that do not have such a character (IVANOFF, Ivan, 2004).

Over the past century, political control over the bureaucracy has become one of the most debated topics in the study of administration. Political control scholars are the latest in a long line of scholars who have been concerned with the appropriate role for bureaucracy in democratic governance. The many disputes come in response to various criticisms of the political-administrative dichotomy paradigm that policies are developed by politicians and implemented by bureaucrats. These criticisms mainly refer to the fact that often this dichotomy is not respected either because of the politician, who intervenes in the administrative through levers specific to the field, or because of the administrative who, according to G. Moldovanu, can accumulate political power in his hands through three ways: "increasing the administrative apparatus until it becomes immune to population control; placing authority over a government administration of any size in the hands of a private entity; vesting a public institution with discretionary authority, in such a way that the exercise of this power does not aim to ensure the good of the population" (MOLDOVANU, George, 2005). No matter what, the balance between these two sectors, political and administrative, cannot be achieved, the balance tilting sometimes towards one, sometimes towards the other depending on general factors, linked to the political system and consolidated throughout political and administrative history of the country, as well as factors specific to the status, role or social position of high officials. "The separation of politics from administration is one of the constants of the democratic model of public administration, but the possibility of real separation of these two systems remains an unsolved problem to this day" (ФЕТЕСКУ, Ч. П, 2019).

Among the criticisms brought to the excessive politicization of the public office, which, among other things, can be found in the series of problems faced by the LPA of the first level and in our country, we can mention the lack of skills necessary for the exercise of public functions by some representatives for the reason that they were appointed exclusively for political interests, without even having an exhaustive picture of the local administration process. This inevitably leads to the appearance of partisanship, as civil servants fully support the policies promoted by the ruling parties, often ignoring innovation and creativity. The promotion of the same philosophy within the public office ensures the lack of transparency in the activity, even associated with secrecy, but this represents a colossal impediment for a democratic state. And finally, we would like to mention that "excessive politicization leads to the weakening of the degree of competence in public administration, the degree of responsibility and efficiency" (MANOLE, Dinu, 2020), thus constituting a significant barrier in order to achieve performance in the direction of development rural space. The appointment of mayors on political principles does not imply the obligation, imposed on legal principles, to possess certain

managerial knowledge and skills, a fact that would certainly contribute to increasing the performances recorded by the entire team and would favor the achievement of the objectives drawn up on the principles of efficiency and effectiveness.

Another challenge to the development of rural spaces by the local public administration is the **imperfection of the legal framework**, which refers both to the *lack of a well-defined legal framework* and to the lack of legislative acts that are extremely necessary for the effective activity of the local public administration. If we refer to the results of the questionnaire completed by the mayors of rural localities, they, in a proportion of about 60%, expressed their partial agreement with the motion according to which the degree of regulation of the rural space in the Republic of Moldova is sufficient and clear. However, there are also mayors who opted for the "partial agreement" motion, their weight being a significant one - 20%. In general, if we are to refer to the local public administration, we would like to mention the fact that the normative acts that are currently in force do not clearly define the obligations of the civil servant, *only delimiting his rights*. We consider this a maneuverable versatility in legal texts for the simple reason that, on the one hand, it can contribute to increasing and promoting irresponsibility among public officials, and on the other hand, it can practically eliminate the protective dimension, which is so necessary in in order to ensure professional independence, as well as protection against political arbitrariness. Our legislative basis also lacks a clear definition of the roles, positions, obligations and rights exercised within the administrative system, in order to rank and order them.

Another relevant barrier faced by mayors in rural localities in order to develop rural spaces by transferring the performance of their management is the **limited administrative capacity**. Although the administrative decentralization procedure was initiated a long time ago, its effects are still expected to be seen, and the principle of decentralization, local autonomy and subsidiarity, being ensured only at the declarative level. In the process of administrative decentralization "the state no longer assumes the task of administration alone, but shares it in certain quotas, with other categories of legal entities under public law, which in the case of the Republic of Moldova are represented by districts, municipalities, cities, communes and villages " (ȘAVGA, Alexandru, 2017).

Here we would like to mention that administrative decentralization implies compliance with certain conditions, namely:

- recognition of local interests as a distinct category from national interests;
- the attribution by law to territorial communities of the capacity of public law and their own public interest;
- ensuring financial autonomy;
- designation of the representative authority by universal vote;
- independence in the management of matters of local interest by granting the right to adopt the legal acts necessary to carry out the duties;
- state control over the realization of local autonomy.

When we refer to the process of administrative decentralization in the Republic of Moldova, we attest to deficiencies in the decentralization chapter of public services, which "means granting a certain autonomy to public services, giving them legal personality, removing them from hierarchical control and placing this public service under the rules of administrative tutelage" (ȘAVGA, Alexandru, 2017).

Another challenge for local public administration that prevents the sustainable development of rural areas is the **lack of professionalism** in the case of a significant part of the staff. Special attention must be paid to the recruitment and training of personnel, because the value of the public sector is not only given by the material and financial resources it possesses, it is given especially by

its human potential. The human factor manifests its decisive role in achieving any change through "attitudes and skills that are characteristic of it, increasing efficiency in managing processes and in communication, in planning, in coordination" (FETESCU, Cezara, 2020). We note that at the current stage the law only provides for some qualitative criteria applied to the performance evaluation of public sector employees, but these criteria facilitate a subjective evaluation as a result of which all employees are entitled to a maximum increase, regardless of whether they have shown effective performance, i.e. have recorded some outstanding results compared to other results of the same kind. We rightly believe that the performance evaluation mechanism of civil servants should be reviewed, even more, reinvented in the direction of including the performance evaluation of civil servants in the general evaluation mechanism of LPA management.

Analyzing the answers to the questionnaire again, we find that 14% of the respondents never benefited from training, and another 30% benefited from training once every two years (figure 3).

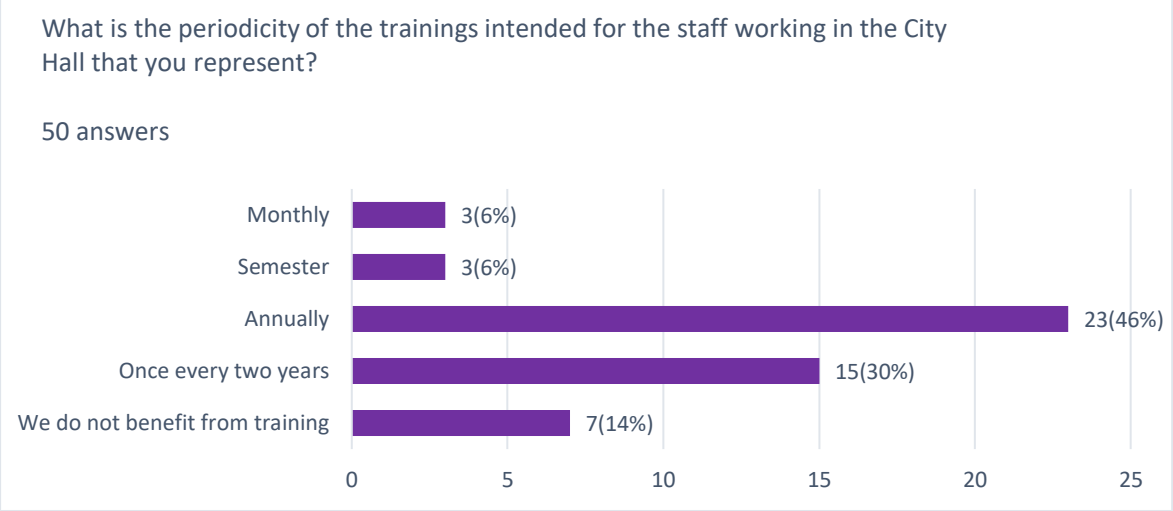

Fig. 3. The periodicity of staff training within LPA Level I

In this context, we believe that "public authorities must pay special attention to the training of their own staff and adaptation, from an institutional and human point of view, to the very rapid changes taking place in society. The continuous training of the staff within the public administration authorities is a defining element in the consolidation of the institutional capacity and the efficiency of the public administration. The development of the professional skills and competencies of public administration officials significantly determines the performance of a public institution and its institutional capacity" (TOFAN, Tatiana, 2019).

The quality of public administration is one of the engines of national competitiveness, for these reasons the tendency to modernize this engine is becoming increasingly pronounced. A modern public administrative system is one in which there are opportunities for the promotion of innovations and information technologies, and strategic performances increase with the professional improvement of human resources in the public administration.

"From the point of view of the form of implementation, professional training can be carried out through training programs created as a result of carrying out in-depth studies to evaluate the training needs, the thorough evaluation of both the quality of the training and the instructors, the didactic materials, of the relevance of the proposed programs, which will ensure the improvement of their quality. The change depends, first of all, on the skills of the people who make public

administrations transparent, accountable and at the service of citizens, and all this depends, in turn, on the attention paid to the training and professional development of human resources in public administration. Training must be an essential tool for implementing public administration reform, in particular, and the entire socioeconomic reform process, in general" (TOFAN, Tatiana, 2019).

The objectives of a professional training process can be grouped into 5 categories as represented in figure 4.

Training for the purpose of *acquiring knowledge* usually aims to train staff in a new field. Here we are talking about major changes in the use of information technologies, at the level of changes in legislation, etc. Special attention should be paid to project management in order to train the skills of writing funding request projects, because the mayors admit in the applied questionnaire that they have enough information related to the possibilities of requesting funding (78% of the total number of respondents), considering the application procedure partially accessible (70%) mainly due to the lack of staff who have the necessary skills to write a project. For these reasons, 24% of the total number of town halls interviewed never benefited from investments, and 30% of the mayors never even tried to apply for any financing program. Here we would like to mention that the ability to attract funding sources is one of the relevant criteria proposed by the author for assessing the performance of LPA management, this also contributing to the development of the rural area.

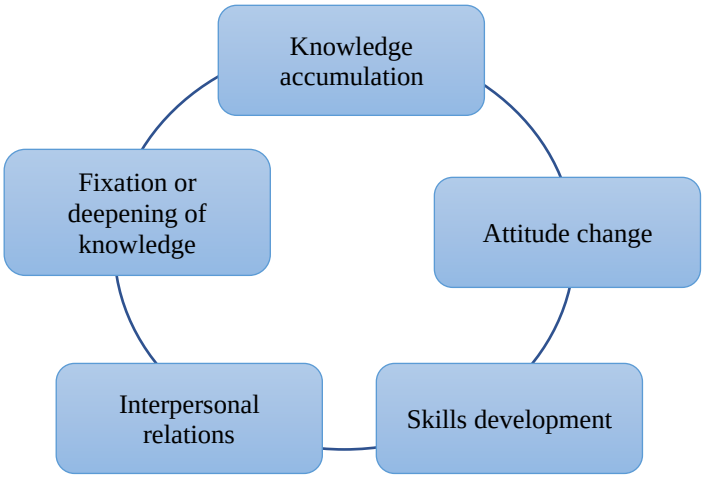

Fig. 4. The objectives of a professional training process

Source: Developed by the authors based on (GRECU, A., TOFAN, T., 2021)

The trainings that involve a *change of attitude* are especially oriented towards the adaptation of employees to the major changes in the organizational culture.

"Although the need for decentralization and delegation of tasks from the central level to the lower levels is increasingly being imposed, this is viewed with reluctance by the followers of the fixed mentality, who believe that this way there is a dilution of authority, through the disappearance of an imposing part of their power. Thus, we are witnessing a rather large resistance of the managers, of the managerial culture towards such initiatives. Institutional reforms can and must be done with certainty" (FETESCU, Cezara, 2020), and the attitude change must be done by implementing leadership, training aimed at increasing personal motivation, etc.

Another barrier referred to by the representatives of local public administrations is **the total indifference on the part of the population**, manifested by the lack of interest and non-involvement in community matters. This is certainly the result of the existence of the previously identified barriers

such as the lack of financial resources, excessive politicization, the imperfect legal framework - things that inevitably generated the distrust of the population in the local administrative system, which society considers unable to provide quality services. Local interests can and must be defended only by the members of this community, because they are the people who know best the local needs and the possible development opportunities, they are the ones for whom the given locality is the native locality, it is the locality with which they have a lot of ties of events and memories, for these reasons the right to make decisions and to act jointly in matters of community level is a prerogative of the community, and the community must be attracted by various methods to the decision-making process of the locality. We mention that among the principles of good governance, identified in 2001 by the European Commission through the White Paper, is participation, which implies the most active involvement of the entire community in the process of drafting, implementing and monitoring public policies. The mayors of rural localities of course know about the good practices currently existing at the level of some local public authorities that have proven their potential to generate a significant impact on ensuring transparency through community involvement in the decision-making process. For these reasons, the interest of the community and its involvement in the decision-making process of the LPA is extremely important for the mayors, their task being to increase the attractiveness of local public administrations for the population. The people of a community "are diamonds not yet polished, but which, through their multitude, can nevertheless provide unrepeatable brilliance to the crown. Gemstone polishing will be able to bring out all the skills and abilities possessed by human capital and once again demonstrate the veracity of Belbin's Theory that "imperfect individuals can make perfect teams" as long as their qualities and flaws are taken into account and balanced at the right time" (FETESCU, Cezara, 2020).

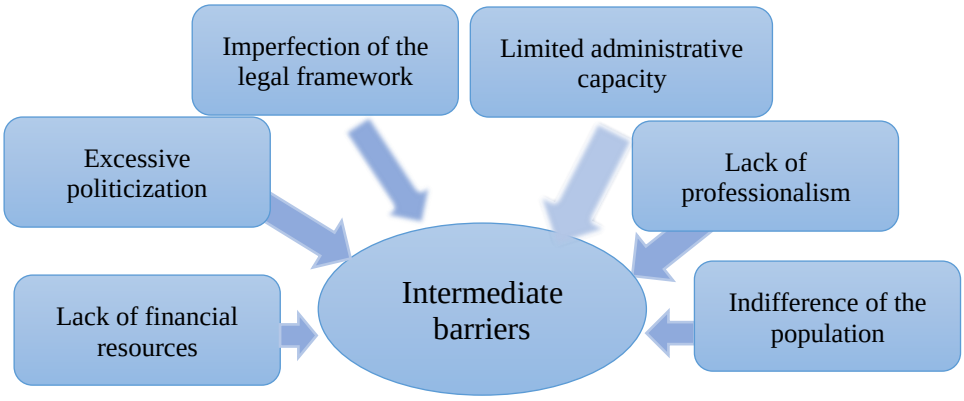

Fig. 5. Intermediate barriers that prevent the transfer of LPA management performance in the direction of rural development

Source: Developed by the author based on the Report generated by Google Forms

Based on these findings, we deduce the fact that there are major barriers on the way to the development of the rural space through the transfer of performance of the LPA management (figure 5), but once they are aware, they can possibly be fixed. "The lack of a strategic vision, the definition of susceptible elements decisively influenced medium and long-term developments, the lack, in the last instance, of clear objectives towards the achievement of which the administrative structures should be oriented, made any serious approach to the reform in the field impossible . That is why the reform of the administrative system must aim at establishing a set of priorities and aim at clear and achievable objectives; it must pass from the stage of routine and contentless invocation towards a professional and efficient approach" (HINȚEA, Călin-Emilian, 1999), and the performance of local

public administration management would be expressed through the results obtained by it in solving problems and citizens' needs through discipline and competence, reliability and promptness.

CONCLUSIONS

At the helm of the mayors of rural localities in the Republic of Moldova are mayors exercising their first and second terms of office - 36% and 38%, respectively, with the third term being 14% of the surveyed mayors, the rest already holding either the fourth, be the fifth term. The length of service in LPA varies between 2 and 32 years, on average being 8.36 years. Also in this context, we would like to mention that approx. 66% of the mayors have higher education, and approx. 8% - a master's degree, a fact that is certainly appreciated positively, in the context in which we are referring to increasing the performance of LPA management.

In the process of determining the opinion of the mayors regarding the level of development of the rural locality at the helm of which they are at the helm, it was found that approx. 56% of the local elected officials consider that they lead a sufficiently developed locality, the degree of development of which could be appreciated with the qualification "satisfactory", and own contribution - with the qualification "good", which is more than "satisfactory".

The mayors cite a series of external barriers that prevent them from channeling their managerial performance towards the development of rural areas, such as the lack of financial resources, excessive politicization, the imperfect legal framework, limited administrative capacity - things that have inevitably generated , citizens' distrust in public institutions.

Total indifference on the part of the population was caused not only by the existence of external barriers, but also by the existence of a barrier in their own backyard, namely the lack of professionalism among civil servants.

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