Impact of Ethical Infrastructure on the Performance of Executive Power Administrative Units in Bulgaria

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This research analyses the level of development of ethical infrastructure and its impact on the performance of administrative structures in Bulgaria, while also exploring the respondents' attitudes towards these issues. It defines the applied models of ethical infrastructure and problem areas in the ethical environment of executive administrations in Bulgaria. The research is based on an electronic survey which was distributed among all administrative units that are part of the executive power in Bulgaria. The sample comprising 127 administrative units was formed using the method of respondents. After conducting a wide-scale survey, eight in-depth non-structured interviews were con-

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ducted with senior officers and experts from three administrative structures.

Keywords: ethics, ethical infrastructure, level of development of ethical infrastructure, impact of ethical infrastructure

1. Introduction

Issues related to ethics in the public sector have become increasingly pressing in Bulgaria. This is due to the fact that ethics in public institutions management requires ensuring a good environment for the performance of administrative structures, which, undoubtedly, has a positive impact upon citizens. Ethics is directly related to applying the principles of good management that will guarantee compliance with the law, proper spending of public resources, and respect for human rights, while also ensuring integrity, adherence to values, curbing corruption, etc. Our research focuses on the findings of numerous surveys conducted by international and national organisations (Gallup International, 2023; World Justice Project, 2022; U.S. Embassy in Bulgaria, 2023), which indicate that the ethics environment in Bulgaria is in an unfavourable condition and brings to the fore problems related to the existing corruption and the lack of adequate measures to fight it.

Corruption is the most obvious manifestation of the lack of a functioning ethical infrastructure or adequate control over administration in our country. According to the data provided by the World Barometer, 68.9% of Bulgarian citizens rate the Government poorly in terms of its fight against corruption (Transparency International, 2022). This poor rating is due to problems related to the lack of transparency in spending public resources, lack of regulations for appointing senior government executives and the merely formal compliance with such regulations, as well as the inefficient sanctions imposed on government executives for unethical conduct (Transparency International, 2023). This casts doubt not only on their compliance with the law, but also on their ethics. Furthermore, data provided by the Corruption Perceptions Index indicate that the condition of the corruption environment in our country is unfavourable. In 2022, Bulgaria ranked 72nd with the index of 43. The values of the index for the period from 2012 to 2022 indicate that there has been no significant progress in fighting corruption over the last ten

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years. These values rank Bulgaria at the bottom among EU countries. A similar assessment is presented in the European Corruption Attitudes Barometer 2023 – 81% of citizens in Bulgaria believe that the country has a serious problem with corruption (European Union, 2023).

Reactive behaviour towards cases of corruption is not an effective mechanism for curbing corruption. Rather, actions need to be based on proactive approaches (Yonkova, 2022). Yet, to make adequate choices, it is essential to analyse the level to which the elements of ethical infrastructure which have an impact on organisational performance and affect the ethical climate have been developed.

The purpose of this research is to identify the impact of ethical infrastructure on the functioning of public sector organisations in Bulgaria, with an emphasis on administrative structures, part of the executive power in Bulgaria. The main points of focus are as follows:

1. Studying the respondents' attitudes towards the condition of ethical infrastructure and its impact on the organisational performance of administrative structures;
2. Defining the employed models of ethical infrastructure;
3. Identifying problem areas in terms of the ethical environment in executive power administration.

The research methods used were induction and deduction; thematic, critical, and comparative analysis of scientific literature; best practices and research data from secondary sources; structural and graphical method; and univariate and bivariate descriptive distributions.

2. A Theoretical Review of the Concept and Existing Models of Ethical Infrastructure

2.1. Ethical Infrastructure as a Concept

Ethical issues are complex and multifaceted. The practical manifestation of ethics is subject to divergent understanding and interpretation, especially when it comes to public administration. It operates through day-to-day managerial decision-making, which is characterised by rationality, discretion, expediency, and is a prerequisite for the exercise of public authority and the satisfaction of public needs. The resulting responsibility and the

embodiment of those decisions in practice require soundness, efficiency, accountability, correct and adequate judgement, and ensuring that those decisions and the actions that flow from them are based not only on legality but also on well-established ethical principles and standards.

Increasingly, however, in the specialised literature and in practice, a number of examples are being cited which provide grounds to argue that ethical principles and standards are being violated and that a lack of integrity, low civic trust in institutions, weak public engagement, poor employee satisfaction and motivation accompany the practice of public organisations in Bulgaria. Overcoming these weaknesses, improving the quality of the administration's performance, and creating reasonable confidence that objectives are being achieved in compliance with public morality and ethics, require the creation of an adequate organisational environment with an appropriate ethical infrastructure.

Scholars do not clearly define the content of the term "ethical infrastructure". In addition to the lack of a generally accepted definition in the specialised literature, there is also a lack of a common opinion regarding the content of ethical infrastructure models. This, in turn, provides scope for new research. Various authors point to different definitions of the concept depending on the meaning framework in which they consider it. Tenbrunsell, Crowe and Umphress (2003), for example, present a definition of ethical infrastructure in which they embed the organisational elements that contribute to the ethical effectiveness of organisations, their impact, and their integration. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2000), Perzanowska and Pachwicewicz (2010), Bercoc and Andolsek (2019), and Efremovski (2021) link infrastructure to the management of ethical behaviour, sharing the view that it is a system of decisions that promotes high standards of behaviour and therefore has a positive impact on organisations. An interesting definition that focuses on the meaningfulness of ethical infrastructure is presented by Stare and Klun (2017). They define the ethical framework as a set of individual employee ethics, internal organisational standards, rules and culture, and national legislation that ensures the applicability of ethics in the organisation. However, beyond the scope of research inquiries remains the question of how these standards are assessed and how they influence the development of ethics in administration. For the needs of this research, ethical infrastructure will be interpreted as a "complex mechanism of ethical standards and practices that creates the environment for the overall performance of the administration according to universal human and social values and norms" (Parashkevova & Yonkova, 2021, pp. 179-186)).

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2.2. Models of Ethical Infrastructure in the Public Sector

There are several widespread models of ethical infrastructure in the academic literature that reflect the need to improve ethical behaviour in the public sphere (see Table 1). The development of an appropriate ethical environment in the administration largely depends on the chosen model.

Table 1: *Elements of ethical infrastructure, as a part of various authors' views on the content of the models*

Elements of ethical infrastructure	Authors of the ethical infrastructure model				
	Kandeva (1998)	Georgiev (1999)	OECD (2000)	Ten-brunsel, Crowe, & Umphress (2003)	Fernandez & Camacho (2015)
Political commitment	✓	✓	✓		
Control and accountability	✓	✓	✓		
Responsibility	✓				
Conditions of organising civil service	✓	✓			
Fair and equal treatment of employees	✓				
Salaries and wages	✓				
Security	✓				
Training	✓				
Ethical codes	✓	✓	✓		✓
Legal framework		✓	✓		✓
Professional socialisation		✓	✓		
Civil society			✓		
Conditions supporting public services			✓		
Formal systems				✓	✓
Informal systems				✓	✓
Organisational climate				✓	✓
Leadership				✓	✓
Ethical culture				✓	✓

Source: Author.

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The comparative analysis presented in Table 1 shows that the models include different numbers of elements. It should be noted that four of these five models reflect the need to regulate the ethical conduct of employees through codes of ethics at the organisational level. These are the models of Kandeva (1998), Georgiev (1999), Organisation for Economic Co-operation & Development (2000), and the one presented by Fernandez and Camacho (2015). These authors also stress the need for political commitment, oversight, and accountability, as well as a legal framework. Formal and informal systems, organisational climate, ethical culture, and leadership are the fundamental elements represented in two of the five models mentioned, those of Tenbrunsel, Crowe, and Umphress (2003), and Fernandez and Camacho (2015). Other researchers emphasise the need for professional socialisation and conditions of organising civil service. These ethical elements are embedded in the models of OECD, Georgiev, and Kandeva.

All other elements, such as responsibility, salaries and wages, security, training, civil society, and conditions supporting public services are only covered in one model out of the five models mentioned. We can therefore argue that they have not been sufficiently developed in the scientific literature.

However, the fact that the endeavour to build a comprehensive and well-functioning ethical infrastructure continues indicates that there is currently no model that would meet the requirements of practice and ensure a high level of ethicality in the work processes in public sector administrations.

3. Ethical Infrastructure in Public Sector Organisations in Bulgaria - Empirical Study

The work of the public sector is subject to a series of constraints – political, institutional, financial, and human, which, together with the lack of integrity, low citizens' trust in institutions, weak civil engagement, and employees' low satisfaction and motivation, render it impossible to ensure higher levels of ethics. These findings are based on several surveys conducted by international and national institutions and organisations (Gallup International, 2023; Alpha Research, 2023; Basel Institute of Governance, 2023; Anti-Corruption Fund, 2023; Economist Intelligence Unit, 2022), according to which the conditions of the ethical environment

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in our country are unfavourable. The results of the surveys cited above raise a number of questions in terms of both the real level to which the individual elements of ethical infrastructure have been developed, and in terms of individual perceptions of the phenomenon which is materialised in the daily performance of any administrative employee.

These results raise a number of questions related to the development of ethical infrastructure and its impact on the organisational functioning of public sector administrations in Bulgaria.

3.1. Methodology

In terms of its methodology, the research was conducted in several inter-related stages:

At the first stage, secondary information sources were thoroughly examined and the collected data were analysed. The major questions and working hypotheses of the research were defined.

At the second stage, an interview card for the survey was designed and tested. Twenty questions of different types were defined, and included dichotomous questions, a Likert-scale questionnaire, and multiple-choice questions. The interview card was tested by five representatives of public sector organisations and was further elaborated.

At the third stage, the sample method was defined. The total number of administrative structures was 421. The interview card was sent to the representatives of all of them, and the sample was formed from the number of respondents, which was 127 administrations. The sample is therefore not representative, yet it provides sufficiently correct information about the level to which ethical infrastructure has been developed, and the impact it has on the performance of public sector organisations.

At stage four, an electronic survey was conducted based on the Lime-Survey web application. The survey questionnaire could be accessed in the period from February 2023 to March 2023. The link to the survey was sent by e-mail. At the end of the period, a sample was formed on the principle of unrepeatable random selection.

At stage five, responses were processed and summarised.

Stage six of the methodology related to conducting unstructured in-depth interviews. To ensure more comprehensive high-quality data, in-depth interviews were conducted in the period from April 1 to April 12 2023. Interview invitations were randomly sent to 20 representatives of five ad-

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ministrative structures via private contacts. Among the representatives, there were eight senior officers and experts from three municipal administrative units – Gabrovo, Sevlievo, and Dryanovo. The general topic of the interview was implementation of an ethical policy at the organisational level. The objective was to collect more comprehensive information about the employees' attitudes towards the ethical performance of administrative units.

At stage seven, a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the collected data and results was carried out. The statistical analysis which was conducted was based on the structural, graphical, and correlation method, and on univariate and bivariate descriptive distributions.

At stage eight, which was the last one, the data was interpreted, after being processed by employing the methods presented earlier. As a result, conclusions were drawn which brought to the fore failures in the performance of organisations. Such failures may be used as a basis for designing tools to raise the quality of ethical infrastructure within administrations.

3.2. Results and Analysis

The number of public sector organisations which took part in the survey is 127, including the Council of Ministers, ten ministries, four state agencies, 11 executive agencies, a state commission, nine administrative structures established by a legislative act whose functions relate to exercising executive power, nine regional administrations, and 82 municipal ones (see Table 2).

Table 2: *Administrative structures included in the survey*

Administrative unit	Established in the country		Included in the scope of the research	
	Total	Relative Share (%)	Total	Relative Share (%)
Council of Ministers	1	0.24	1	0.79
Ministry	19	4.51	10	7.87
State agency	9	2.14	4	3.15
Executive agency	32	7.6	11	8.66
State commission	5	1.18	1	0.79

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Administrative structure established by a legislative act	62	14.73	9	7.09
Regional administration	28	6.65	9	7.09
Municipality administration	265	62.95	82	64.56
Total:	421	100	127	100

Source: Author.

In terms of the respondents' job positions, it is important to note that the most active participants in the survey were the managers of administrative units that play a leading role in maintaining and developing the ethics within the organisation (see Table 2). The share of respondents at a position with managing functions is 61%, while nearly 33% of respondents are experts with supervisory, analytical, and support functions in various management-related spheres. The highest share of respondents in senior positions comes from municipality administrations (71.59%), while the majority of respondents who are experts with analytical functions are from administrative structures established by a legislative act (44.4%). The highest share of respondents who are experts with support functions came from regional administrations (33.33%), while the respondents from executive agencies are mainly in technical positions (9.09%). The share of respondents who are experts with supervisory functions is nearly the same for all organisations.

The participants in the survey were interviewed about the documents they keep in their organisations to support and encourage ethical behaviour. The received responses exceed 100%, as more than one answer could be selected.

Table 3: *Normative and methodological frameworks of surveyed administrative structures*

Normative and methodological frameworks of the administrative structures	Relative share of cited documents (%)
Administrative Act	91.34%
Civil Servants Act	92.91%
Financial Management and Control in the Public Sector Act	72.44%
Ministry of Interior Act	2.36%

Access to Public Information Act	72.44%
Counter Corruption and Unlawfully Acquired Assets Forfeiture Act	66.93%
Direct Citizen Participation in State and Local Government Act	37.01%
Code of Conduct / Code of Ethics	85.04%
Ordinance on the Terms and Conditions for Assessing Staff Performance in State Administration	66.41%
Ordinance on the Professional Training of Employees	32.28%
Ordinance on Holding Public Consultations	22.83%
Ordinance on the Form, Content, Order and Deadlines for Presenting Information	37.80%
Manual for Financial Management and Control	35.43%
Methodological Guidelines for Defining the Structure and Contents of Datasets to be Published in the Open Data Portal and for Updating Them	30.71%
Manual on Financial Management and Control Systems	48.82%
Manual on Behaviour Patterns	8.66%
Internal Rules for Organising Administrative Services	85.04%
Internal Rules for Monitoring the Implementation of the Ethical Code of Conduct by Employees	66.93%
Internal Rules for Applying Anti-Corruption Procedures to Report Established Information/Data about Errors, Irregularities, Fraud, Misuse	55.91%
Internal Rules for the Organisation and Procedure for Checking Declarations and for Establishing Conflicts of Interests	65.35%
Procedure for Reporting Violations of the Code of Ethics	41.73%
Rules of Procedure	76.38%
Manual on Procedures	7.87%
Procedure for Managing Applications for Access to Public Information	49.61%
Anti-Corruption Plan	23.62%
Job Description	89.76%
Customer Service Charter	64.57%

Source: Author.

The results on the applicability of the normative and methodological frameworks related to ethics (see Table 3) lead to the conclusion that administrative structures are applying the national legislation at a level

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that is sufficient to meet the basic requirements. As a whole, the internal normative framework that should regulate the ethical performance of organisations is not sufficiently developed. Many of the respondents share the opinion that in addition to the Administrative Act, the Civil Servant Act, the Financial Management and Control in the Public Sector Act, the Access to Public Information Act, and the Ordinance on the Terms and Conditions for Assessing the Performance of Employees in State Administration, the Rules of Procedure (76.38%), the Customer Service Charter (64.57%), the Internal Rules for Organising Administrative Services (85.04%), the Code of Conduct or the Code of Ethics (85.04%), the Internal Rules for Monitoring the Implementation of the Ethical Code of Conduct by Employees (66.93%), the Internal Rules for the Organisation and Procedure for Checking Declarations and for Establishing Conflicts of Interests (65.35%), and the Internal Rules for Applying Anti-Corruption Procedures to Report Established Information/Data about Errors, Irregularities, Fraud, Misuse, etc. (55.91%) are also part of the internal normative basis of organisations that is relevant to their ethical performance. A significant number of respondents (89.7%) regard the job description as a document that ensures and supports the ethical performance of administrations, i.e. according to them an individual's performance is related to that of the organisation. Most of these internal documents, though, refer to the processes related to human resources and their management, appointment, fulfilment of work duties, and to a much smaller degree to the processes which take place within an administration. As a matter of fact, there is no regulative framework referring to work processes that will guarantee their implementation according to ethical principles. For example, 23.62% of respondents state that their organisation is applying an anti-corruption plan. Eleven organisations (8.66%) apply a manual on behaviour patterns, but do not have adequate tools for managing individual work performance. There seems to be little awareness about the connection between ethics and work processes. Less than half of the respondents (48.82%) identify the Manual on Financial Management and Control Systems as a document related to the ethics within their organisation. The Procedure for Reporting Violations of the Code of Ethics, which is in most cases part of the management and control system, is logically identified by 41.73% as a document supporting the ethical performance of an organisation, while as few as 7.87% consider the Manual on Procedures to be a significant document.

Civil engagement, transparency, publicity, and inclusion are not recognised as factors contributing to the ethical performance of administra-

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tions. Only 37.01% of respondents state that the Direct Citizen Participation in State and Local Government Act is related to the ethical performance of their organisation. The number of respondents who consider the Ordinance on Holding Public Consultations to be relevant is even smaller – 22.83%.

We can therefore conclude that formal normative requirements are observed in administrations, that is, the existing national normative framework that is related to human resources in the public sector is leading and most recognisable in terms of ensuring a documentary basis for ethical performance. However, in practice there are no adequate mechanisms to ensure the ethical performance of work processes. Ethical performance is interpreted from the perspective of employees only, and not from that of processes or the environment. Most internal normative acts are the result of ordinances related to the national legislation and are therefore mandatory for any administration. However, they tend to be rather general and, not infrequently, similar in their content (the Codes of Conduct, for example), and are therefore predominantly formal. Internal normative acts are rarely subject to further precision, such as procedures, instructions, or technological maps that would regulate processes sufficiently to minimise the risks of unethical conduct.

As for the manner in which administrations engage citizens and stakeholders with the processes related to formulating and conducting public policies, various practices are employed. Responses exceed 100%, as more than one answer could be selected.

While processing the collected data, it became obvious that the approaches which are most frequently employed tend to transfer information passively and provide no opportunity for a constructive dialogue or real participation in discussions about ongoing management processes (see Figure 1). In addition to notifications on the organisation's official website (94.49%), the approaches predominantly used by organisations include publishing information on local media (62.99%), social media communication (49.61%), public reports (44.88%), and posting information on the Public Consultation Portal (33.07%). Only 33.86% of the respondents state that they create prerequisites to ensure citizen participation in administration meetings, while the share of organisations which form focus groups with representatives of stakeholders is only 18.11%, i.e. any decisions related to public policies are not taken together with stakeholders, but are taken unilaterally with no civil engagement in the implementation of the policies.

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Figure 1: *Approaches undertaken by administrations to communicate with, inform and consult citizens about the processes of formulating and conducting public policies*
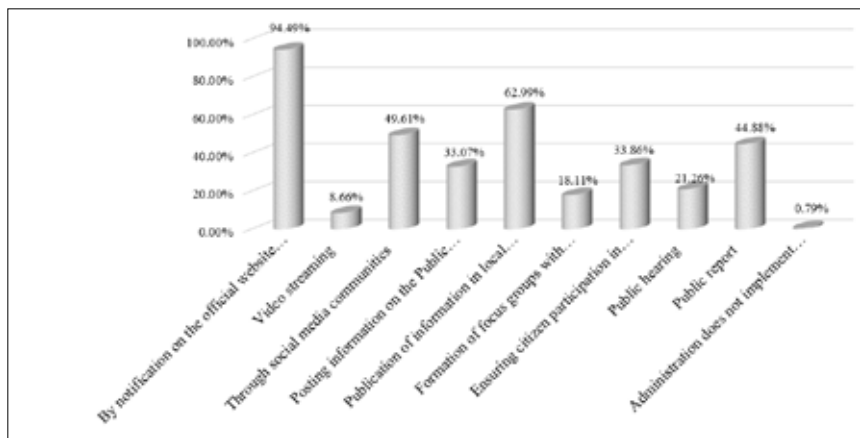
Source: Author.

These tools can be considered a means of receiving feedback about managerial decisions which have already been made, yet they cannot guarantee that extensive civil engagement is ensured in the formulation of public policies, which renders it debatable whether the proposals made by citizens have any real impact on the implementation of public policies. All administrative structures have observed the national legislation by designing mechanisms to ensure civil engagement in the management process, at least on paper. In practice, citizens are in the position of observers and there are no adequate tools to guarantee their engagement in the management processes. They have not been really integrated into the separate processes related to the formulation or implementation of public policies, although the execution of those policies has a direct impact on the quality of their lives. Citizens' proposals and initiatives are thus not taken into consideration when decisions are made, since they do not have an opportunity to discuss specific proposals or to make decisions related to these policies, which accounts for the low level of engagement and the need to develop civil society (Open Society Institute Sofia, 2022; Institute for Direct Democracy Foundation; Civil Participation Forum, 2023). This is due to the fact that administrative structures are not fully aware of the vital role of the civil society in the efficient and ethical performance of the public sector. No real opportunities have been provided for citizens to be

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included in or monitor the activities, decisions, or policies of administrative structures. Hence, the society itself is not an active opinion maker in management processes. In addition to the limited impact which civil society has on the work of administrative structures, and its small capacity to ensure a good organisational environment with no ethical deficiencies, the insufficient engagement of citizens in the activity of administrative structures has a negative effect on the transparency and publicity that are required to ensure integrity and efficiency of the elements of ethical infrastructure, reporting and supervision, accountability and responsibility. Furthermore, the fact that citizens are marginal participants in the management process and cannot exercise any real control over the work of administrative structures, undermines the citizens' confidence in institutions and reduces civil engagement in the processes that are taking place in the state, which contributes to further occurrence of ethics-related issues. It is therefore essential to recognise that the absence of citizens in the management process and the lack of civil control over the activity of administrative structures, which are vital for the ethical performance of the public sector, are issues of a complex nature. In order to provide the necessary conditions for establishing a highly ethical environment, there must be a will to develop the civil society and to update the regulatory framework in terms of the issues related to civil engagement. What is more, there must be continuous effort to influence the citizens' culture regarding those issues.

As for the elements of ethical infrastructure which contribute to the ethical performance of their organisation, respondents were asked to rate the level of integration of separate elements. The collected data indicate, with a few minor differences (see Figure 2), that these elements have largely been integrated into the work processes of all administrative structures. This is what the respondents indicated in terms of the legal framework which regulates ethics (85.83%); the control, incentives, and sanctions which are employed within the framework of organisational performance (66.93%); accountability (77.17%); and responsibility (73.23%). As for professional socialisation (51.97%), ethical culture (59.06%), working conditions (53.54%), ethical expertise (44.88%), these have also been marked as fully integrated into administrative structures. Other elements with a high level of integration noted by the respondents were organisational strategy (55.91%), leadership (56.69%), training on ethical issues (55.91%), security (59.84%), transparency (69.29%), and employees' personal responsibility and integrity (63.35%).

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Figure 2: *Assessing the level of integration of ethical infrastructure elements*

Source: Author.

As evident from the feedback received from the respondents , the ethical infrastructure seems to be well established. It is worth noting the high share of interviewees who report that the legal framework has been fully integrated into work processes. This is essential for the adequate performance of organisations, since it is precisely normative acts and the regulations, manuals, rules, tools, etc. based on them that regulate the rules for running work processes and, when supported by informal systems within the organisations, guide the ethical conduct of employees. The analysis of the respondents' responses indicates, however, that the legal framework they have established within their organisations is at the lowest, purely formal level. Normative acts are not subject to detailed elaboration, nor are they supported by adequate tools to govern the ethical implementation of work processes. Despite these deficiencies, which clearly indicate a partial integration of the legal framework, respondents tend to consider it an element which has been fully integrated into work processes, which signals a lack of awareness about the nature of real integration, not merely in terms of normative acts, but also in terms of the other elements of the ethical structure.

As for their perceptions of the impact of ethical infrastructure, respondents were asked a question aimed at identifying their expectations about the impact of its elements upon the work of administrative structures.

The analysed data show (see Table 4) that all elements of ethical infrastructure, except for a few minor variations, have a strong impact on the perfor-

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mance of administrative structures. This is according to the responses provided by respondents in terms of the legal framework, whose impact is identified as strong by more than 88.98% of the respondents from all administrative structures, while as few as 7.87% of the respondents consider that impact to be average. The share of respondents who consider the impact of control, incentives, and sanctions to be strong is 76.38%. The impact of that element is identified as strong by more than 81% of the interviewees. In addition to these elements, a significant number of administrative structures register a strong impact of other elements, such as ethical expertise, strategy, leadership, training, transparency and publicity, civil society, personal responsibility and integrity of the staff. They thus describe an adequately functioning ethical infrastructure with a strong impact on work processes.

Table 4: *Assessment of the impact of ethical infrastructure on the performance of administrative structures*

| Ethical infrastructure elements	Share of assessment of the impact of ethical infrastructure on the performance						
	Very strong	**Strongly**	**Average**	**Weak**	**Very weak**	**It doesn't affect**	**I can't decide**
Legal framework	50.39%	38.58%	7.87%	-	0.79%	-	2.36%
Control, incentives and sanctions	36.22%	40.16%	16.54%	3.94%	0.79%	-	2.36%
Accountability	39.37%	41.73%	13.39%	3.15%	1.57%	-	0.79%
Ethical expertise	14.17%	46.46%	22.83%	7.09%	2.36%	0.79%	6.30%
Strategy	25.98%	43.31%	16.54%	7.87%	1.57%	0.79%	3.94%
Leadership	29.92%	46.46%	14.96%	3.15%	0.79%	0.79%	3.94%
Training	28.35%	39.37%	22.83%	7.09%	0.79%	-	1.57%
Transparency and publicity	42.52%	34.65%	19.69%	1.57%	0.79%	-	0.79%
Civil society	22.05%	33.86%	32.28%	7.09%	3.15%	-	1.57%
Personal responsibility and integrity of staff	37.01%	39.37%	18.11%	3.15%	-	0.79%	1.57%

Source: Author.

The assessment of the impact of ethical infrastructure, alongside the findings of the interview, established that administrative structures have developed legal and methodological frameworks, procedures and rules, as well as practices of introducing employees to their contents. They employ

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various approaches to inform stakeholders about the processes of formulating and implementing public policies and interpret all elements of ethical infrastructure as fully integrated, which should ensure high ethics. At the same time, the respondents do not seem to identify deficiencies in ethical conduct or be aware of the high level of discretion, risks of corruption and conflicts of interests, or the opportunities for unlawful lobbying activities, which have been pinpointed as major weaknesses of the Bulgarian administrative and judicial systems by the EU (European Commission, 2022; European Commission, 2023). Formally meeting certain procedural requirements and regulations does not ensure their real, effective, or efficient implementation in practice, hence, the levels of ethics in the performance of administrations are low. These issues are not in line with ethical infrastructure whose elements are characterised by a high level of integration and a strong impact on organisational performance. These perceptions and assessments affect the level of integration of the elements of control, sanctions and incentives, accountability, responsibility, ethical culture, leadership, transparency and publicity, personal integrity and responsibility of staff. It is therefore clear that despite the existing deficiencies in the performance of administrative structures, staff members do not approach the lack of ethics as an issue affecting the performance of their organisations. Hence, we should identify organisational weaknesses which hinder the development of an ethical environment with a solid ethical infrastructure not so much in the existing legislation, but in the failure to employ ethical norms in the performance of administrative structures, and in the employees' lack of engagement in the work processes within the organisation. This conclusion is also supported by the interviewees' answers to the questions seeking to identify unethical conduct and report violations of ethical norms in administrative structures.

The analysis of obtained results shows (see Figure 3) that despite the availability of legal documents, regulations, procedures, guidebooks, and tools regulating ethical conduct, as well as the high level of integration and the impact of ethical structure elements, the principles of ethics are violated in all administrative structures. A significant share of the respondents – more than 28% – have witnessed violations that could be characterised as instances of unethical conduct. The reasons behind that finding are to be identified in the manner in which ethics-related control is implemented and exercised within organisations. The fact that employees witness violations despite the existing legislation and financial management and control systems indicates that no adequate control mechanisms are applied to reduce the risks of ethics violations. And if issues related to the lack of

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control have only been described as societal perceptions (Transparency International, 2022; National Centre for Parliamentary Research, 2021), the results obtained in this survey lead us to the conclusion that both ethics deficiencies and omissions in terms of exercising control are real and existent in the performance of all administrative structures. Furthermore, even though control, sanctions, and incentives are an element which is interpreted by the respondents to be one with a high level of integration and a strong impact on organisational performance, apparently it is not working in administrative structures in Bulgaria. Its employment fails to provide a good organisational environment with a high level of ethics. We can therefore claim that it is only formally present in the active models of ethical infrastructure of administrations.

Figure 3: *Relative share of established violations of ethical norms*
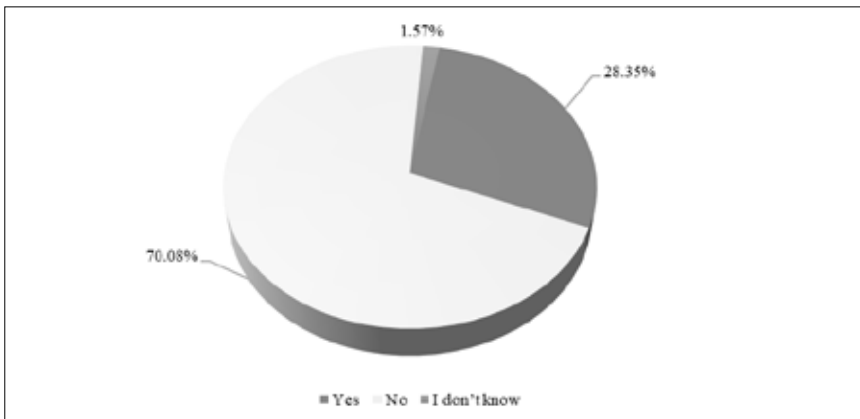
Source: Author.

As for the respondents' attitudes towards reporting violations which could be categorised as unethical conduct, the analysis of obtained data indicates that despite the significant share of identified ethics deficiencies, only 6.30% of the respondents have reported such violations, or 11.11% of district administrative structures and 8.5% of municipal ones (see Figure 4).

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Figure 4: *Relative share of violations reported in the administrative structure*
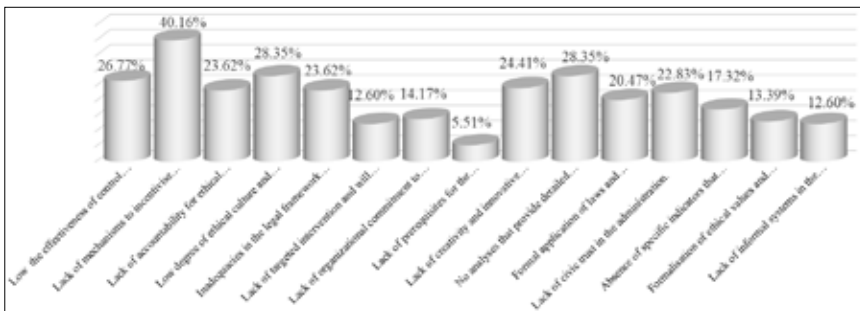

Source: Author.

These findings bring to the fore the lack of an adequately established internal organisational environment, organisational culture, appropriate tone at the top management level, style of management or control mechanisms to encourage employees to observe ethical conduct by reporting identified deficiencies in ethics. This supports the author's opinion that there is a lack of awareness about the real integration or the impact of ethical infrastructure elements in administrations, since although elements like control, incentives and sanctions, ethical culture, accountability, responsibility, leadership, personal responsibility and integrity have been described as fully integrated and having a strong impact, employees fail to signal the occurrences of unethical conduct they have witnessed. This means that those elements have not been sufficiently integrated into work processes so as to have a real impact on the performance of administrative structures.

Furthermore, the fact that employees witness violations but tend not to report them confirms the conclusion that normative acts are not employed in the work of administrative structures, since the existence of codes of ethics and procedures about reporting violations are apparently not interpreted or used as tools for reducing instances of unethical conduct. In addition, employees are not engaged in work processes in the administration, since when there is a high level of engagement, human resources do identify with the goals, mission, and vision of the organisation (Knies & Leisink, 2018; Civil Service People Survey, 2015). They would, in that case, make an effort to raise the level of ethics by reporting any violations. These weaknesses impede the establishment of a favourable ethical cli-

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mate and could be considered as hindrances to developing an effectively functioning model of ethical infrastructure.

The interviewees were also asked about organisational deficiencies which hinder the establishment of an effectively functioning model of ethical infrastructure within the administrative structure for which they work. The received responses exceed 100% as interviewees could select more than one answer.

Figure 5: *Organisational weaknesses which hinder the establishment of a stable ethical infrastructure in administrative structures*

Source: Author.

The received feedback (see Figure 5) clearly indicates that there are major deficiencies which make it difficult to build a reliable ethical infrastructure in administrations. The highest share of respondents noted the lack of mechanisms for encouraging ethical conduct (40.16%), i.e. they interpreted as insufficient the effort made by the managers of their organisation to encourage staff to adhere to ethical conduct and to avoid instances of unethical one.

That opinion was also shared by all participants in the interviews. This comes as no surprise since the legal framework which regulates ethical conduct in the public sector does not provide any tools to encourage or sanction staff. Nevertheless, as long as there is a will on behalf of the managers, senior employees could employ informal incentives to intervene in their subordinates' behaviour. The results obtained therefore justify the thesis that the existing management style does not ensure a favourable environment for raising the level of ethics within administrative structures as it does not promote an ethical implementation of processes. More than 28% of the respondents noted a low level of ethical culture and effort to

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raise the quality of work processes and improve the ethical climate on behalf of individual employees, i.e. they interpret the levels of ethical culture as insufficient for guaranteeing the ethical performance of their administrative structure, while at the same time the effort taken to improve the quality of work processes is also limited. Once again, the respondents' answers bring to the fore the lack of engagement in ethics-related processes, practices, and rules in their organisations, with 14.17% of administrative structures reporting this to be a barrier to developing an effective ethical infrastructure. It is therefore logical not to conduct analyses which provide information about the condition of the ethical environment in the administrative structures, as indicated by a significant share of respondents (28%).

The respondents' answers about control-related deficiencies are also worth noting, as many administrative structures consider them to be major weaknesses. These include low efficiency of exercised control, lack of tools for sanctioning unethical conduct (26.77%), and lack of acknowledged responsibility for deviating from the norms of ethical conduct (23.62%). This means that the respondents do not consider the control process within their administrations to be in effect and draw attention to the flaws in the national and organisational legal frameworks in terms of sanctioning mechanisms. The fact that adequate measures are not adopted to lower the level of unethical conduct, however, indicates that administrative structures employ neither formal, nor informal mechanisms of control, and consequently the risks of ethics violations are not managed. We could therefore claim that the control, sanctions, and incentives which administrations employ are not sufficiently effective to make sure that rules are observed and violations of ethical norms are not accepted. Hence the need to reengineer the entire control process within administrative structures. The major issues that one should pay attention to are the omissions in exercised control and the implementation of the control process rather than omissions in the legislation, which, by and large, makes it clear where to look for the factors that hinder raising the levels of ethics in administrations. In addition, this leads to the conclusion that administrative structures do not have the will to improve their ethical environment, as confirmed by 12.60% of the respondents.

To sum up, although the respondents are aware of various weaknesses within their organisations, there is common consent about the serious deficiencies in the work of administrative structures which prevent them from developing an effective model of ethical infrastructure and ensuring a good organisational environment with a high level of ethics. The re-

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spondents emphasise many omissions related to the applicability of the principles of ethics, the legislation, its level of comprehensiveness, and the impact of a large number of elements of that type of organisational infrastructure. These, however, are not in line with the respondents' ideas of highly integrated elements of ethical infrastructure with a strong impact on the work of administrations. The feedback received from the respondents indicates that the ethical infrastructure in administrative structures is underdeveloped and its elements are mainly formally applied in work processes, and therefore have a limited impact on organisational ethics. We could then claim that there is little awareness in administrative structures about the real development or impact of ethical infrastructure. In addition, an isolated occurrence of any of these organisational weaknesses should not be categorised as a deficiency in the applicability of only one element of ethical infrastructure, as they are interrelated and any omissions in one of these elements have a negative effect on the performance of the organisation as a whole.

4. Findings and Discussion

1. In general, administrative structures formally apply the national legislation to cover the basic requirements. The established internal normative base concerning the ethical functioning of organisations is poorly developed, as a large part of the established internal acts is the result of provisions of the legislation which are therefore binding for the administrations. Hence, there is a lack of regulations to provide work processes with adequate mechanisms to ensure their ethical implementation. This makes it difficult to build an adequate organisational climate and construct a sound ethical infrastructure in public sector organisations.

2. There are serious deficits in the administrations that hinder the development of a good organisational environment with high ethical standards. Many of these weaknesses indicate violations of legislation and ethical principles. Each of them in isolation hinders the development of an effective ethical infrastructure model adequate to the needs of the administration. However, in administrative structures, the lack of ethics is not interpreted as a problem that prevents their adequate functioning.

3. The current models of ethical infrastructure of public sector administrations include the following elements: legal framework, control, sanctions and incentives, accountability, training, leadership, ethical culture,

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civil society, personal integrity and responsibility of employees, responsibility and incentives, working conditions, fair and equal treatment of employees, and organisational climate. The results of the survey show that most of these elements are formally reflected in work processes. They are not sufficiently integrated to have a strong impact on the performance of the administration and to ensure good and appropriate organisational functioning. It is therefore necessary to develop and implement tools in organisations to enhance employee engagement, which will create the preconditions for the implementation of effective control and management of ethical breach risks, and consequently for upgrading the degree of integration of the ethical infrastructure as a whole. Again, this does not mean formal tools based on rules and procedures. These exist at present, but the results of their application are apparently unsatisfactory. Rather, efforts should be directed towards the actual implementation of instruments with a focus on intangible incentives for employees.

5. Conclusion

The findings of the research about the impact of ethical infrastructure on the organisational performance of administrative structures in the public sector give us grounds to claim that there are some major deficiencies related to the development of ethical infrastructure within those organisations. A significant number of those deficiencies bring to the fore issues related to the applicability of the existing legislation and ethical principles in the performance of administrations. They have a negative impact on the quality of work processes and substantially hinder the establishment of a good working climate with high levels of ethics. Administrative structures therefore need to design and employ tools for raising the employees' engagement which will create favourable prerequisites for exercising effective control and managing the risks of ethics violations, and, hence, upgrading the level of integration of ethical infrastructure in general. What is more, these tools should not be merely formal, i.e. based on regulations and procedures, as such tools are already available, though the results of employing them are apparently unsatisfactory. Rather, an effort should be made to really employ tools, informal rather than formal, that would raise the quality of organisational environment and create the prerequisites for developing an ethical infrastructure that is adequate to the needs of the public sector in Bulgaria.

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IMPACT OF ETHICAL INFRASTRUCTURE ON THE PERFORMANCE OF EXECUTIVE POWER ADMINISTRATIVE UNITS IN BULGARIA

Summary

In the last 30 years, issues related to ethics in the public sector have become increasingly relevant in Bulgaria. Since the democratic changes, the interest in ethics in public structures has increased. A number of studies by international and national institutes and organisations have brought the state of the ethical environment in Bulgaria into the focus of research interest, and have highlighted the problems of corruption and the absence of adequate countermeasures. Corruption is the most obvious manifestation of the lack of a functioning ethical infrastructure or adequate control over administration in our country. Reactive behaviour towards cases of corruption is not an effective mechanism for curbing corruption. Rather, actions need to be based on proactive approaches. Yet, to make adequate choices, it is essential to analyse the level to which the elements of the ethical infrastructure which have an impact on organisational performance and affect the ethical climate have been developed. This research analyses the level of development of ethical infrastructure and its impact on the performance of administrative structures in Bulgaria, while also exploring the respondents' attitudes towards these issues. It defines the applied models of ethical infrastructure and problem areas in the ethical environment of executive administrations in Bulgaria.

Keywords: *ethics, ethical infrastructure, level of development of ethical infrastructure, impact of ethical infrastructure*

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UTJECAJ ETIČKE INFRASTRUKTURE NA IZVEDBU I REZULTATE UPRAVNIH TIJELA U BUGARSKOJ

Sažetak

U posljednjih 30 godina pitanja etike u javnom sektoru postala su sve važnija u Bugarskoj. Od demokratskih promjena porastao je interes za etiku u javnim institucijama. Brojne studije međunarodnih i nacionalnih znanstvenih organizacija dovele su stanje etičkog okružja u Bugarskoj u fokus istraživačkog interesa i istaknule probleme korupcije i nepostojanja odgovarajućih protumjera. Korupcija je najočitiji dokaz da u našoj zemlji ne postoji funkcionalna etička infrastruktura ni odgovarajuća kontrola uprave. Reaktivno djelovanje prema slučajevima korupcije nije učinkovit mehanizam za njezino suzbijanje. Umjesto toga antikorupcijske aktivnosti trebaju se temeljiti na proaktivnom pristupu. Ipak, za donošenje adekvatnih mjera bitno je analizirati razinu do koje postojeći elementi etičke infrastrukture utječu na organizacijsku izvedbu i na etičku klimu. Ovo istraživanje analizira razinu razvoja etičke infrastrukture te njezin utjecaj na rezultate i izvedbu upravnih tijela u Bugarskoj na temelju stavova ispitanika. Definirani su primijenjeni modeli etičke infrastrukture i problematična područja u etičkom okružju upravnih organizacija u Bugarskoj.

Ključne riječi: etika, etička infrastruktura, razina razvoja etičke infrastrukture, utjecaj etičke infrastrukture, Bugarska