

ADOPTION OF TQM AND EXCELLENCE MODELS IN EUROPEAN PUBLIC SECTOR

Maria BOLBOCEANU

Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania
bolboceanumaria22@stud.ase.ro

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to assess the current state of the application of Quality Management (QM) models in the public sector of six European countries: Romania, Croatia, Greece, Portugal, Latvia, and Ireland. To achieve this objective a comparative analysis was conducted. The study evaluates the maturity of QM from the perspective of eight components that refer to political commitment, source of funding, training offer, communication, and rewarding mechanism. The research methodology implies a scoring model to determine the maturity level of QM in each country. The data was collected from international and national public sector reports, national and European strategies, official websites of governments and QM competence centres. The study results underline clear differences between the analyzed countries in the way of implementing QM in public services. Portugal, Greece, and Ireland have a more advanced level of QM institutionalization as a consequence of long-term support for QM and efficiently organized systems compared to Latvia, Romania, and Croatia with dependents on temporary EU funding and lack or underdeveloped QM support centres. The study emphasizes the importance of having dedicated centres and specialists that can provide training and help institutions develop their own QM abilities. The research results contribute to the literature by extending empirical research on QM in the public sector to six more European countries and underlining the progress of quality integration in public services. The originality of the study is given by the sample of countries selected that was not previously covered by the existing literature.

Keywords: Quality management, Institutionalization, Public institutions, Comparative analysis, European countries.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Public sector in Europe is currently functioning under a dynamic and demanding environment shaped by economic, social, and demographic challenges. Budgetary constraints and fiscal austerity require administrations to optimise resources and deliver more with less. While populations are ageing and health and social care costs are increasing, citizens expect more efficient, citizen-orientated, and high-quality services. At the same time, climate change imposes urgent demands for adaptive and resilient public policies and investments straining existing resources and requiring forward-looking governance approaches. Digitalisation can be a solution considered that fundamentally transforms how administrations

operate, but requires rapid updating of the IT infrastructure, integration of e-government services, and investments in both digital knowledge and IT skills among the employee and beneficiary. There are public institutions struggling with resistance to digital change, legislative complexity, and nonintegrated data system which undermines the need for an innovation reform (Alateyyat et al., 2024).

These challenges require more than isolated responses, they require a holistic approach to support continuous improvement, which is possible through a quality management model. Public institutions started progressively implement Quality Management models (QM) from the 1990s through New Public Management reforms (Staes & Thijs, 2005). The most common QM models used are International Standard Organisation 9001 (ISO 9001), European Foundation for Quality Management Excellence Model (EFQM), and Common Assessment Framework (CAF) (Baschung, 2024; Alicja & Renata, 2020; Asensio et al., 2021). These models are different from the perspective of their scope, application, and origin. Although they share a common objective in improving the efficiency, effectiveness, and quality of public services.

ISO 9001 was originally designed for industry and was primarily concerned with quality assurance in the delivery of services and products. It represents a process-based standard that focusses on process standardisation, documentation, continuous improvement, and stakeholder satisfaction through quality assurance from internal audits and gained certificates. It relies on external evaluation more than on holistic self-evaluations. ISO 9001 is used in both the private and public sectors, in institutions like government agencies, local authorities, health, education, and social services (Prorok & Parzer, 2021).

The European Foundation for Quality Management created the EFQM excellence model as a holistic frame that encourages self-assessment over multiple enabler and result criteria. This model addresses the quality built on three questions related to the institution: Why? How? and What?. The first question refers to the purpose, vision, and strategy of the organisation. It helps the manager clarify long-term objectives and to whom they are directed. Furthermore, the management team must ensure that their intentions are aligned with stakeholder expectations, values, and environmental challenges. The execution question, How?, refers to operational processes, organisational structure, culture, and leadership. It assesses the way strategies transform into actions and skills for a consistent delivery of institution objectives. The final question evaluates performance outcomes through multiple perspectives including stakeholder perception, operational and strategic results, and sustainability. It encourages evidence-based assessment and learning, including feedback loops and benchmarking. The EFQM excellence model is used in various public sector contexts like local governments, health services, education, etc., and represents the basis for several national and sector-specific awards (Arribas et al., 2024).

CAF is the first quality management tool specifically designed for the public sector in Europe, designed by the European Public Sector Network (EUPAN) in collaboration with the European Institute of Public Sector

(EIPA). The model integrates the EFQM principles adjusted to the public sector needs focusing on citizen value, transparency, and public accountability using self-assessment, continuous improvement, and benchmarking among public institutions (Prorok & Parzer, 2021). It is extensively adopted by European Union, particularly in municipalities, ministries, and government agencies. The CAF model is built on nine criteria, a set of enablers which include: leadership, strategy and planning, people, partnerships and resources, processes and a set of results which focus on outcomes related to citizen/customer, people, society and key performance (EUPAN & EIPA, 2019). The purpose of the model is to encourage the institution to engage in a systematic self-assessment to identify its weaknesses and strengths in a structured way. Subsequently, the institution can develop an action plan that leads to measurable improvements in service delivery and institutional functioning.

Due to the lack of quantitative approach regarding the implementation status of QM models in public institutions, this paper came as a continuity of Arribas et al. (2024) research about the institutionalisation of QM and excellence models in eight European countries. Through comparative analyses, it is going to determine the level of the QM institutionalisation in other six countries: Romania, Croatia, Greece, Portugal, Latvia, and Ireland.

The next section provides a summary of the existing literature on the QM institutionalisation in public sector. The study then presents the applied methodology describing the data research process and the comparative analysis model. Next, the results of the study followed by conclusions. At the end, presents the contribution of the study, its limitation, and the paths for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Transferring total quality management (TQM) from the private sector to the public sector is characterised by implementation challenges, significant impacts on performance, and a historical context that facilitated its adoption. Initially, the public sector has often borrowed successful private sector techniques from large companies. The transfer of techniques was facilitated by management consultants who established communication channels with the state (Obembe et al., 2020). There are various factors that affect the successful implementation of QM models in public institutions like entities collaboration, financial resources, and qualified workforce (Alketbi et al., 2022). Despite these barriers, the public sector catching up with the private sector in terms of QM practices, sometimes use more improved tools and techniques than their counterparts, which shows a shift in the approach of QM (Obembe et al., 2020). Regarding the impact on performance, according to the existing literature, QM practices applied in the public sector influence both financial and operational outcomes (Baschung, 2024; Alicja & Renata, 2020; Asensio et al.,

2021). For operational efficiency and to enhance service quality, public institutions need to focus on continuous improvement and customer satisfaction, which is possible by using QM models like EFQM, CAF, ISO 9001.

Institutionalisation refers to a process that integrates practices, norms, and structures as a permanent part of a system, society or organisation. It is based on three pillars: regulatory, which involves rules and policies; normative, which encompasses values and norms; and cognitive, which refers to shared beliefs and actions ingrained in culture (Zurga, 2008). For the public sector, QM institutionalisation relates not only to the formal adoption of QM models, but also to the degree to which these models are embedded in norms, strategic thinking, and systems within public institutions (Gremyr et al., 2021). The structure for establishing quality assurance consists of elements like leadership, policy, and resources, which are crucial for sustaining quality activities (Silimperi et al., 2002).

To determine the level of QM institutionalisation, academics and professional bodies proposed different approaches such as assessing the formal inclusion of QM tools in national reform strategies, the availability of training and technical support in implementation, and the existence of coordinating centres that give guidelines adapted to the local context (Gyllenhammar & Hammersberg, 2022). As core dimensions that collectively indicate the QM institutionalisation in public sector can be consider the presence of strength of political will to promote QM system-wide, the availability of financial support for QM initiatives, the integration of QM concepts in official policy and reform documents, the accessibility and provision of QM related training, and the use of external certification, awards or benchmarking systems to validate efforts (Zurga, 2008; Arribas et al., 2024).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To achieve the study objective, a comparative cross national research methodology is used to assess the level of QM institutionalisation in the public sector, introduced by Arribas et al. (2024). The academic literature concentrates more on qualitative and mixed methodology to explore the QM implementation in the public sector by using case studies (Wiśniewska & Szczepańska, 2014; Xanthopoulou et al., 2024), questionnaire (Alharhy & Ajina, 2023), and interviews (Alhaqbani et al., 2016), which are therefore analysed with quantitative methodology. Most studies focus on implementation outcomes, model adoption or surface-level assessments rather than investigating how QM becomes a sustained, integral part of public organisations' structures, cultures and routines (Eriksson et al., 2025). As a response, the present paper expands Arribas et al. (2024)'s study sample to comparatively quantify the level of QM maturity of each country using a scoring system.

For a balanced geographical representation in the comparative analysis, the selection criteria for countries included EU Member States from Southern, Northern, Western, and Eastern Europe. Additionally, the sample is designed to include countries with different levels of government effectiveness and satisfaction with public sector services.

TABLE 1. SELECTED COUNTRIES WITH INFORMING INDICATORS

Country	Satisfaction with public services (2024)	Government effectiveness (2023) ranging from -2.5 to 2.5
Romania	50%	-0.1
Croatia	56%	0.7
Greece	27%	0.1
Portugal	38%	1
Latvia	59%	0.7
Ireland	53%	1.6

Source: European Commission (2024) and World Bank (2023)

Each country's national public sector system represents the unit of analysis of this research. As presented in Table 1, countries analysed are: Romania, Croatia, Greece, Portugal, Latvia, and Ireland. These countries constitute a geographical mix with different administrative traditions and levels of QM institutionalisation. They were not included in the Arribas et al. (2024) sample, thus, the study contributes with new empirical knowledge. Matei and Lazar's (2011) data collection method used for a comparative analysis in South-Eastern Europe establishes the methodology implemented to collect data in the present research. It relies on strategies and reform documents of the public sector in the analysed countries, taken from the Internet, retrieved from the official websites of various public institutions (Appendix 2). The research also integrates literature on quality management in the European Union (EU) context and findings from empirical studies and reports of EIPA, CAF National Centers, World Bank, and OECD, which provide a broader policy background. Through data collection, the research focused on signs of the existence of QM and excellence models implementation, on the use of the performance indicators and bidirectional communication, on training programs and support from the central institution for QM implementation, and signs of QM principles integration in public strategies.

For QM institutionalisation level measurement, the analysis applied a structured model focusing on eight strategic components (Arribas et al., 2024), as follow:

- strategic documents and policies, reflect the extent to which QM is explicitly enclosed in national strategic plan and guiding public administration documents;
- regulatory status, captures whether QM adoption is based on mandatory legal provisions or voluntary implementation;
- political will and leadership, refer to the stability and directions of governmental commitment to QM over the past decade, including its visibility on policy agendas and institutional support mechanisms;

- customer satisfaction and quality measurement, represent the institutionalisation of performance and citizen feedback mechanism, indicating whether quality and satisfaction are assessed at institutional or national level;
- resources refer to the financial means available to support QM, distinguishing between indirect support through EU structural or operational programs and direct public funding specifically allocated for quality initiatives;
- type of training, concerns the extent of capacity-building activities, from basic to advanced programs, aimed at developing QM competences within the public administration;
- information and communication assess the dissemination of QM related materials and practices, emphasizing the availability of national and english language publications as evidence of knowledge sharing and transparency;
- meetings of QM practitioners, consider the frequency and regularity of professional as quality related efforts follows a centralized or a decentralized model of governance;
- type of award, reflects the existence and focus of recognition schemes in the public sector, distinguishing between general management awards and those explicitly dedicated to QM;
- rewarding quality and engagement of people refers to certification and award systems that acknowledge institutional and individual contributions to quality improvement, indicating the degree to which recognition mechanisms are active and institutionalized. Once the information is collected from an official public source, each country is assigned a score from -1 to 3 for each criterion (see Appendix 1). These scores are then combined to form a composite score, providing an overall view of the depth and maturity of QM integration at the national level. The composite score is used to classify countries into four categories of institutional maturity: exploratory, elemental, established, and mature, with characteristics presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2. SCORING RANGES AND COUNTRY SUB-GROUPS

Range of scoring	Sub-group	Characteristics
-1 to 4.5	Exploratory	Initial stages of the institutionalisation process, with public administrations starting to gain awareness of the advantages of implementing QM.
4.5 to 10	Elemental	A basic set of QM-related activities has been implemented, with a limited level of support by decision-makers and supporting infrastructure.
10 to 15.5	Established	Efforts in the domain of QM have been scaled up, as a result of evidence that backs up the benefits of QM and support by leadership.
15.5 to 21	Mature	QM has been successfully consolidated into the different activities performed by public administrations, adopting a continuous improvement mindset.

Source: Arribas et al. (2024)

4. RESULTS

The following section of the study presents the findings of a detailed mapping of six European countries in Table 3 and Table 4 which are succeeded by a comparative in-depth analysis.

TABLE 3. INSTITUTIONAL AND STRATEGIC FACTORS FOR QM INSTITUTIONALIZATION

Country	Strategic documents and policies	Regulatory status	Political will	Customer satisfaction and quality measurements	Resources
Romania	Clearly defined	Voluntarily	Stable	Organisational level	EU funding
Croatia	Vaguely defined	Voluntarily	Stable (slightly positive)	Customer satisfaction part of multi-country project	EU funding and direct funding
Greece	Clearly defined	Mandatory	Volatile	Customer satisfaction part of multi-country project	EU funding and indirect funding
Portugal	Clearly defined	Voluntarily	Stable	National level measuring both customer satisfaction and the quality of services	EU funding and direct funding for DGAEP from the state budget
Latvia	Vaguely defined	Voluntarily	Stable	Customer satisfaction part of multi-country project	EU indirect funding
Ireland	Clearly defined	Recommended	Increasing	Customer satisfaction part of multi-country project	EU funding and direct funding

Source: Authors' own research (Appendix 2)

The internal enabling environment reflects the organizational culture, leadership, commitment, and resource availability, while the support functions include training, communication, and reward systems. Leadership commitment and effective resource allocation serve as the foundational drivers that enable other support factors to function optimally. When leaders are dedicated to quality management initiatives and allocate the necessary resources, it creates an environment where additional support factors—such as training, collaboration, and technological advancements—can thrive and contribute to the overall success of the organization. This synergy is essential for fostering a culture of continuous improvement and ensuring that quality management practices are integrated effectively into the public sector.

Strategic documents, regulatory status and policies

According to the strategic documents and policies that the analysed countries have, the study divides them into two groups. The first group formed by Romania, Greece, Portugal, and Ireland have developed national strategies or public service reform documents that explicitly refers to quality management as a policy objective. Examples of strategies include National Strategy on innovation in the public sector 2025-2029 in Romania, Our Public Service 2030 in Ireland, and Strategy for innovation and modernisation of the state and public sector 2020-2023 in Portugal. These strategies have as objective enhancing public service quality through the use of QM and excellence models. The key components of these strategies are innovation, digitalisation, quality, efficiency, responsible governance, and citizen satisfaction. In the second group, Croatia and Latvia present more indirect references to QM. In case of these countries, quality-

related initiatives are embedded within broader administrative reform or national modernisation agendas, like Latvia's national development plan 2021-2027.

In most countries, implementation of QM tools like CAF, ISO 9001 or EFQM is encouraged but not legally required. The Greek case is an exception from the sample with a mandatory application on QM where Law 3230/2004 "Management by objectives, measurement of efficiency, and other provisions" established the use of specific indicators to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of public services, require a clear, measurable objectives align with their missions and other aspects related to QM frameworks (Government of Greece, 2004). Ireland promotes QM principles through strategic recommendations and soft governance mechanisms without legal obligations.

Political will and leadership

Romania and Greece constitute the category where commitment appears inconsistent. Despite the fact that Greece has a legal form to support QM, political shifts and the fragmented reform agenda are redirecting policy priorities from quality towards digitalisation and performance monitoring (OECD, 2022). Romania faces a similar situation considering that strategic documents refer to quality, while actual application depends on external European projects (OECD, 2023). In the second category, Croatia and Latvia show more stable political involvement. In these countries, QM is occasionally used together with modernisation initiatives. Portugal and Ireland demonstrate stronger and growing political engagement. In Portugal, because of the dedicated coordinating centre managed by the Directorate-General for Administration and Public Employment (DGAEP), there is an increase in governmental interest in public service quality. In the meantime, Ireland has made visible progress, with recent reforms through national strategies toward innovation and citizen focused services.

Customer satisfaction and quality measurements

While all six countries included in the study are involved in a form of quality measurement and customer satisfaction, there are substantial differences in the institutionalisation of these practices. Portugal uses a structured and coordinated system at a national level supported by DGAEP. In Ireland, instead, the responsibility for quality measurement often remains with individual departments of an institution. In the other countries, the frequency of the measurements depends on how many humans, financial and technological resources they have.

Resources

The availability of financial resources to support QM in public institutions differs for countries the study analysed, with the observation that all of them benefit from EU funding. There are two main sources of financial support: direct funding from the national budget and indirect funding, which countries receive from EU via structural funds, operational programs, and other international grants channelled through national agencies. In Romania and Latvia, funding has primarily relied on European Union support, which is

accessed through temporary programs. Therefore, it is not a sustainable resource because dependence on EU funding cycles determinates interruptions in the application of a QM model once the funding program ends. Portugal, Ireland, and Croatia are in a stronger position to maintain and strengthen the quality improvement process in the long term, as they are financed through both national and EU sources. As long as EU structural funds are combined with state budget allocation, the countries have financial sustainability for institutionalisation of QM. For example, in Croatia, the national financial resource has a specific destination, it is for the development of a dedicated IT platform for citizen feedback that can be given after use of any public services (Ministry of Justice and Public Sector, 2018). Greece and Portugal benefit from national budget and EU financial resources through a centralized competence center that serves as an institutional anchor for QM in these countries.

TABLE 4. TRAINING, COMMUNICATION AND REWARD STRUCTURE FOR QM INSTITUTIONALIZATION

Country	Type of training	Information and communication	Meetings of QM practitioners	Type of award	Rewarding quality and engagement of people
Romania	Basic	Essential implementation information in the national language plus additional materials	Less the one per year	Awarding quality in public sector indirectly	
Croatia	No specific training on QM	Essential implementation information in the national language and in English as well	Less the one per year	Awarding quality in public sector indirectly	Active but less established certification scheme
Greece	Basic and advanced	Advanced documents in english and national language	Event more than one per year	Awarding quality in public sector directly	Active and established certification scheme
Portugal	Basic and advanced	Advanced documents in english and national language	Event more than one per year	Awarding quality in public sector directly	Active and established certification scheme
Latvia	Basic	Basic implementation information in the national language plus additional materials	Less than one per year	No awards	No certification scheme
Ireland	Basic and advanced	Advanced documents in national language	Event more than one per year	Awarding quality in public sector indirectly	Active but less established certification scheme

Source: Authors' own research (Appendix 2)

Type of training

The study observes that only Portugal, Greece, and Ireland provide structured and advanced training for public employees in the national and English language. Romania and Latvia offer introductory sessions but with a limited thematic scope, like CAF trainings and workshops organised by the State Chancellery or a

minister. Croatia does not appear to have a dedicated program for QM, which may affect the consistency of application to the public institutions, the learning offer is only from the EU and the academic field.

Information and communication

Regarding the communication and access to information aspects, countries with more developed training, Greece and Portugal, can ensure broader access to guidance documents, strategies, and explanatory materials, while Romanian and Latvian communications efforts are limited to brief implementation guides without methodological support. The role of a national QM competence centre is to cover the basic steps for QM implementation of self-assessment processes like CAF. In countries that do not have a QM centre, training is provided by representatives of national schools and universities of the public sector. In cases where more advanced training is needed, a public institution should access an external expert who imposes a service fee.

People engagement and rewarding quality

When it comes to recognition and rewards, some countries have developed systems that acknowledge innovation, performance and administrative effectiveness. In the sample analysed, Portugal leads with direct forms of acknowledgement, which includes Effective CAF User Label, APQ Recognition, and Sectorial Recognition, followed by Greece, which awards quality in the public sector directly by giving the Digital Governance Award and National Distinction „Αείν Αριστεύειν”. Romania, Ireland, and Croatia provide more general and symbolic acknowledgements without a formal assessment mechanism in some cases. Awards are granted annually or every two years with the aim to encourage the improvement of QM practices. Besides awards, there are certification mechanisms, especially under the CAF model, which are offered at low cost or subsidised by the state.

Content analysis synthesis

The information obtained through the detailed mapping is classified using numerical scores from Appendix 1. Table 5 below shows the resulting assignment to sub-groups and the scores assigned to each country.

The lowest score of 9 belongs to Latvia, which classifies it in the Elemental group, indicating a basic set of QM-related activities, but not enough support from decision makers and an undeveloped support infrastructure that includes a certification scheme and scheduled events for promoting QM practices. The lack of long-term investment in training for digital and management skills compromises the ability of Latvian public institutions to adapt and modernise (OECD, 2024). Also, the continued contraction of public employment in line with the Reform Plan 2020, which aimed to reduce employment by 6%, may constrain QM implementation by straining institutional capacity and human resources needed for comprehensive quality assurance and improvement efforts. On the other hand, Latvia has taken important steps in reinforcing transparency, accountability, and internal control systems in the public sector. Anti-Corruption Action Plan 2021-2024 has supported key aspects of quality management like integrity, performance

measurement, and continuous improvement, demonstrating the government's commitment to expand the foundation of a quality-oriented administrative culture.

TABLE 5. MATURITY LEVEL OF QM INSTITUTIONALIZATION

Country / Institutional and strategic factors	Romania	Croatia	Greece	Portugal	Latvia	Ireland
Strategic documents and policies	2	1	2	2	1	2
Political will	1	1	0	1	1	2
Customer satisfaction and quality measurements	1	2	2	2	2	2
Resources	1	3	1	3	1	2
Type of training	1	0	2	2	1	2
Information and communication	2	1	3	3	2	2
Meetings of QM practitioners	1	1	3	3	1	3
Type of award	1	1	2	2	0	1
Rewarding quality and engagement of people	1	1	2	2	0	1
Total score	11	11	17	20	9	17
Country grouping	Established	Established	Mature	Mature	Elemental	Mature

Source: Authors' own research

Romania and Croatia share several significant similarities in the development and implementation of QM systems in the public sector. Both countries have integrated QM tools, CAF and ISO 9001 standards into their public sector reform strategies, reflecting a commitment to aligning their administrative systems and practices with broader European standards. Countries emphasise modernisation of public sector through increased efficiency, transparency, digitalization, and citizen-orientated service delivery, often referencing EU benchmarks and support frameworks as guiding principles (Matei & Lazar, 2011). Even so, the scoring shows some differences regarding financial sources, the presence of QM in national strategies and the training activities for QM implementation. Romania depends just on EU projects for the implementation of QM (Dinca & Dumitrica, 2019), while Croatia allocated funds from the national budget for the development of a national platform that supports quality measurement and customer satisfaction measurement through feedback from users for a specific public service. Matei and Lazar (2011) remark in a comparative analysis that institutionally, each country designates central government ministries or agencies to oversee and coordinate QM initiatives, including promoting training, translating QM guides, and facilitating knowledge sharing. Both Romania and Croatia have established policies aimed at combating corruption, increasing ethical standards, and improving accountability, further contributing to the convergence of their approaches to public sector quality management. The QM reforms in both countries also stress the importance of continuous professionalisation and training for civil servants to enhance service quality and integration of digital governance (EIPA, 2024). Romania and Croatia share the same classification in terms of institutional maturity, due to the scoring process, but the way they reached the label of Established differs. Romania prioritises internal development through policies, training and communication, while

Croatia has invested more resources and developed tools to understand and respond to citizens' expectations. These differences show that there is no one-size-fits-all model (Oakland, 2014), and that institutional maturity can be achieved through different routes, depending on national needs and administrative structure.

The third group of the analysis, formed by Greece, Portugal, and Ireland, have the highest scoring, thus being classified in the Mature category. In the case of these three countries QM has been effectively integrated into different activities conducted by public sectors committing to a continuous improvement mindset. Despite the fact that they reached the same level of QM institutionalisation, they differ in implementation depth, citizen outcomes and policy integration. Greece's efforts to institutionalize QM began in the late 1990's driven by EU integration (Giannakopoulou & Alexopoulos, 2020). Law 3230/2004 has a decisive role in QM improvements because it's institutionalized performance measurement and encouraged the implementation of CAF in public sector. Departments for Quality and Efficiency, together with quality awards, are the instruments that contribute to increase the QM institutionalisation. There are still some barriers like complex regulatory environment and limited public trust, that challenge Greece's ability to achieve consistent service quality (OECD, 2021). Giannakopoulou and Alexopoulos (2020) observe how the implementation of CAF in Greek public institutions, specifically in the Directorate of Human Resources from the Ministry of Administrative Reform and Electronic Governance, has led to more simplified procedures, more actions instead of planning and less beauracratic obstacles which made the institution became more efficient and effective compared to others.

A key factor in Portugal's QM institutionalisation is the presence of a dedicated CAF Resource Center, hosted within DGAEP. This center performs several pivotal roles, including supporting public institutions in the implementation of CAF, providing expert guidance, training, and material resources, also managing an online platform for CAF experts, and disseminating information via newsletters, events, and social media. Also, the center coordinates national networks of CAF practitioners and external feedback actors to ensure ongoing knowledge sharing, peer learning, and support (Asensio et al., 2021). Another important element that determinate the high level of institutionalisation is SIMPLEX+ program that evolved into a structured national reform agenda promoting administrative simplification, service responsiveness, and citizen centered innovation. Through regular monitoring, public reporting, and digital service integration, Simplex+ demonstrates a systematic approach to process optimization and performance management (OECD OPSI, 2023).

Mature QM in Ireland is determined by the adopted strategies. Prioritization of digital skills, research informed polices, and human resource management was made by strategies like Making Innovation Real, Connecting Government 2030, and Civil Service Renewal 2030. The country consistently ranks among the EU's top performers in digital public services and citizen engagement, with an 8.5% growth of Digital

Economy and Society Index (DESI) between 2017-2022, Ireland occupies fifth place in EU ranking (European Commission, 2022). Trust in government and satisfaction with public services are notably high. According to the OECD (2025) report, 47% of Irish citizens have high trust in national government and 51% of them are satisfied with public services based on a survey conducted in 2023. All of these indicators validate high level of QM institutionalisation through communication, digitalization, and political decisions.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In European countries the promotion of QM models in public sector institution is a response to the challenges that society faces currently and to the citizens' demands for better services. Present study underlines significant differences in the level of QM institutionalisation for the analyzed sample. The level of QM development is higher in Greece, Portugal, and Ireland where exist more advanced and coherent quality management systems compared to Romania, Croatia, and Latvia which are still in early phases of implementation and miss stable legislation support and funding.

Study's result is confirmed by recent research on QM and excellence models addressing public sector because it emphasizes the importance of strong national policies, stable support organizations, and continuous investment in institutional capacity (Arribas et al., 2024; Kuhlmann et al., 2021; Taraza et al., 2023). Arribas et al. (2024) conclude that for a sustainable QM adoption, it is necessary to align European recommendations given through Commission reports or ComPact Communication on public sector performance and quality with national policies. Additionally, the study confirms that the structure like competence centres and QM agencies plays a crucial role in framing QM support, implementation, and promotion within a country. The presence of these agencies, like DGAEP in Portugal, positively influence QM maturity through the consistent training, certification, and peer learning (Asensio et al., 2021; OECD, 2023).

The main focus of European countries according to their ongoing strategies are digitalization and innovation, while the components of QM like efficiency, performance measurement, and accountability are missing from political will, but modernisation in public sector is more effective when implies digital reform and evidence-based practices. Regarding the financial resources, the study shows that countries with direct funding have a higher level of QM institutionalisation because of the sustainability of the project started, because financial continuity and institutional support are positively correlated with a long-term improvement in quality in public service delivery. The present study confirms that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to QM institutionalisation (Oakland, 2014), but there are several factors like resource stability, training infrastructure, strategic national policies, and coordinated communication that can determine the level of maturity of an QM and excellence model in a country.

The study's limitations are determined by the availability of official documents and secondary data sources, which may not fully represent recent practices and developments in QM institutionalisation. Also, the sample includes just six countries, so it is impossible to generalise the findings for the entire European public sector. Subjectivism in interpretation and scoring based on the information found on official platforms constitutes another limitation of the article.

Future research can expand the analysis to more European countries using a geographical criteria, to determine the characteristics of a zone. It can use mixed methodology for study like comparative analysis and interviews with practitioners, to validate the results of the quantitative scoring method. Longitudinal studies can help to integrate the evolution of institutional maturity and link QM practices to measurable public service outcomes.

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Appendix 1

Internal enabling environment	
Element	Classification criteria and range of scoring
Strategic documents and policies	The scoring ranges from 0 to 2, and points are allocated as follows: • 0 points if QM is not mentioned at all in strategic and policy documents; • 1 point if there is some mention of QM, albeit vague, or there are indirect mentions, for example of elements that are related to QM; • 2 points if QM is defined clearly and in a detailed manner as guiding documents for public administration within the respective country. 'Regulatory status' is excluded from the scoring since consulted research does not indicate a higher or lower level of institutionalisation maturity. However, as mentioned in section 3.1, the classifications 'non-mandatory' and 'mandatory' are used in the third stage of the comparative analysis to group the eight countries.
Leadership	The scoring for countries ranges from -1 to 2, and points are allocated as follows: • -1 in case of decreasing political will in the past ten years; • 0 points in the case of volatile political will; • 1 point if political will can be classified as stable; • 2 points where the political will in the last 10 years can be categorized as increasing. The country reports are diverse, so possible indications for categorization within this element were sourced, for example from: A) the scoring within the first element on documents and policies; B) if there is support for a national QM Competence Centres, or other forms of governmental support for QM; C) country-specific indications during the interviews, such as the position of QM on recent political agendas.
Quality culture as a core value	The scoring for this criterion ranges from 0 to 3, and is based on the practices of countries when it comes to measuring quality and customer satisfaction. Points are allocated as follows:

	• 0 points if quality/customer satisfaction measurement is only part of strategic and policy documents without being carried out in reality (yet); • 1 point is assigned when quality/customer satisfaction measurement take place at the organisational level in different government bodies according to their discretion; • 2 points if measurements take place at the national level, and they focus only on either quality or satisfaction; • 3 points if both quality and satisfaction are measured at the national level.
Resources	The scoring ranges from 0 to 2, and points are allocated as follows: • 0 points if no funding (not even indirect) is available for QM (this includes countries with schools for public administration which do not specifically function as competence centres for quality); • 1 point for countries where there is a government-funded competence center for QM; • 2 points if direct funding for QM is available.
Organizing for quality	
Structure/coordination of QM practitioners	The structure/coordination of QM practitioners is excluded from the scoring since it does not inherently suggest a higher or lower level of institutionalisation maturity. However, as mentioned in section 3.1, the classifications 'centralized' and 'decentralized' are used in the third stage of the comparative analysis to group the eight countries.
Support functions	
Element	Classification criteria and range of scoring
Capacity building	The scoring ranges from 0 to 2, and points are allocated as follows: • 0 points if no specific training activities on QM are offered; • 1 point if only basic training is offered, or training activities are planned but not yet implemented; • 2 points if both basic and advanced training is organised.
Information and communication	The scoring ranges from 0 to 3, and points are allocated as follows: For publications: • 0 points if there are no publications on QM; • 1 point if only basic implementation information in the national language is published; • 2 points if more advanced documents in the national language are published; • 3 points if more advanced documents in English and in the national language are published. The logic of the three-point scoring is based upon the argument that countries with the highest score are likely to be more invested QM as they seem to share their lessons learned on QM with the wider QM community. For gatherings of QM practitioners, points are allocated as follows: • 0 points if no gatherings take place; • 1 point if gatherings take place less than once per year; • 2 points if gatherings take place once per year; • 3 points if gatherings take place more than once per year
Rewarding quality and engagement of people	The scoring ranges from 0 to 2, and points are allocated as follows: For certification schemes: • 0 points if there are no certification schemes; • 1 point if certification schemes are present but their scope is relatively limited, for example if they are available only to local governments or if they have been losing resources and support; • 2 points if schemes are active and well established. For quality awards: • 0 points if no awards are held for public administrators; • 1 point if awards are held that recognize related topics such as effective management in public administration, but they do not have a specific focus on QM; • 2 points if awards are centered on QM.

Appendix 2

R O M A N I A	https://www.poca.ro/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Prezentare-POCA-2014-2020.pdf
	https://www.mdlpa.ro/pages/consolidareaadministratieipublice
	https://www.mdlpa.ro/uploads/articole/attachments/61a87b7221669028670433.pdf
	https://www.anfp.gov.ro/R/Doc/2022/Competitie%20bune%20practici/Comunicat_presa_conferinta_IC_DEC_2022.pdf
	https://www.anfp.gov.ro/arhivaanunturi/anfp-certificare-iso/
	https://www.transparency.org.ro/en/tironews/transparency-international-romania-supports-exchange-good-practices-field-quality
	https://www.adr.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/A-3.1_Ghid-CAF-ADR.pdf
	https://www.poca.ro/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Document-strategic-CAF.pdf
	https://www.edu.ro/sites/default/files/A%204.2.%20Ghid%20de%20bune%20practici%20privind%20managementul%20calității%20CAF%2C%20in%20inst.%20ce%20guvernează%20sist.%20educational.pdf
	https://ina.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/M2_Calitate-si-performanta_Suport-curs.pdf
	https://sgg.gov.ro/1/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Plan-de-actiuni-de-imbunatatire-CAF-2023-2025-1.pdf
	https://www.poca.ro/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Formularea-referintelor-strategice-ghid-de-bune-practici.pdf
	https://www.zalausj.ro/ro/programe/calitate_procedura.pdf
	https://www.cjsibiu.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Raport_CAF_9-ianuarie-2019-in-consultare.pdf
G R E E C E	https://www.eipa.eu/the-golden-18-best-practices/
	https://digitalstrategy.gov.gr/en/vivlos_pdf?page=139
	https://www.ekdd.gr/en/ekdda/our-identity/quality-management/
	https://commission.europa.eu/business-economy-euro/economic-recovery/recovery-and-resilience-facility/country-pages/greeces-recovery-and-resilience-plan_en
	https://www.iky.gr/en/excellence-certifications/
	https://greekcitytimes.com/2024/12/28/gov-gr-customer-experience/
	https://www.ypes.gr/dimosia-dioikisi/category--poiوتا-kai-apodotikotita
C R O A T I A	https://reform-support.ec.europa.eu/document/download/2512f085-7017-439e-ab70-cc44ac4cb227_en
	https://mpudt.gov.hr/highlights/projects/technical-support-instrument-tsi/multi-country-project-tsi-mcp-23hr01-measuring-citizens-satisfaction-with-key-government-services-for-better-performance-and-enhanced-trust/27612
	https://mpudt.gov.hr/highlights/projects/eu-projects/introduction-of-a-quality-management-system-in-the-public-administration-of-the-republic-of-croatia/25411
	https://mpudt.gov.hr/news-25399/final-conference-of-the-project-introduction-of-a-quality-management-system-in-the-public-administration-of-the-republic-of-croatia/27100
	https://www.hgk.hr/odjel-za-upravljanje-kvalitetom/odjel-za-upravljanjekvalitetom
	https://www.esf.hr/odluka-o-financiranju-operacija-u-vođenje-sustava-upravljanja-kvalitetom-u-javnu-upravu-rh-i-razvoj-kompetencijskog-okvira-za-zaposlene-u-javnoj-upravi-ministarstva/
	https://reform-support.ec.europa.eu/what-we-do/public-administration-and-governance/leadership-programme-senior-public-officials-croatia_en
P O R T U G A L	https://www.caf.dgaep.gov.pt/index.cfm?OBJID=D488AF71-125D-4847-B73D-08729CA01349
	https://www.dgaep.gov.pt/index.cfm?OBJID=83DDD323-6047-46DB-B137-6A732C8C2202&
	https://www.caf.dgaep.gov.pt/media/publicacoes/RESULTADOS_InqueritoCAF_Adm_Central_Junho2018.pdf
	https://www.caf.dgaep.gov.pt/index.cfm?OBJID=FD02BCEE-99B1-4678-9132-E83AAFA563B8
	https://www.caf.dgaep.gov.pt/
	https://www.arte.gov.pt/documents/24077/266791/Resultados_Sintese_Parceiros_2022.pdf
	https://www.bacid.eu/images/7/76/5_CAF_structures_Portugal.pdf
	https://www.dgrm.pt/documents/20143/48268/siadap_lei_66b2007_28dez_versaoactualizada.pdf

I R E L A N D	https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2022/05/serving-citizens_9e6ed66f/65223af7-en.pdf
	https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-public-expenditure-infrastructure-public-service-reform-and-digitalisation/policies/public-service-reform/#public-service-reform-plans
	https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-public-expenditure-infrastructure-public-service-reform-and-digitalisation/publications/action-plan-for-designing-better-public-services/
	https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-public-expenditure-infrastructure-public-service-reform-and-digitalisation/policy-information/guiding-principles-of-quality-customer-service/
	https://www.ipa.ie/research/public-sector-trends-2023/
	https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-public-expenditure-infrastructure-public-service-reform-and-digitalisation/publications/better-public-services-public-service-transformation-2030-strategy/
	https://ilead.ie/institute-of-public-administration-ipa/
	https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-the-taoiseach/press-releases/publication-of-harnessing-digital-2023-progress-report/
	https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/customer-action-plans-and-charters-guidelines-for-preparation.pdf
	https://healthservice.hse.ie/staff/benefits-and-services/health-service-excellence-awards/
L A T V I A	https://reform-support.ec.europa.eu/what-we-do/public-administration-and-governance/enhancing-public-sector-innovation-capacity-latvia_en
	https://reform-support.ec.europa.eu/what-we-do/public-administration-and-governance/innovation-laboratory-and-reform-supervision-latvia_en
	https://www.varam.gov.lv/en/article/latvia-continues-lead-public-service-digitization-and-e-identity-usage-within-eu
	https://oecd-opsi.org/work-areas/building-innovative-capacity-in-latvia
	https://inovacija.mk.gov.lv/en/who-we-are
	https://www.mk.gov.lv/sites/mk/files/media_file/public-administration-reform-plan-2020_1.pdf
	https://www.izm.gov.lv/lv/common-framework-assessment-basic-digital-skills-identification-and-planning-training-needs-and-assessment-based-digcomp