

INSTITUTIONAL FORESIGHT AND STRATEGIC VULNERABILITY: THE CASE OF SEX EDUCATION POLICY UNDER ANTI-GENDER PRESSURE IN ROMANIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the strategic management vulnerabilities of public institutions operating in geopolitically and culturally complex environments, using Romania’s sexuality education policy as a case study. It focuses on how moral panic and ideological campaigns—particularly those labeled as anti-gender movements—destabilize evidence-based policymaking and undermine institutional foresight. Drawing on critical discourse analysis of Romanian parliamentary debates (2018–2023) and existing literature on counter-movements, the study identifies discursive tactics and institutional responses that illustrate deeper forms of strategic fragility. The research reveals that repeated delays in implementing sexuality education—despite international guidelines and public health imperatives—reflect broader challenges in long-term planning, stakeholder coordination, and anticipatory governance. The paper contributes to global management literature by proposing a conceptual framework for institutional foresight, applicable to public sector governance in ideologically polarized societies. It argues that the sustainability of democratic institutions increasingly depends not only on operational capacity, but also on their ability to manage symbolic threats, narrative disruptions, and shifting cultural norms—particularly in the face of globally networked illiberal campaigns.

KEYWORDS: *anti-gender campaigns, evidence-based policy, foresight, institutional resilience, Romania*

DOI: 10.24818/IMC/2025/02.01

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Romania has become a key battleground in the European contestation over gender rights, family values, and the governance of education. A central flashpoint has been the recurring debate over the introduction of sexuality education in public schools. Despite consistent recommendations from global organizations such as the WHO and UNESCO and rising public health concerns—including increased teenage pregnancies and misinformation among youth—Romania has failed to implement a coherent, nationwide curriculum.

The problem this paper addresses is not simply political resistance, but a deeper strategic challenge faced by public institutions: how to manage ideological conflict and symbolic disruption while maintaining evidence-based policymaking. Between 2018 and 2023, successive legislative efforts to institutionalize sexuality education were blocked, diluted, or reframed under ambiguous terms like “health education.” These setbacks occurred despite institutional consensus on the policy’s importance for youth wellbeing, gender equity, and social sustainability. Resistance was frequently

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justified through anti-gender narratives, invoking moral panic, parental sovereignty, or national identity.

Scholars such as Paternotte and Kuhar (2018), Graff and Korolczuk (2022), and Verloo (2018) have extensively analyzed the rise of anti-gender campaigns in Europe as part of a broader illiberal trend. In Romania, research has explored the legal, political, and religious dimensions of these movements. However, less attention has been paid to the internal dynamics of public institutions: how ministries, parliamentary actors, and bureaucracies respond to discursive pressure, and how institutional strategies—deliberate or passive—shape policy outcomes.

Anti-gender mobilizations are not only national or cultural disputes, but part of a larger geopolitical dynamic. The Vatican played a pivotal role in initially formulating the notion of “gender ideology,” portraying feminist and LGBTQ rights as an existential ideological threat to its social doctrine (Corredor, 2019). These ideas have diffused through transnational religious networks: Catholic and Orthodox actors have often found common cause, collaborating across borders to resist perceived “Western” liberal influences. For example, both high-ranking Vatican officials and Russian leaders have echoed strikingly similar rhetoric, denouncing “gender ideology” as a foreign imposition that endangers national traditions and family values (Corredor, 2019). Such global diffusion underlines that debates over gender and sexuality carry geostrategic weight, linking local policy battles to a broader “culture war” against liberal norms.

This paper fills that gap by shifting the analytical focus toward institutional foresight and strategic vulnerability—concepts typically used in organizational and public management. It asks: why do technically capable institutions fail to act decisively on policies backed by both scientific consensus and internal mandates? How do symbolic threats destabilize long-term planning?

To address these questions, the study applies critical discourse analysis to 55 parliamentary debates on sexuality education between 2018 and 2023, guided by Bacchi’s “What’s the Problem Represented to Be?” (WPR) framework. This method captures how dominant framings (e.g., “sex education equals moral corruption,” “the EU imposes gender ideology”) influenced policy design and institutional response. Supplementary analysis of public statements and official documents reveals a consistent pattern of ambiguity and risk-avoidance in institutional communication.

The results show that institutional actors often adopted non-positions—avoiding confrontation with anti-gender rhetoric while failing to articulate a clear evidence-based narrative. This strategic hesitation enabled ideologically motivated actors to dominate the discursive space. Ministries relied on vague language, delayed implementation, and lacked an integrated framing strategy capable of neutralizing controversy.

What is new in this paper is the framing of these phenomena as strategic vulnerability: a condition where institutions, although operationally functional, are symbolically disempowered in highly polarized contexts. The analysis shows that governance failures do not stem solely from resource gaps or political interference, but from the absence of anticipatory governance, narrative resilience, and cultural competence.

Thus, the paper contributes to both public management and political communication by proposing that institutional resilience in the 21st century must include the capacity to pre-empt discursive threats and reframe value-laden controversies—not merely manage resources or implement programs.

2. STRATEGIC VULNERABILITY IN IDEOLOGICAL POLICY FIELDS

Literature Review. Conceptually, this study bridges public management theory with the scholarship on illiberal anti-gender movements. In organizational terms, **strategic vulnerability** denotes an institution’s susceptibility to disruption by internal weaknesses or external pressures that exploit gaps in strategy and decision-making capacity. Conversely, **institutional foresight** refers to an organization’s capacity to anticipate future challenges and plan proactive responses, a concept borrowed from strategic management and public administration. Applying these notions to

democratic governance highlights a core puzzle: why technically capable public bodies can falter when confronting coordinated ideological campaigns. The focus shifts from individual attitudes to structural and strategic factors – how public institutions manage (or fail to manage) contentious value-driven conflicts while pursuing evidence-based policies.

A growing body of literature links the rise of anti-gender campaigns to broader illiberal trends in Europe (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; Graff and Korolczuk, 2022; Verloo, 2018). These campaigns, often under the banner of resisting “gender ideology,” function as transnational countermovements against progressive gender norms. Scholars have shown that opposition to “gender ideology” serves as a symbolic glue uniting various conservative, religious, and nationalist actors (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017). The term encapsulates resistance to multiple equality initiatives – from women’s and LGBTQ+ rights to comprehensive sex education – reframing them as a single, nefarious agenda. Garbagnoli (2016), for instance, documents how the Vatican’s discourse constructed “gender” as a heresy threatening the natural sexual order, a narrative that has been adopted by Catholic and Orthodox hierarchies alike. Graff and Korolczuk (2022) further argue that anti-gender activism has become integral to the populist moment in Central and Eastern Europe, providing a ready-made enemy (“Brussels” or “global liberalism”) that anti-establishment leaders use to rally support. This pan-European opposition is not monolithic; as Verloo (2018) notes, it varies from country to country. Yet a common thread is the framing of gender equality measures as an external imposition on national sovereignty and moral order (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022). The result is a coordinated backlash, or what some call an “Illiberal International,” wherein actors share resources and rhetoric across borders while adapting to local contexts. In sum, current research indicates that anti-gender discourse is both a product of, and a driving force in, the illiberal turn undermining liberal-democratic values in Europe. Crucially, recent studies have illuminated the gendered dimensions of illiberalism in Central and Eastern Europe, showing that anti-gender themes are an **existential feature** of new illiberal projects (Grzebalska and Pető, 2018; Pető, 2021). Populist leaders in Poland and Hungary explicitly declared a “pan-European” conservative project centered on defending the “traditional family” and Christian values against liberalism (Sierakowski, 2016; Kuhar, 2015). Anti-gender discourse provides the ideological coherence for this project by offering a clear adversary – painted as a threat to the nation and family – thereby justifying authoritarian measures as protection against moral decay (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022; Laruelle, 2022). In Romania, too, scholars have observed a shift from latent traditionalism to explicit illiberalism through the idiom of anti-genderism (Dragolea, 2022). Băluță (2020) describes how the very notion of gender equality evolved into a discursive and political battleground in the 2010s, where secular policy initiatives were reframed in religious-nationalist terms. A key turning point was the 2018 “Referendum for Family,” an attempt to constitutionalize the definition of marriage as between a man and a woman. This campaign, initiated by the Coalition for the Family and actively endorsed by the Orthodox Church, localized global anti-gender tropes into Romanian politics. Studies show that its advocates invoked the specter of “gender ideology” as a civilizational threat, claiming the Romanian nation and Orthodoxy were facing extinction unless traditional family values were safeguarded (Norocel and Băluță, 2023; Soare and Tufiş, 2021). Although the referendum ultimately failed due to low turnout, it succeeded in injecting illiberal language into the mainstream. In its wake, major parties cautiously adopted elements of the anti-gender agenda (Mărgărit, 2020; Norocel and Băluță, 2023). Moreover, the period immediately after saw the rise of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), the first parliamentary party in post-2000 Romania built on an overtly anti-gender, ultra-conservative platform. AUR’s discourse aggressively champions the “traditional family,” opposes comprehensive sex education and LGBTQ rights, and paints these issues as core to a struggle for national survival (Dragolea, 2022). This evolution confirms that Romania’s policy arena has been strategically vulnerable to illiberal incursions, especially in the absence of institutional foresight to counter misinformation and moral panic. The literature thus suggests that without deliberate strategies to bolster institutional resilience,

public policy processes can be hijacked by well-organized illiberal movements even in a formally democratic setting.

Public institutions often operate under the assumption that once a policy proposal is scientifically grounded, legally sound, and democratically advanced, its implementation should proceed with minimal resistance. However, in the case of sexuality education in Romania, this assumption collapses in the face of organized countermovements that contest not only the content of policies but also their underlying values and narratives. To understand institutional vulnerability in such contexts, it is essential to examine the dual dynamic between emancipatory change and organized backlash. Emancipatory movements—such as feminism, LGBTQ+ rights advocacy, or progressive educational reform—have historically aimed to expand individual freedoms, challenge structural inequalities, and democratize access to power. Nancy Fraser (1995) describes these efforts as part of a broader struggle for “recognition,” aimed at correcting cultural injustices that marginalize specific social groups. However, the gains of such movements have been increasingly met with resistance. These resistance efforts, or countermovements, do not simply oppose specific policies; they offer alternative visions of social order rooted in traditionalism, nationalism, and religious authority (Snow & Benford, 1988). Within this dynamic, education emerges as a particularly potent terrain. It is a symbolic battleground where visions of society are transmitted intergenerationally. As Graff and Korolczuk (2022) argue, “the school becomes a primary target because it is seen as a site where ideological control can be asserted or disrupted” .

A central mechanism by which these countermovements operate is through the deployment of the term “gender ideology.” Originally a conceptual tool developed by the Vatican in the 1990s (Case, 2016), “gender ideology” was strategically framed as a foreign, harmful, and subversive influence imposed upon traditional family structures. Rather than opposing feminism or LGBTQ+ rights directly, the term acts as a discursive container—able to absorb and delegitimize a wide range of emancipatory ideas without naming them explicitly. The discursive power of “gender ideology” lies in its deliberate vagueness. As Paternotte and Kuhar (2018) show, its meaning is rarely clearly defined in public debates, yet its emotional charge is intense. In Romania, as in many parts of Central and Eastern Europe, the term has been used to cast suspicion on European institutions, frame educational reforms as moral threats, and present public health measures as forms of cultural colonization . By focusing on education, anti-gender campaigns activate latent cultural anxieties about childhood, sexuality, and national identity. This reframing enables countermovements to position themselves not as reactionary, but as defenders of innocence, morality, and sovereignty (Verloo, 2018). In doing so, they reverse the framing: the progressive actors become the “ideologues,” and the conservatives become “protectors.”

Central to the Romanian case is the figure of the child—a symbolic and emotional node that unites diverse ideological positions under the banner of protection. The child is rarely presented as an autonomous rights-holder but rather as a passive vessel vulnerable to external influences. In the political rhetoric analyzed from the Romanian Parliament, children are described as being “corrupted” by sex education, “robbed” of their innocence, or “indoctrinated” with Western values. These framings create powerful affective responses that make rational policy debate extremely difficult. This emotional construction is closely tied to the notion of parental sovereignty, which is elevated rhetorically to override public health concerns. For example, one MP claimed: “What the state wants is to take away from parents their constitutional right to decide what is best for their children” (Romanian Parliament debate, 2020) . In such framings, sexuality education is not a pedagogical tool but a threat to the sanctity of the family and national culture. These discursive strategies enable institutional actors to be cornered symbolically. Ministries or health authorities that support comprehensive education risk being accused of moral complicity or cultural betrayal. As a result, institutions retreat into ambiguous or neutral language, avoiding clear positions even in the face of mounting public health data.

Anti-gender campaigns in Romania did not emerge spontaneously. They are part of a broader transnational network of actors that includes religious institutions, political parties, conservative NGOs, and foreign-funded think tanks. The Romanian Orthodox Church plays a dominant role, often mobilizing moral authority and symbolic capital to contest policies aligned with gender equality or EU directives. One important moment in this narrative architecture was the 2015 Citizens' Initiative to define marriage constitutionally as a union between a man and a woman. Although framed as a specific legal change, this initiative was embedded in a broader discursive infrastructure that sought to establish "gender ideology" as a threat. Similar themes resurfaced during the debates on sexuality education: protecting children, defending Romanian values, resisting EU impositions, and asserting national sovereignty. These themes were recycled and adapted across campaigns, showing that anti-gender rhetoric is not issue-specific but modular and mobile. As Bracke and Paternotte (2016) note, "the anti-gender movement is not only reactive; it is proactive in shaping policy discourse and re-legitimizing conservative norms." In this context, institutional actors that lack a strong strategic communication framework become increasingly vulnerable—not only to political pressure but to discursive capture.

The Romanian case illustrates that ideological contestation is no longer limited to fringe groups or social movements. It operates within institutional arenas, shaping the narratives, fears, and hesitations of public agencies. The conceptual tools used to resist progressive reforms are often more emotionally resonant and symbolically effective than the technocratic language of policy implementation. For public institutions, the implication is clear: strategic foresight must include cultural and narrative dimensions. It is not sufficient to rely on data, best practices, or legal compliance. Institutions must anticipate the symbolic terrain in which they operate and develop framing strategies that can withstand emotional politicization. This requires not only discursive agility but internal alignment—a shared narrative across ministries, agencies, and political actors. In the absence of such alignment, ambiguity becomes the default, and policy momentum is lost. The Romanian case shows that without strategic narrative coherence, even scientifically supported policies can be halted by symbolic resistance.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, case-based research design to examine how Romanian public institutions navigated the sex education policy conflict under anti-gender pressure. The data consist of official parliamentary transcripts from both chambers covering the period 2018–2023. We constructed a dataset of approximately 55 parliamentary debates and committee meetings in which sex education, reproductive health, or "gender ideology" were discussed. These transcripts include legislative deliberations on relevant bills, such as the 2020 law renaming sex education to "health education," as well as interpellations and public addresses by key political figures. Using complete transcripts (sourced from public records of the Parliament's proceedings) ensures that our analysis captures the full spectrum of arguments presented, from progressive expert-based positions to religion-nationalist counterpoints. The sample is thus comprehensive in tracing the policy discourse trajectory over five years of contention.

The analytic approach combines critical discourse analysis with Carol Bacchi's "What's the Problem Represented to be?" (WPR) method (Bacchi, 2009). This framework directs attention to how policy problems are discursively constructed by different actors. I examine not only what was said in these debates, but how sex education was framed – for instance, as a public health necessity, a moral threat, or a sovereignty issue. Following Bacchi's approach, our analysis asks: What implicit "problem" definitions underpin various positions, and what assumptions and values do they reveal? To systematically identify patterns, we applied thematic coding (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to the transcripts. Coding was conducted iteratively, first openly to capture recurring motifs (e.g. "parental rights," "traditional values," "European pressure") and then more selectively to refine key discursive

frames. Two dominant frames – an evidence-based public health frame and an anti-gender civilizational frame – emerged from this process. Within each, we further traced sub-themes and narrative strategies (for example, appeals to children’s safety, invocations of national identity, or references to scientific data). The qualitative data analysis software was used to organize codes and excerpts, but interpretive judgment remained crucial in contextualizing language within Romania’s socio-political setting. Throughout, we aligned our coding process with best practices in qualitative research to ensure reliability, including double-checking code applications and documenting analytical decisions (Flick, 2014).

The analysis proceeded in stages. First, each debate transcript was read in full to grasp context and tone, then examined line-by-line to annotate argumentative moves. Next, I grouped excerpts by theme, comparing how different political actors (government officials, opposition MPs, religious spokesmen quoted in debates, etc.) talked about sex education. This enabled me to map discourse coalitions – for instance, identifying when unlikely political allies echoed each other’s talking points. Finally, I applied the WPR lens to interpret what these findings mean for institutional behavior: how did ministries and committees anticipate or respond to the frames identified? Did they exhibit foresight in addressing predictable objections, or did they reveal vulnerabilities by capitulating to reframed narratives? By melding discourse analysis with policy process questions, we could evaluate institutional strategies (or their absence) amid the rhetorical contest.

This study’s qualitative approach is justified given the complexity of the subject matter. Rather than quantifying instances of keywords, we sought to understand meaning, context, and subtext – goals well served by interpretive methods (Braun and Clarke, 2006). A qualitative design allows for nuanced insights into how language was used to exert pressure on the policymaking process, and how institutional actors negotiated that pressure. The approach follows established methodologies for critical policy analysis, treating language not as a neutral conveyor of facts but as a tool that shapes what is politically feasible (Bacchi, 2009). All data were drawn from publicly available sources, which minimized ethical concerns; no private or sensitive information was accessed. However, the research was conducted with attention to reflexivity: the author remained aware of their own interpretive lens as a scholar of gender politics. We acknowledge that our categorization of frames is itself an analytical construct – one influenced by theoretical perspectives on liberalism, secularism, and so forth. To mitigate bias, we grounded our interpretations in direct textual evidence and, where possible, triangulated parliamentary discourse with contemporaneous reports or official documents for context. Ultimately, by working exclusively with official public transcripts, we ensured that our analysis can be transparently checked against the record, and that the findings directly reflect the institutional discourse under study. This methodological rigor strengthens the validity of our conclusions about institutional foresight and vulnerability in the face of Romania’s anti-gender campaign.

4. CASE STUDY: BLOCKING SEXUALITY EDUCATION IN ROMANIA

Between 2018 and 2023, the Romanian Parliament became the arena for a fierce ideological battle over the institutionalization of sexuality education in schools. While public health indicators and international recommendations supported the introduction of a comprehensive curriculum, successive legislative efforts were either stalled, reframed, or fundamentally altered by actors invoking religious, moral, and nationalist concerns. The first major legislative push came in 2020 with Law no. 45/2020, which initially introduced “sexual education” as a standalone discipline in Romanian schools. However, within months, Parliament amended the law to replace the phrase “sexual education” with “health education,” and made attendance conditional upon parental written consent. This transformation was not merely semantic. It marked the symbolic defeat of an evidence-based public health proposal under pressure from ideological narratives. Subsequent initiatives—including several legislative proposals filed between 2021 and 2023—either failed to pass committee stages, were

returned to initiators with requests for revision, or were left indefinitely pending in specialized commissions. This bureaucratic stasis was accompanied by increasingly polarized public discourse, where MPs and institutional actors reframed the issue as one of sovereignty, national morality, and child protection.

This chapter draws on the critical discourse analysis of 55 parliamentary debates concerning sexuality education between 2018 and 2023. The methodology followed Bacchi’s “What’s the Problem Represented to Be?” (WPR) approach (Bacchi, 2009), which focuses on how the “problem” is socially constructed through language, rather than taken as given. This method is particularly suited for analyzing debates where values, ideologies, and emotions play a central role.

The dataset includes:

- Official stenographic records from the Romanian Chamber of Deputies and Senate;
- Proposed and amended legislative texts;

Debates were coded thematically based on recurring discursive frames. In addition to identifying major themes, we looked at who used them, how they were legitimized, and what their strategic implications were for institutional policy-making.

The analysis identified four dominant rhetorical frames deployed in parliamentary discourse to contest or delay the implementation of sexuality education:

A. Moral Panic and the “Corruption of Innocence”

This was by far the most recurrent theme. Sexuality education was constructed as a corrupting force, capable of robbing children of their innocence. For example, Florica Cherecheș, a former deputy, stated:

“These topics corrupt children rather than protect them. What we need is not sex education, but moral education and character-building.” (Parliamentary session, May 2020)

For example, Ilie Alin Colesa (AUR) vehemently rejected the idea that sexuality education reduces teen pregnancies:

“A lie! A big lie! [...] This kind of education leads to sexualization, not protection.” (June 21, 2022)

He further linked sexuality education to child abuse:

“Those who are now sexual predators were once children themselves—exposed in schools to these initiatives, normalizing deviations such as homosexuality.” (October 11, 2022)

This frame drew on a mix of religious morality and affective appeals to child protection. It ignored empirical evidence from public health institutions, focusing instead on the symbolic implications of “talking about sex.”

B. Parental Rights and Constitutional Sovereignty

A second dominant frame focused on parental sovereignty. MPs argued that introducing sexuality education without parental consent violated Article 29(6) of the Romanian Constitution, which guarantees the right of parents to guide their children’s education according to their beliefs.

Titus Corlățean, a key political voice during the 2020 amendments, remarked:

“No state authority can force a child to attend a course that contradicts the values of their family. We are a constitutional democracy, not a dictatorship of ideologies.” (Senate session, July 2020)

Dumitru Coarnă (AUR) emphasized the “written consent” clause as a constitutional safeguard:

“Children do not have the legal capacity to propose or decide such matters. That’s why written parental consent is essential.” (June 21, 2022)

Andrei Daniel Gheorghe (PNL) stated:

“The debate on gender ideology, also called sexual education, reflects our inability to see the real problem: a return of totalitarian ideologies seeking to nationalize the child and subject them to indoctrination.” (June 3, 2020)

He explicitly linked sex ed to Marxist traditions:

“This started 100 years ago with Lukács in Bolshevik Hungary—a pedophile communist who invented what we now call sexo-Marxism.”

Lilian Scripnic (AUR) echoed this framing:

“Tolerating these ideologies leads to a globalist, amorphous world where people no longer know the difference between mother and father.” (June 29, 2021)

This narrative positioned the state as a potential usurper of familial authority, framing international guidelines as intrusive and even totalitarian.

C. Anti-Gender Ideology and National Sovereignty

Anti-gender rhetoric was strategically mobilized to reframe sexuality education as part of a broader “ideological colonization” by Western liberalism. In this framing, gender equality was portrayed as a threat to national identity, Christian values, and Romanian traditions.

For instance, Deputy Matei Dobrovie claimed:

“The pressure for sex education comes from organizations financed externally, pushing a gender ideology that undermines our sovereignty and the moral foundations of the Romanian nation.” (Chamber of Deputies, November 2019)

Such discursive strategies drew heavily from international anti-gender campaigns documented by Paternotte and Kuhar (2018), effectively importing frames of “gender as ideology” into the Romanian political mainstream.

D. Strategic Ambiguity and Institutional Evasion

Some political actors avoided taking clear stances but used coded language that aligned with anti-gender rhetoric. This allowed them to appeal to conservative sentiments without appearing regressive.

Deputy Adrian Cozma stated:

“Let’s be careful what we introduce in schools. We must protect childhood and ensure we do not sow confusion in young minds.” (Parliamentary transcript, February 2021)

Some politicians resorted to mockery to delegitimize the debate altogether.

George Simion (AUR) derided USR’s insistence on the term “sexual education”:

“They just want to hear the word ‘sex’—over and over again. Are you happy now? Sex, sex, sex...” (June 21, 2022)

Others engaged in cultural deflection. Adrian Solomon (PSD) reframed the debate as unimportant:

“We’re spinning our wheels over a single amendment—because that’s all we seem capable of understanding.” (June 8, 2022)

Such ambiguous discourse provided institutional cover for delays, non-decisions, and indefinite postponement, which collectively functioned as a form of symbolic obstruction.

The policy blockage did not rely solely on voting outcomes. It occurred through four interlinked mechanisms:

1. **Delays:** Proposals such as PL-x nr. 450/2021 (reintroducing sexual education in a rights-based format) were held up in specialized committees without explanation. In many cases, deadlines for debate were simply extended repeatedly, preventing progress.
2. **Renaming:** The most explicit tactic was terminological. “Sexual education” became “health education”—a term broad enough to be emptied of controversial content. This neutralization diluted the policy’s emancipatory potential.
3. **Parental Consent Clause:** Requiring written parental consent served as an administrative barrier. As your thesis showed, this disproportionately excluded children from conservative or underprivileged families—precisely those for whom such education is most needed.

4. Legislative Inconsistency: Law 272/2004 (on the rights of the child) was cited selectively. Some MPs invoked children’s rights to avoid “indoctrination,” while ignoring children’s rights to information, autonomy, or protection from abuse.

Perhaps the most damaging element was the lack of institutional coordination. The Ministry of Health published alarming statistics on teenage pregnancies and STDs, yet the Ministry of Education maintained a neutral or absent stance. This vacuum was filled by populist rhetoric. Institutions lacked a unified communication strategy, failed to reference international standards (such as UNESCO's 2018 guidelines), and avoided any confrontation with ideological actors. Instead of proactive leadership, public institutions appeared hesitant, divided, and risk-averse.

Even civil society efforts were inconsistently supported. NGOs working on sex education faced hostility in public discourse and had no structured support from state agencies. When confronted with media campaigns accusing them of “brainwashing” or “sexualizing children,” institutions chose silence rather than defense.

What emerges from this case study is not simply a policy failure but a systemic vulnerability. Public institutions in Romania possessed the legal, scientific, and international justification to implement comprehensive sexuality education. Yet they lacked the narrative tools, strategic cohesion, and cultural foresight to withstand ideological opposition. As a result, policy became a hostage of emotion-driven politics. The discursive terrain was ceded to populist actors, and the public institutions—though functionally capable—became symbolically disempowered. This reveals a critical flaw in governance models that prioritize technical capacity but underestimate narrative risk. The Romanian experience should serve as a cautionary example for other public administrations facing similar ideological challenges. The question is no longer whether institutions are technically equipped to act, but whether they are strategically prepared to defend their mandates in the symbolic arenas where meaning, legitimacy, and cultural resonance are contested.

Sexuality education emerged as a particularly potent site for illiberal mobilization for several reasons:

- It centered on a taboo subject—sex—which is culturally suppressed but hyper-visible in popular media;
- It activated deep-seated societal ambivalence over the division of responsibility between parents and the state in education;
- It overlapped with European policy, making it susceptible to selective interpretation and Eurosceptic instrumentalization;
- It allowed for the recycling of prior campaign infrastructure, such as the 2018 referendum on the traditional family;
- It intersected with broader anti-gender discourses circulating across Europe, making it a culturally resonant and transnationally relevant rallying point.

In this sense, sexuality education functioned less as a stand-alone issue and more as a symbolic vessel—carrying with it contested values, competing visions of national identity, and polarized understandings of governance and sovereignty.

The case study reveals that institutional failures in Romania were not primarily technical, but symbolic. The blocking of sexuality education policies was not simply a matter of poor legislative drafting or lack of political will—it was the result of an unanticipated cultural and narrative battle that institutions were unprepared to fight. What emerged was a pattern of strategic vulnerability: institutions that are formally capable but symbolically fragile, unable to defend evidence-based policy in the face of moralized controversy. This underscores the urgent need for public institutions to move beyond procedural governance and embrace a more holistic approach—one that includes narrative intelligence, discursive strategy, and anticipatory communication.

In sum, the Romanian case shows that policy success in contentious areas increasingly depends not only on legal feasibility and technical quality, but on the ability to strategically manage the symbolic dimensions of public governance. Institutions that fail to anticipate and engage with these dimensions risk not only policy failure—but erosion of public trust and legitimacy itself.

5. INSTITUTIONAL AMBIGUITY AND STRATEGIC FRAGILITY

In contexts of ideological contestation, public institutions are increasingly evaluated not only on their operational capabilities, but also on their symbolic agility—the ability to navigate moral panic, media storms, and value-driven confrontation. Romania’s failed implementation of sexuality education between 2018 and 2023 offers a case study in institutional ambiguity and strategic fragility, exposing a deeper dysfunction at the crossroads of governance, culture, and foresight

Romanian public institutions—formally mandated to implement health-based curricula, signatories to international guidelines, and equipped with a network of expert bodies—nonetheless remained immobilized. This was not due to legal constraints, but rather to a deeper form of institutional ambiguity. Key ministries adopted a posture of passivity, characterized by rhetorical vagueness and procedural inertia. Rather than oppose sexuality education explicitly, institutional actors delayed decisions, avoided public commitment, and used neutral, non-confrontational language. The Ministry of Education, for example, systematically avoided explicit endorsement of WHO or UNESCO recommendations, despite Romania’s participation in these international frameworks. This silence was not apolitical; it created a discursive vacuum that was quickly filled by more vocal, ideologically motivated actors. As the debates intensified, the institutions’ non-positioning began to signal complicity. Ambiguity thus became a strategic form of non-action, enabling illiberal rhetoric to shape the policy landscape by default.

One of the most glaring dimensions of institutional fragility was the absence of a coherent communication strategy. In the face of anti-gender narratives—many of which equated sexuality education with “moral corruption” or “early sexualization”—no authoritative institutional voice emerged to clarify, defend, or contextualize the proposed policies. While NGOs and individual professionals occasionally attempted to intervene in public discourse, these efforts were uncoordinated, under-amplified, and lacked institutional backing. This failure to engage strategically with public narratives allowed opponents to control the framing. Instead of presenting sexuality education as a scientifically grounded, rights-based intervention, the topic was rebranded by its detractors as a threat to national values, family sovereignty, and religious morality. Ministries remained reactive, when what was required was anticipatory, resonant messaging grounded in social values and institutional legitimacy. The result was what might be termed a “communication void” in which technocratic silence was interpreted as cultural concession. Institutions, though operationally capable, forfeited the narrative terrain, allowing misinformation and fear to proliferate unchecked.

The Romanian case illustrates not only a breakdown in communication, but a deeper absence of anticipatory governance. There were clear signs—both within Romania and across the region—that sexuality education would become a flashpoint for ideological confrontation. Precedents included the 2018 referendum on the definition of family, as well as earlier pushbacks against LGBTQ+ rights and civic education. Despite these signals, public institutions failed to prepare. No foresight exercises were conducted. No scenario planning was evident. Legislative resistance was treated as episodic rather than systemic, prompting ad hoc responses rather than coordinated counter-strategies. Ministries did not simulate the likely public reactions, nor did they map ideological actors or plan for counter-narratives rooted in Romanian cultural idioms.

This foresight deficit amplified the effects of ideological attacks. Institutions appeared blindsided, unprepared not only to defend their proposals, but to recognize them as politically volatile. This myopia contributed directly to legislative inertia and narrative loss.

Another defining feature of the Romanian failure was institutional fragmentation. While the Ministry of Health intermittently supported sexuality education based on alarming adolescent pregnancy and STI rates, the Ministry of Education remained mute. Parliamentary dynamics followed their own ideological logic, often disconnected from the public health rationale. Meanwhile, civil society operated in parallel, lacking formal avenues for structured engagement with government actors. This fragmentation yielded a disjointed policy ecosystem. Technical justifications failed to connect with

legislative action. Advocacy campaigns failed to secure institutional champions. No cross-sector alliances were forged to stabilize policy momentum or respond to media controversy. Missed opportunities abounded. Parent associations, youth-led initiatives, and even moderate religious voices could have served as validators, broadening the coalition in favor of evidence-based policy. Instead, the fragmented ecosystem left sexuality education politically exposed and discursively isolated.

Central to this institutional paralysis was a misreading of the policy’s symbolic load. For anti-gender actors, sexuality education was never just about curriculum. It was a metonym for broader anxieties: about gender roles, globalization, European integration, and the erosion of “traditional” values. Institutions, by treating it as a technical matter, underestimated the symbolic potency of the issue. They were prepared for debates over pedagogy or public health—not for moral panic, emotional narratives, or strategic misrepresentation. As such, they failed to recognize that in highly polarized environments, meaning—not just fact—must be managed. Once sexuality education was discursively reframed as a Trojan horse for foreign ideologies and moral decay, silence was no longer an option. Yet public institutions continued to rely on legalistic justifications, ignoring the emotional, cultural, and symbolic stakes that defined the public debate.

What could Romanian institutions have done differently? First, they could have developed culturally adapted, morally resonant narratives to accompany their policies. Reframing sexuality education as a form of child protection, bodily autonomy, or abuse prevention could have created stronger public support. Second, ministries could have invested in metaphorical framing to depolarize the issue—comparing sex education to road safety, hygiene, or mental health awareness. Framing devices like “respect education” or “future readiness” would have softened ideological opposition while preserving pedagogical integrity. Third, foresight units embedded within ministries could have simulated backlash scenarios, mapped ideological actors, and prepared adaptive responses. These teams could have built coalitions across civil society, religious groups, and youth organizations to distribute the discursive burden and preempt polarization.

Lastly, strategic communication must become a core public management function in contested fields. Institutions require trained spokespersons, rapid response units, and a proactive media presence to maintain narrative integrity and build cultural legitimacy.

Romania’s struggle with sexuality education underscores a broader vulnerability affecting many democracies today. Public institutions, built for technocratic delivery, are often ill-equipped for symbolic politics. When policy fields become battlegrounds for identity, religion, and ideology, classical governance tools—laws, data, mandates—are not enough. The lesson is clear: legitimacy is no longer generated solely through performance or expertise. It now hinges on cultural literacy, anticipatory capacity, and the ability to engage symbolically with a fragmented public. Institutions that fail to adapt will not only lose specific policy battles—they risk long-term erosion of public trust and democratic authority. In the face of ideological polarization and anti-gender mobilization, public institutions must evolve. Romania’s case illustrates how technical competence without narrative control is insufficient. Governance today demands not only the right answers, but the right language, coalitions, and emotional intelligence. To defend democratic gains in sensitive policy areas such as gender, education, and health, institutions must embrace strategic foresight, communication, and alliance-building as core components of public management. Ambiguity, while once a shield, now invites contestation. Only by embracing their symbolic role in society can public institutions move from fragility to foresight—and from survival to transformation.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS – INSTITUTIONAL RESILIENCE IN POLARIZED POLICY FIELDS

In light of the empirical analysis presented in the previous chapter, this final section outlines a framework of strategic recommendations for public institutions—particularly in sectors like education—operating within ideologically polarized environments. The Romanian case offers

broader lessons for public management under symbolic threat, where institutional effectiveness depends not only on administrative competence, but also on narrative strategy, foresight capacity, and cross-sectoral alignment.

Traditional strategic management frameworks in the public sector focus on resource allocation, goal alignment, and performance measurement. However, in socio-politically charged contexts, these are insufficient. Institutions must also develop capabilities in narrative shaping, conflict anticipation, and values-based communication. The blocking of sexuality education in Romania illustrates how operational capacity can be undercut by symbolic delegitimization. Ministries and agencies had the legal and technical tools to implement the policy, yet failed to counteract the discursive forces mobilized by anti-gender campaigns. This calls for a shift from purely technical planning to strategic cultural governance.

One of the key insights from the Romanian case is the danger of strategic ambiguity. Institutions attempted to remain neutral in the face of polarized discourse, but this ambiguity was interpreted as weakness. Illiberal actors occupied the discursive space, framing public institutions as either complicit in a foreign “gender ideology” or incapable of protecting “traditional values.”

A critical recommendation is that public institutions cannot afford discursive silence on topics of high societal friction. Strategic silence becomes strategic fragility. A proactive stance—grounded in evidence but aware of cultural sensitivities—is necessary to avoid narrative capture.

The Romanian case underscores the absence of anticipatory governance mechanisms. The emergence of anti-gender narratives was not sudden; international examples (e.g., Poland, Hungary) provided early warning signs. However, Romanian institutions lacked the internal capacity or political mandate to engage in scenario planning or discourse monitoring. Strategic foresight units should be embedded within key ministries, tasked with identifying emerging symbolic threats, mapping discursive trends, and simulating future controversies. This capability is especially relevant in the education and health sectors, where evidence-based policy often collides with ideological resistance.

Illiberal campaigns succeed partly because they synchronize messaging across actors—politicians, media outlets, religious institutions, and civil society. Pro-democratic public institutions, on the other hand, often communicate in fragmented or overly technocratic ways.

One strategic recommendation is the development of narrative alliances. Ministries should co-create communication strategies with education experts, public intellectuals, civil society leaders, and international bodies. These alliances should articulate the why of policies—not just the how—linking evidence to values in ways that resonate with broader publics.

Evidence alone does not win policy debates. The findings from the Romanian Parliament show how illiberal actors mobilize emotional, identity-driven frames: “sexual education equals moral corruption,” “the EU imposes anti-family ideology,” “parents are being sidelined.”

Institutions must be equipped with counter-frames that do not mirror the aggressiveness of opponents but instead recontextualize the debate. For example:

- Replace "sex education" with “respect-based health education for youth.”
- Frame policies as protective of families, not disruptive to them.
- Highlight stories of children and parents benefitting from inclusive education.

This is not about spin; it’s about strategic empathy—understanding public anxieties and redirecting them constructively.

The Romanian case also exposed a lack of moral leadership from public institutions. Bureaucratic language and vague policy announcements created a vacuum filled by moral panic. In contested policy fields, policy communication is not secondary—it is the policy.

I recommend institutionalizing ethics-based communication training for mid- and senior-level public managers, emphasizing clarity, transparency, and responsibility. Policies that touch on identity, family, or youth require moral clarity, not just administrative coordination.

Lastly, public institutions should track discursive legitimacy as an ongoing performance indicator. Tools like sentiment analysis, discourse mapping, and media frame tracking can offer early signals of reputational risk or polarization flare-ups.

Institutions should also cultivate constructive media partnerships, working with journalists and content creators to preempt misinformation and normalize difficult conversations.

7. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has argued that public institutions are increasingly challenged not just by resource constraints or procedural inefficiencies, but by discursive volatility and symbolic attacks that aim to undermine their legitimacy, not merely their output. The Romanian case study—focused on the blocking of sexuality education—demonstrates how policy paralysis emerges when strategic foresight, cultural fluency, and coordinated communication are absent from the management toolbox of public actors.

By analyzing 55 parliamentary debates and situating them in the broader context of anti-gender campaigns in Europe, this study uncovered a pattern of institutional hesitation and symbolic vulnerability. Ministries and decision-makers had the formal capacity to act but lacked the narrative and cultural strategy to withstand politicized pressure. This form of strategic vulnerability is particularly dangerous because it is subtle: it does not manifest through institutional breakdown, but through gradual erosion of purpose, narrative capture, and paralysis in the face of controversy.

In this context, strategic management must be reconceptualized. It can no longer focus exclusively on efficiency, compliance, and stakeholder mapping. It must now include:

- Narrative intelligence – the ability to identify, preempt, and respond to discursive shifts.
- Symbolic leadership – the courage to articulate institutional values clearly and consistently.
- Cross-sectoral resilience – the capacity to build alliances that extend beyond bureaucratic silos, uniting actors across civil society, media, academia, and international frameworks.

Institutions cannot—and should not—attempt to “win” ideological battles. But they must develop the foresight and moral coherence to remain relevant and credible in the eyes of diverse publics. This requires investing in new forms of institutional intelligence, including discourse monitoring, anticipatory communication, and collaborative framing strategies.

As democratic backsliding, polarization, and symbolic manipulation become increasingly transnational phenomena, public institutions must evolve from reactive defenders of the status quo into proactive architects of democratic meaning-making. Only then can they manage not just policies, but the contested social imaginaries that surround them.

The case of Romania’s stalled sexual education policy is not an anomaly—it is a warning. Without cultural strategy, foresight, and ethical clarity, institutions risk becoming technically competent but symbolically irrelevant. To avoid this fate, a new paradigm of strategic governance is required—one that recognizes that narrative is not the enemy of evidence, but its most powerful ally.

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