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EXPLORING THE RECENT EVOLUTION OF THE ACCOUNTING PROFESSION IN ROMANIA – AN INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

This paper mobilizes an institutionalism-based approach in order to discuss the factors influencing the recent evolution of the Romanian accounting profession and to advance a tentative prognosis. Using the case of Romania as context for the study, we illustrate how a national profession aligned to the main international requirements, but also remaining connected to local features in many cases. Using multiple sources to collect data, we discuss the main stages in the profession's evolution (formation, proliferation, and consolidation), the inter- and intra-professional conflicts, and the pressures for change. I argue that national professional bodies should consider themselves in competition with the international ones, in order to result mimetic and normative isomorphism which would be of benefit for the local profession. Therefore, the paper contributes to the research on the global – local dialectic in the accounting profession and has implications for the literature on the accounting profession, but also for professional bodies and academia.

✂ accounting profession, professional bodies, Romania, institutionalism

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INTRODUCTION

This paper mobilizes an institutional approach in order to discuss the factors influencing the recent evolution of the Romanian accounting profession and to advance a tentative prognosis. The accounting profession, its role, image and

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evolution attracted attention recently (Carnegie & Napier, 2010; IFAC, 2011; Krell, 2011), and issues related to the professionalization, the role of actors and the political aspects and the impact of globalization still claim consideration (Cooper & Robson, 2006; Mennicken, 2008).

While prior research covers mainly developed countries, there is an increased interest for development of the profession and for understanding how the competence and skills are constructed and reproduced in other contexts such as Eastern Europe (Cooper & Robson, 2006). Emerging economies attract a lot of attention recently, being presented as investment opportunities. Accounting, accountability and governance play however a significant role in this process, and they remain varied and determined by local institutions, despite the efforts of internationalization and alignment to international practices.

International organizations such as IFAC (The International Federation of Accountants), ACCA (Association of Chartered Certified Accountants) or ICAEW (Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales) develop guidance and training based on a global model of the profession, which in many cases is driven by the developments in developed countries. On the other hand, in less developed economies the profession evolves under the influence of local but also global pressures. Factors such as the globalization, the process of convergence of accounting and of the actions of professional bodies, or the development of IT may lead to uniformity in the profession and to a common role or image of the accountant. On the other hand, the cultural (national) factor, the lack of social knowledge about the accountant's work, the differences in the accountant's work in different types of companies are factors leading to differences. All of these issues generate the interest in investigating the global-local dialectic in the accounting profession.

We employ an institutional approach in order to explore the recent evolutions in the Romanian accounting profession, and data from various sources (websites, press releases, prior research, personal experience, interviews, job offers) are mobilized to support the theoretical analysis. One of the main concepts from the institutional theory employed in accounting studies is isomorphism (James, 2009; Liguori & Steccolini, 2012) according to which in the search for legitimacy and efficiency, institutions tend to convergence as a result of various types of pressures. These pressures are called coercive, mimetic and normative isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The use of this approach helps us to understand the recent evolutions, to identify influencing factors and to explore future trends in the profession.

The context of this research is Romania, an ex-communist country, nowadays member of the European Union. Facing various pressures, from a resistance to change derived from the communist origins and the desire to become legitimate at national and international levels, professional bodies acted in order to survive and

to become recognized and shaped the evolution of the accounting profession. We find that national professional bodies were influenced in their actions mainly by coercive pressures, while in the profession we find coercive, mimetic and normative pressures, of various sources and intensities. We also find a split between bean counters bookkeepers (as exponents of the traditional image for accountants) and business professionals (as exponent of the new image), having different roles and competencies. We formulate three predictions about the future of the accounting profession in Romania, related to the differences in roles, to the diversification of competencies, and to the strategy of professional bodies.

The remaining of this paper is organized as follows. A literature review discusses the main issues investigated in the prior research on the accounting profession. The methodological approach, including data analysis and the theoretical framework follows. The institutional-based analysis of the Romanian context includes the evolution of professional bodies, the evolution of the profession and accountant's role and some trends for the future. Finally, the main conclusions, implications and future research are presented.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The creation of the accounting profession is considered to be mainly the result of closure, in order to assure protection from other professional groups (Velayutham & Rahman, 2000). By closure it is understood the process by which social groups seek to regulate the market in their favor and to restrict access (Idem: 693). Traditionally, the profession is understood using a functionalist approach (Velayutham & Perera, 1996: 447) as having the following features: (i) the work of professionals is characterized by techniques derived from a body of theory; (ii) the existence of a code of ethics and of the claim of working in the public interest; and (iii) there are standards of entry and work and an effective self-regulation process. However, more recently power approaches are used to understand the evolution of the accounting profession (Velayutham & Perera, 1996; Velayutham & Rahman, 2000) because there are interactions and competition to maintain identity and establish the domain of work. Under this conception, the professional work is analyzed as “a process of constructing and maintaining an occupational role” (Becker *et al.*, 1961 cited in Velayutham & Perera, 1996: 447).

The accounting professional bodies and the professionalization process are generally discussed in relation to the state as system of powers (Sikka & Willmott, 1995). The studies investigating the role of the state in the profession also focus on the inter- and intra-professional rivalries and political aspects (Yee, 2012), the state is being ‘close and indulgent’, ‘a dangerous foe or helpful friend’ (Idem: 429).

The strategy and actions of accounting professional bodies evolve in time, in line with the economic and political environment, but also given their maturity and strategic vision. For example, Velayutham and Rahman (2000) discuss three stages in the evolution of professional bodies in Australia and New Zealand: (i) formation – in which it was an attempt to gain professional authority and closure; (ii) proliferation – growth of the profession, in terms of membership but also competencies, and also segmentation; and (iii) consolidation – is about profession building, market differentiation, and increase in the level of professionalism.

Professional bodies are influenced in their evolution by local and global factors, such as the role of the state in economy, prior developments in the profession, the role and involvement of big auditing firms, the relationship with international organizations etc. Also, professional bodies react to the evolution of the role of accountants, since one of the roles of the profession is to set the common body of theory for the those working in the area and respond to the needs of their customers/clients (Velayutham & Rahman (2000) distinguish between the client (which is unable to evaluate the services of the professional) and the customer (which provides feedback and requirements)).

The evolution of the role and image of accountants is significantly impacted by the globalization of economies, IT developments, and changes in the business environment. Accountants' image and perceptions are important to be understood, because they attract people to the profession and because they define the profession in relationship to other professions. Some authors (Elliot & Jacobson, 2002) draw attention on the fact that the accounting profession may misfit the business environment, which may be seen as a danger leading to a marginal role of accountants in society.

The image of and transformations in the accounting profession were studied using various approaches and data methodologies. Friedman and Lyne (2001) and Carnegie and Napier (2010) use the publications (newspapers, books, magazines) in order to analyze the profession's image. Hunt *et al.* (2004) employ surveys on students in order to see how they perceive the accounting profession. On the other hand, Smith and Briggs (1999) and Dimnik and Felton (2006) analyze the accountants characters in movies, while Jeacle (2008) examines the Big 4 recruitment literature. From the literature review it results that the traditional view of the accountant is assimilated to the bean counter stereotype having both positive and negative aspects as well as implications on the accountant profession. However, based on the changes in the economic environment and the evolution of the roles of accountants, a new stereotype emerges, called by some the colorful accountant, or the business professional stereotype, also with positive and negative aspects and implications. Carnegie and Napier (2010) suggest that the new stereotype is mainly a construction of professional accounting bodies and big firms, mainly in order to recruit better students and people to the profession. This new

trend also led to the cliché “accounting is the language of business” (Jeacle, 2008: 1316) and to the addition of entrepreneurship to the ideals of the accounting profession (Carnegie & Napier, 2010).

In terms of analyzing and predicting changes in the profession, Krell (2011) suggests that the following factors should be taken into consideration: economic, environmental and geopolitical volatility, technological advancements and demographic shifts. While these are common issues all over the world, they will affect the profession differently in different countries. On the other hand, these pressures will affect the global accounting profession, which to various mechanisms will trigger change at the national level. This situation leads to a complex relationship and dialectic between the local and global models.

In the global – local dialectic an important role is played by the past evolutions and experiences of the profession. Cooper and Robson (2006: 416) state that professional bodies’ “histories, allegiances and struggles” influence the activity and expertise of the profession. In countries where big financial and economic scandals have emerged, accountants were negatively portrayed by the press (Carnegie & Napier, 2010), but in other countries, especially in those less exposed to scandals, accountants might not be considered to play a negative role. Also, in Anglo-Saxon countries, the accounting profession enjoys a longer tradition than in countries in other regions/with other cultures, and therefore it is expected to have a different image. The current transformations represent the background for future evolutions, since the factors triggering change in the profession will intervene on the existing situation.

Research on the Romanian accounting profession is still incipient, at least in terms of analyzing the institutional context, the strategies employed or the sites of professionalization. Prior research describes the history of the profession, mainly following a longitudinal approach and covering the pre-communist, communist and post-communist period (Albu *et al.*, 2011b; Bunget *et al.*, 2009; Tiron-Tudor & Muțiu, 2007). Zelinschi (2009) follows a more in-depth approach and focuses on the project of the first professional body’s creation in 1921. He investigates legitimacy and expertise issues, as well as the institutional arrangements during that period of time. These issues are of interest for developing an understanding of the evolution of the accounting profession, since intra- and inter-professional conflicts and the social development shape the practices and create the context in which accountants work (Caramanis, 2005).

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Various approaches are employed to investigate the changes in the accounting profession and the evolution of professional bodies, ranging from a functionalist to

interactionist and critical approaches (Velayutham & Rahman, 2000). The professionalization process has become very complex in the current economic context and the concepts of power and actors are very important in investigating the transformations (Yee, 2012).

The new institutionalism focuses on change as result of external and social influences (Liguori & Steccolini, 2012) and therefore is a useful framework for analyzing change and it was widely used in accounting studies. One of the key concepts in the institutional theory is isomorphism, representing the accounting change and convergence under the influence of various pressures. The types of isomorphism are especially useful in analyzing the evolution of the accounting profession in a globalizing economy because they focus on how change will result in convergence (Lounsbury, 2008). DiMaggio and Powell (1983) proposed three types of isomorphism in order to synthesize the forces leading to convergence of practices and actions. This framework was used in prior research in analyzing the implementation of IFRS in specific countries or in analyzing the changes in accounting models (such as Irvine, 2008; Judge *et al.*, 2010; Barbu *et al.*, 2012).

The types of isomorphism identified by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) are the following: coercive, mimetic and normative. The coercive isomorphism results from requirements, laws and other coercive mechanisms, being derived from resource dependency and the need for legitimacy. The mimetic isomorphism refers to the tendency to imitate those who are perceived to be more successful and legitimate. The third form of isomorphism is the normative one, resulting from professionalization.

We apply these forms of isomorphism to discuss the evolutions in the profession, using the setting of Romania. Romania is a former communist country, nowadays a member of the European Union. Therefore, there has been a significant change after the fall of communism in 1989 and until nowadays, and the orientation towards international-accepted practices is still undergoing. In analyzing the evolution of the profession we will focus on the isomorphic pressures described above, but also on the features of the various stages in the evolution of professional bodies as presented by Velayutham and Rahman (2000).

As in other studies conducted on the evolution of the accounting professional bodies, multiples sources of data are used: professional bodies' websites and press releases, prior research, personal experience, job offers analysis and interviews. The interviews were conducted with accounting professionals (10 interviews were conducted in 2011 and 2012) and with accountants and representatives of Romanian accounting bodies. Also, a job offers analysis was performed (50 job offers randomly selected for accounting positions).

3. AN INSTITUTIONAL-BASED ANALYSIS

3.1 The evolution of professional bodies

During communism, accounting was reduced in Romania to simple bookkeeping. Therefore, this is the background of the Romanian accounting profession and the starting point for adapting to the needs of a market economy. The way the profession is organized and the respective bodies' strategy impact on the accounting profession's change. Immediately after the fall of communism, the profession (The Body of Expert and Licensed Accountants of Romania (Corpul Experților Contabili și Contabililor Autorizați din România - CECCAR)) was recreated in 1992. In 1999, at the request of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (King *et al.*, 2001), the Chamber of Financial Auditors of Romania (Camera Auditorilor Financiari din România – CAFR) was created. Both professional bodies are nowadays IFAC members. They also have a good relationship with international accounting bodies. For example, the ACCA has a good position in Romania, as in other developing countries (Nobes & Parker, 2008). However, more recently ICAEW and CIMA try to enter the Romanian market and established partnerships with both CECCAR and CAFR.

In order to analyze the mechanisms of change, the pressures to change have to be understood. The profession was affected in Romania by various types of pressures conducting to change, including political pressure in terms of conflicting interests, competition for clients, and social pressure in terms of rules and values. Applying the types of isomorphism to the evolution of professional bodies, it might be noticed that global institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund exerted a coercive pressure to create a new professional body. On the other hand, the desire to become internationally recognized and to be considered as legitimate led to mimetism in terms of organization, aims and policies in order to become an IFAC member and to be involved at international level in partnerships with other professional bodies. IFAC is the global organization for the accountancy profession and includes today 164 members and associates from 125 countries. IFAC elaborates standards on ethics, audit and assurance, standards for public sector and also guidance for the profession. In order to become and remain IFAC members, the professional bodies adopted the international standards, which generated changes in the profession and an alignment towards the international trends. This membership creates legitimacy, but also an external dependency as a pressure for change.

The Romanian professional bodies promote on their websites and magazines the partnerships and activities of international relevance. Also, the high-level representatives of international bodies at the professional bodies' congresses (such as IFAC's president etc.) indicate their connection to the international environment. The interviews with CECCAR representatives also reveal their involvement in the

international activity, with feedback for projects, the membership in various working groups, and a good international reputation. However, for the members there is a rupture between this international image and the everyday problems. CECCAR is a big professional body, with approximately 60,000 members and students. It appears that the strategy was to attract and accept more and more members in the profession in order to assure the stability and the force of the profession. On the other hand, in the profession there are many accountants trained during communism. Interviews reveal that because of this huge size and also of various interests of those involved in management (especially differences between central/local management) there are difficulties in applying a standard and high-quality continuous education programs and exams. In this case the social pressures in terms of historical continuity, rules and values are obvious and actually act against significant change in the profession. Therefore, these issues and various interests generated in fact an inability to provide to the profession the optimum institutional context for normative isomorphism.

On the other hand, the legitimating strategy of CAFR consisted in the first years in a difficult access to the profession, justifying its legitimacy through a superiority aura. However, there were some breaches, and the requirements were considered in some cases removed from practice and international requirements, and this policy changed in time.

The relationships with international bodies such as ACCA, ICAEW and to a smaller extent CIMA are less considered as competition, but as means of international legitimacy. Therefore, there was a reduced level of mimetic actions in terms of aligning the national practices (in terms of accession, curriculum etc.) to those of international bodies. Also, while international bodies have a visible implication in wider accounting issues such as corporate governance and sustainability, the national bodies do not show similar interests (Albu *et al.*, 2011d). However, these developments extend the role and competencies of accountants. For example, IFAC issued in 2009 the IFAC Sustainability Framework and developed The Prince's Accounting for Sustainability (A4S) Project, which is dedicated to develop practical guidance and tools for embedding sustainability into decision-making and reporting processes, the aim being "to create a globally accepted framework for accounting for sustainability that brings together financial, environmental, social and governance information in a clear, concise, consistent, and comparable format." (IFAC cited in Albu *et al.*, 2011d). Global accounting professional bodies (such as ACCA and ICAEW) devoted significant resources to bringing into attention the implications of corporate governance and responsibility on the accounting profession.

3.2 The current image of the profession

There are a few studies analyzing the role and image of accountants in the Romanian context. Albu and Albu (2009) suggest that accountants are usually

viewed as “bean counters”, but roles such as information provider, decision supporter, analysis, and consultant are present also in the Romanian environment. Albu *et al.* (2011d) find that the Romanian accountant is more preoccupied with the core areas of the profession, such as reporting, legal compliance and performance measurement and less with new roles such as sustainability and governance.

Albu (2012) employs interviews with managers in order to analyze the accountant’s image and roles. The results suggest that for small entities the image is associated with the bean counter and the role is to ensure the legal compliance, for following reasons: the complexity of regulations, the lack of accounting competencies at the management level, the relationship with taxation. However, there are few suggestions that the accountant has positive attributes, such as trustfulness and correctness. On the other hand, for multinationals and larger entities the accountant might play a more complex role and can enjoy a position of consultant, analyst and business partner. Therefore we might conclude that there are variations between entities in terms of the roles and image of accountants.

The representatives of the professional bodies tend to support a change away from the traditional image of the accountant which is related to numbers use, conservative behavior and routine (Albu & Albu, 2009).

There has been claimed that the professional bodies contributed to the changes in the profession. In the CECCAR’s case, the alignment to international standards and rules is an indicator of the fact that “the competency was hidden behind a desk” and the professional body “took it into the world and opened new horizons” (Curierul Național, 2012). However, using the isomorphic pressures, we argue that there was a reduced level of coercive pressure, a moderate level of mimetic isomorphism and also a moderate orientation towards normative isomorphism from the CECCAR’s part.

Accountants are required to follow some educational schemes to enter and remain in the profession (CECCAR, 2013). A part of this training is aligned to international standards, at least in what concerns IFRS, auditing and ethics standards. But there are not powerful coercive mechanisms in place in order to assure full adhesion to these requirements. Also, those entering the profession expect training for immediate practice and not for future developments in their career (Bunea *et al.*, 2013).

Also, being a big professional body and the members work in various domains, there is a moderate place for mimetic isomorphism, and this occurs only in groups based on similar backgrounds. Given the wide expectations from the business environment, it is difficult for the profession to provide the appropriate training for all situations. For example, many accountants working in SMEs do not understand why they have to study IFRSs, while their issues are in taxation and law. On the

other hand, for accountants working in multinationals there is a higher need for IFRS training, as results from the interviews conducted. On a general note, the chartered accountant trainees perceive that they have a good level of competencies in accounting, taxation and IT, and a modest one in international accounting, corporate governance, financial market and management (Bunea *et al.*, 2013). Despite this variety in the profession conducting to difficulties in creating the background for normative isomorphism, CECCAR was dedicated in the last years to issue guidelines for various domains, guidance for accounting regulations etc.

The case of CAFR seems to be to some extent different, because the profession seems to be more homogeneous. Based on an analysis of the news posted on the website (CAFR, 2013) it seems that CAFR organize activities (working groups, training) in partnership with Big 4 or other auditing firms. While it seems to be a difference between Big 4 and non-Big 4 auditors, those working in Big 4 being perceived to be more independent and more competent (Albu *et al.*, 2011a), these activities creates the environment for mimetic and normative isomorphism. For example, a working group composed of 12 members of the largest auditors in Romania (including also Big 4 and other international firms) analyzes the auditing issues and generates interpretations for the members.

Besides the actions of national bodies, international bodies, especially ACCA which is the most present in Romania, are acting as pressures for changes in the profession. Holding the ACCA certification is an indication of an excellent training. Analyzing 50 job offers for 2012 for accounting jobs, less than half require the person to be a member of the profession, while 10% require international qualifications (ACCA, ICEW, CIMA). These qualifications are usually required by multinationals and for top positions. For example, for the head of accounting and finance position in a multinational is required an ACCA or CIMA qualification, and some of the responsibilities are: “to manage the planning and reporting activities, to ensure the robust control environment and risk management, to develop and implement policies and procedures, to promote the right culture”. Therefore, the accountant acting as a business analyst and not as a bookkeeper needs international qualifications and training.

4. EVOLUTIONS AND TRENDS

Exploring emerging trends in the profession is not an easy task. In conducting a global review, IFAC (2011) concludes that the trends at the international level are: dramatic but differential effects of globalization, transformations in the accounting and finance function in terms of internal value added and organizational involvement, creation of multidisciplinary practices and removal of the label accounting from job titles, departments, or professional associations, and the development of a global profession. In forecasting the future role of management

accountants, Krell (2011) looks at the developments in some areas such as risk management, financial and performance management, and human capital management.

The analysis of the Romanian context using an institutional approach focused on pressures for change and legitimacy quests represents a good starting point for exploring some trends in the accounting profession. Analyzing the evolution based on the phases described by Velayutham and Rahman (2000) we suggest that in the CECCAR's case the formation phase is more observable, because in the first years after 1992 the main activities were related to bookkeeping. Later, the Body developed a code of ethics and a professional culture, and during the proliferation phase many people were attracted to the profession. The segmentation of the profession resulted in the creation of a new body. If in the literature the segmentation is considered as a normal step in the general evolution of professions and based on task and status (Velayutham & Rahman, 2000), the creation of the new body did not remain without criticism in the Romanian context. Bunget *et al.* (2009) suggest that members of the accounting profession found themselves forced to be dissipated across and to subscribe to various professional organizations (since the segmentation involved not only the creation of CAFR, but also organizations for valuers, tax controllers etc.). We might assume that both CECCAR and CAFR undertook the main steps in the proliferation phase and are about to start the consolidation phase.

As Velayutham and Rahman (2000) point out, consolidation is the most important phase in developing the accounting profession and it involves adopting strategies to respond to the needs of the market. Current pressures from the profession come from the business' expectations in terms of services (Velayutham & Rahman, 2000; Carnegie & Napier, 2010; Albu *et al.*, 2011c), but also from the inter- and intra- professional competition (Caramanis, 2005; Velayutham & Rahman, 2000; Lander *et al.*, 2012). Velayutham and Rahman (2000) suggest that segmentation based on status and driven by market, strategic marketing, raising the membership requirements in terms of competencies are the current strategies of professional bodies at the international level. In the context of Romania, Bunget *et al.* (2009) take a critical approach towards the level of competencies held by the members of the profession. In this context, several predictions might be proposed for the future evolution of the Romanian accounting profession.

A first prediction is that the Romanian accounting profession will remain for some time with differential roles and image. These are derived from the pressures and expectations outside the profession. As long as for SMEs the legal and tax compliance will be the main expectation, accountants focused on numbers, compliance, rules, mainly bean counters, will have to fulfill these expectations. On the other hand, larger entities, with various activities and risk exposures, will expect more complex activities and roles from accountants. The job offer analysis

and the interviews confirm that this is the current situation and analyzing the societal pressures, we contend that this trend will continue. These expectations from the business environment act for the profession as coercive pressures, and mimetism in these subgroups leads to maintaining this division. Also, professional bodies and universities provide training in both directions, creating therefore the environment for the normative isomorphism. Future research should address this dual role of accountants, and especially to analyze the presence or lack of a continuum between these two images.

A second prediction relates to the development of non-accounting competencies (such as finance, management, communication, sociology) for those working in the accounting domain. These competencies are required by the changes in the business environment. This multidisciplinary leads to two possible consequences. The first consequence is the development of the profession in line with these requirements, while the other means to bring people with a different background in the profession. The future might also prove that both of these happen. It is obvious that more and more complex and diverse competencies are expected from accountants. This leads to hybridization, between different types of accounting positions or between accounting and non-accounting positions (Albu *et al.*, 2011c). The analysis of job offers reveals for some positions specific non-accounting competencies, such as mathematical and statistical skills, a good understanding of the hedging mechanisms and instruments, or proficiency in less common foreign languages (such as Dutch, Czech, Polish etc.). This variety of expected competencies, in accounting but also outside accounting, requires a huge adaption and learning ability from accountants. Otherwise, people from outside the profession will fulfill the new accountant's functions. Lander *et al.* (2012) illustrate how accounting firms hire people without an accounting background because they can easily fulfill the requirements of communication, brainstorming, and service development. Therefore, the universities, professional bodies, but also students and later accountants bear the obligation to develop multiple competencies and a higher capacity of adaptability.

A third prediction is that professional bodies have to consider themselves at some point in competition with international bodies in order to gain more prestige in the national market. Currently the relationship between national and international bodies is one of cooperation, which does not lead to significant mimetic or normative isomorphism. In order to prepare accountants for various types of organizations and expectations, the national bodies should provide more exigent standards, at least for a part of the profession. Therefore, developing various types of qualifications might meet this requirement. This would be an example of mimetic isomorphism and would imply imitating the model of international bodies in developing various qualifications, with various types of requirements and competencies. Without this development, there will continue to be a schism between the profession oriented towards the local environment and holding

national qualifications, and professional working at the international level or in large firms and multinationals, holding international qualifications. More than that, there will be no bridge between these two worlds, which would make very difficult for professionals to switch from one to another.

CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper was concerned with the identification and analysis of the factors influencing the evolution of the accounting profession in order to explore some emerging trends. The evolution of the profession is of interest for its members, professional bodies and society (Carnegie & Napier, 2010; Lander *et al.*, 2012). Using the case of Romania as context for the study, we illustrate how a national profession aligned to the main international requirements, but also remaining connected to local features in many cases. Therefore, using the Romanian accounting profession as a field study, this paper complement prior research (Albu, 2012; Albu & Albu, 2009; Albu *et al.*, 2011c; Bunea *et al.*, 2013; Bunget *et al.*, 2009; Tiron-Tudor & Muțiu, 2007; Zelinschi, 2009) by exploring the global – local dialectic.

We described the evolution of the national professional bodies and their quest for legitimacy. Through their actions, the professional bodies set the framework in which the profession evolves and develops. We suggest that professional bodies aligned to the requirement of international organizations in order to be recognized and considered legitimate. They use this legitimacy also in order to strengthen the position on the local market. However, they did not totally imitate the international models. Therefore, the normative background for the profession remains limited mainly to the legal requirements for compliance.

Data collected from the local environment suggest the existence of various types of accountants, including bean counters (the traditional accountant) and business analysts (the new type of accountant). These accountants work in different types of entities, play different roles, exhibit different competencies and probably qualifications. There is an increased accent on international qualifications for top accounting positions in large entities or multinationals. This schism is the result of the various pressures to which the professionals are exposed.

Based on the factors identified, we predict that the Romanian accounting profession will remain for some time with differential roles and image. Also, we discuss the implications of the diversification in the expected competencies: the profession might adjust and develop different competencies, or non-accountants may fill in their positions. Also, we argue that national professional bodies should consider themselves in competition with the international ones, in order to result mimetic and normative isomorphism which would be of benefit for the local profession.

This research has implications for the literature on the accounting profession, but also for professional bodies and academia. The professional bodies and academia should understand and support the changes in the profession and should play a significant role in its future evolution. Future research is needed in order to understand the source of variation for the factors influencing the profession, the reactions in the profession and the implications for education. Also, since the concept of isomorphism has its limits (Lounsbury, 2008; Liguori & Steccolini, 2012), other frameworks might be useful to shedding different lights and to uncovering other perspectives in the evolution of the accounting profession.

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