

The Influence of Government Priorities on Public-Administration Reforms in Europe¹

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Abstract³

The article assesses how and the extent to which political or policy priorities of European governments condition reform processes and their results in times of crisis. This research is based on desk research and statistical analysis of the 2013 EUPAN survey data on public-administration reform initiatives in Europe. The article finds that the place of public-administration reforms on the governmental agenda partially explains the process of public-administration reforms, but it cannot account for the variation in the (perceived) reform results. Also, the results of this research confirm that EU-13 and (potential) candidate countries face more difficulties in reform implementation due to a combination of comprehensive reform strategies and weak administrative capacities. If the quantitative analysis was able to uncover some broad trends common to European public administrations, more qualitative approaches (causal process-tracing and case studies) are needed to capture specific contexts and changing processes in different European public administrations on which delivery progress is inevitably contingent. In order to explain why some windows of opportunities are seized while others are missed during the process of public-administration reforms, it is important to undertake process-tracing in within-case and between-case analysis and focus on causal configurations in the study of particular reform cases.

Key words: government priorities, public-administration reforms, policy implementation.

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1. Introduction

The recent financial and economic crisis has pressed many European governments to undertake reforms in order to make European public administrations more efficient and meet citizens' expectations (OECD 2010; Kickert et al. 2013). As a result, public-administration reforms have gained increased attention on the agendas of European governments which prioritised some reform issues for policy action. One of the reform instruments that was used to drive reform implementation from the centres of government were the political or policy priorities of these governments.

At the government level, political priorities can be set in government programmes. For instance, governance based on transparency, responsibility and honesty was one of the reform priorities of the 2013–2016 Romanian government. Public administration can become a policy priority as part of fiscal-consolidation programmes (e.g. in Cyprus). Moreover, governments can set public-administration priorities in specific reform plans. The Public Service Reform Plan in Ireland and the Civil Service Reform Plan in the UK provide examples of such documents. Finally, many governments from Eastern European and Western Balkan countries developed comprehensive strategies for public-administration reforms (EUPAN 2013).

Despite the proliferation of various types of priorities in times of crisis, little attention has been paid as to how they can affect the design of reforms and their execution. It is interesting to explore how political attention translates into specific reform decisions and their delivery. Also, since implementation studies have more frequently focused on Western European countries (e.g. Bovens et al. 2001), it is important to undertake a broader comparative analysis of reform implementation, including Eastern European and Western Balkan countries, where many reforms were carried out in the last two decades (e.g. Bouckaert et al. 2011) in the scope of analysis. Despite the recent reviews of New Public Management reforms in the post-communist region that analysed the influence of capacities and context on these reforms (Dan and Pollitt 2014) implemented in the 2004–2013 period, it is pertinent to consider new trends in the process of reform formulation and implementation.

Previous research on public-administration changes has largely relied on single-country or few-country studies, but more comparative studies have been recently undertaken as part of COCOPS⁴ and other large-scale projects. The design of this research is based on a broad analysis of many European countries, which will be followed by a more in-depth assessment of one specific country (Lithuania) in the

4 The “Coordinating for Cohesion in the Public Sector of the Future” project of the EU Seventh Framework programme (<http://www.cocops.eu>).

future.⁵ Whereas larger-N studies permit the application of statistical methods in explaining variation on the dependent variable, single-country studies can provide a more specific and contextual understanding of policy changes.

This research focuses on the influence of government priorities on recent public-administration reforms in Europe. It follows the rational approach (Aberbach and Christensen 2014) and measures systematic relationships between important reform drivers. This research is based on desk research and statistical analysis of a web-based survey of the European Public Administration Network (EUPAN) participants from the EU member states and other European countries (the European Free Trade Agreement (EFTA) countries, candidate countries and potential candidates from the Western Balkan countries) (N = 35).

The article finds that the place of public-administration reforms on the governmental agenda only partially explains the process of public-administration reforms (especially their scope and implementation certainty), but it cannot account for the variation in their (perceived) results. Statistical analysis allows accounting for how and to what extent government priorities condition public-administration reforms. Since this approach cannot reveal how certain contextual changes facilitate or constrain priority delivery, it is also useful to undertake more qualitative studies examining the execution of the most pressing government issues in particular European countries.

This article is divided into several sections. After the introduction, the second section elaborates a theoretical framework and sets hypotheses for the study of government priorities. This section also outlines the research methodology. The third section of the article presents the main findings of the statistical analysis of the EUPAN survey data. Finally, the article concludes by summarising its main results and presenting some theoretical implications for future research.

2. Theory and hypotheses

Overall framework for analysis

Different theoretical approaches can be employed in order to describe and explain reform implementation. If rational approaches to decision-making assume that policy actors follow clear goals and have a good knowledge of implementation processes, garbage-can approaches emphasise goal ambiguity and fluid participation in decision-making (Aberbach and Christensen 2014). Whereas according to the former approaches policy changes should be determined by initial policy designs and their corrections made during the execution process, from the perspective of the

5 This assessment is part of the research project “Performance Priorities of the Lithuanian Government: Implementation Process and Results” carried out by the Institute of International Relations and Political Science, Vilnius University.

latter approaches an *ad-hoc* and unpredictable coupling of problems and solutions should decide the course of reform delivery. In this article, we follow the rational approach by examining systematic relationships between key reform drivers while recognising its limitations in the study of reform implementation (see discussion and conclusions below).

In order to assess the influence of government priorities on public-administration reforms, we first identified important contextual factors affecting the relation between our independent and dependent variables. Based on desk research the following three factors appear to be salient to recent public-administration reforms. First, the EU's leverage is a key driver of these reforms, especially in Eastern European countries and (potential) candidate countries (e.g. Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005). Second, policy reforms frequently emerge in response to crisis (Williamson 1994). Previous research revealed that the worse the financial and economic situation was in a particular country, the more ambitious reforms were undertaken (Kickert et al. 2013, 60). Third, election cycles and changes of governments are affecting reforms through appropriate electoral mandates and government policies (Tompson 2009). It was found that electoral pledges dealing with more salient issues are more likely to be fulfilled with less delay in Poland (Zubek and Klüver 2013).

As public-policy decisions political priorities are set during the process of information-processing that involves collecting, assembling, interpreting and prioritising signals from the policy-making environment (Jones and Baumgartner 2012). This process can be informed by commitments of EU membership, electoral pledges or monitoring the state of the economy during the crisis period. In the European governments whose agendas are dominated by the EU, prioritisation can be more strongly influenced by exogenous pressures, whereas endogenous factors (the economic situation, electoral outcomes or elite beliefs) can play a more important role in other countries. Also, any reform design is the outcome of elite decision-making, whereby elite perceptions of what reforms are desirable are combined with their perceived feasibility (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011, 33).

Research hypotheses

Public-administration reforms can be pursued through political or policy priorities in a few ways. First, in terms of focus they prioritise the most salient policy issues, whose implementation may bring more significant policy changes. Second, in terms of scope political priorities can target system-wide changes that are supposed to bring benefits to the whole public-administration system across different levels of government. Third, the announcement of political priorities can mobilise various resources in the public-policy process, increasing execution certainty and, in turn, contributing to better results.

A standard approach to political priorities would assume that the more salient a policy issue is on the political agenda, the higher is the chance of it being

delivered. However, some research results raised some doubts about this relation. Major non-incremental reforms were found to be vulnerable at every policy stage from conception to implementation (Aberbach and Christensen 2014). According to Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011), there are many gaps that stand between the announcement of a reform policy and the successful delivery of that policy. Governments may face different types of obstacles in carrying through their reforms, which can account for the variation in the achieved results.

Therefore, it is hypothesised that:

H1: Because of their focus, comprehensiveness and execution certainty, political priorities can generate more significant, system-wide and ongoing changes, but these priorities may not necessarily produce better reform results because of various implementation obstacles.

It is expected that setting government priorities can generate more significant changes (as opposed to less salient changes) in public administration, can influence the whole public-administration system (as opposed to a few public-sector organisations) and make the execution of certain decisions more foreseen (as opposed to more uncertain). However, we predict that the level of priority should not explain variation in the reform results in terms of substantive (e.g. efficiency of public administration, quality of services or effectiveness of public policies and programmes) or process-related changes (e.g. coordination of policies and government organisations or transparency and openness of public administration). These reform results are more likely to be influenced by various challenges to their delivery.

Furthermore, political economy studies argued that reform design matters (Williamson 1994; Tompson 2009). More specifically, a higher scale of change brings more complexity and adds risks to policy implementation (Pollitt 2009). On the other hand, governmental capabilities determine governments' ability to make strategic policy choices and deliver policy results (Weaver and Rockman 1993, 9).

As a result, we hypothesise that:

H2: More wide-ranging reforms are likely to face greater implementation challenges in European countries with weaker administrative capacities.

The EU-13, candidate countries and potential candidates tend to pursue more wide-ranging public-administration reforms. In response to the exigencies of EU membership or EU funding these countries frequently design large-scale public administration strategies that "bundle" various reform initiatives. Examples of such strategies that are perceived to be major public-administration reforms are the Strategy for Public Administration Reform in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina or Kosovo, the Public Governance Improvement Programme in Lithuania, the Public

Administration Development (*Magyary*) Programme in Hungary, the Smart Administration Strategy in the Czech Republic or the Effective, Reliable and Open Public Administration Programme in Slovakia (EUPAN 2013).

On the other hand, reforms in Eastern Europe were characterised by insufficient implementation capabilities (e.g. Dunn et al. 2006; Neshkova and Kostadinova 2012; Dan and Pollitt 2014) at the level of individuals, organisations and systems. Therefore, we predict that the EU-13 and (potential) candidate countries that embraced more wide-ranging reforms in the form of long-term strategies but have weaker implementation capacities are more likely to suffer from difficulties in the process of reform delivery compared to the EU-15 and EFTA countries.

Methodology and data

The 2013 EUPAN survey was commissioned by the Lithuanian Presidency of the EU Council⁶ in order to identify recent public-administration trends in the EU Member States and other European countries. The response rate of 92 % was reached with 35 respondents (out of 38 invited respondents) completing a survey questionnaire. All the EU member states (except the UK), Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), Iceland, Kosovo, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland and Turkey were represented in the EUPAN survey.

These countries were grouped into:

- two main types of countries: (1) EU-15 and EFTA countries (Iceland⁷, Norway and Switzerland) and (2) EU-13, candidate countries and potential candidates from Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, FYROM, Kosovo, Serbia and Turkey);
- four sets of geographical regions: (1) Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden) and Ireland; (2) countries of Continental Europe (Austria, Belgium, Germany, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Switzerland); (3) countries of Southern Europe (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, FYROM, Greece, Italy, Kosovo, Malta, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Spain, Turkey) and countries of Eastern Europe (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia).

In this survey we defined public-administration reforms as deliberate changes to the structures and processes of public-sector organisations with the objective of getting them to run better (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011). The main independent variables employed in statistical analysis are the importance of public administration on the governmental agenda (“How important is public administration cur-

6 The Lithuanian Ministry of the Interior in cooperation with the Government Office of Lithuania.

7 Although Iceland is also officially treated as a candidate country whose accession negotiations started in 2010 and were put on hold in 2013, it was assigned to the group of the EFTA countries in this research.

rently in your central government policy?”) and that of reform obstacles (“Which of the following obstacles have been most important during the implementation of public-administration reforms in your country over the past six years?”).

The main dependant variables in this analysis were the characteristics of reform processes (how much these changes are significant, influencing the whole public-administration system and foreseen by national decision-makers) and their outcomes (to what extent public administration reforms influenced the efficiency of public administration, the quality of public services, the effectiveness of public policies and programmes, the coordination of policies and government organisations, the transparency and openness of public administration).

Finally, in order to control for the effect of the identified contextual factors (the EU, the crisis and election time), we tested a few other variables related to the influence of the EU (the importance of new policies and initiatives from the EU institutions), the crisis (the severity and dynamics of the financial crisis) and the electoral time (based on information on the last parliamentary elections in Europe).

Since the survey measured subjective perceptions of the EUPAN representatives (Directors General or their colleagues), it was important to control for any response bias. Since personal involvement of the EUPAN members (measured under the control question “How much have you been personally involved in the design and execution of public-administration reforms in your country in the period 2008–2013?”) was statistically significantly related to general improvements in public administration (the question concerning how public administration works in a particular country), this response was judged to be biased and, as a result, excluded from our analysis.

Therefore, we focused on more specific indicators of independent and dependent variables in order to reduce the likelihood of common-source bias when information on these variables is gathered from the same survey (Meier and O’Toole 2012). Since some managers can be inclined to report a rather positive image of their administrations, it is possible that some survey answers were still biased. Additional assessments based on other sources of data would be useful for verifying such subjective findings, but it is difficult to find comparable evidence on a large comparative scale at the system level. For instance, although the large-scale survey of senior executives on public-sector reforms in Europe was recently carried out in 16 European countries under the COCOPS project (Hammerschmid et al. 2013), its findings refer to the organisation level and do not measure the impact of government priorities on public-sector organisations.

Various tests of descriptive and inferential statistics were applied while analysing the survey data. In order to assess the strength of association between cause and effect, we used the test of Chi square (when both dependent and independent variables were categorical), that of ANOVA (when the dependent variable was continuous), as well as Kendall’s tau_b (nominal by ordinal) and Cramer’s V (nominal

by nominal) coefficients. Due to a limited number of observations (N = 35) it was not possible to apply more advanced methods of statistical analysis in this research. A level of significance was set at 0.05 for all statistical tests (unless indicated otherwise), which were performed using SPSS 19.

3. Quantitative analysis of public-administration reforms in Europe

This section of the article provides the main results of the quantitative analysis on public-administration reforms in European public administrations based on the EUPAN survey.

Results of descriptive statistics

Public administration was perceived to be the top government priority in 20.6% of the European countries whose representatives participated in the EUPAN survey. It represented one of a few top government priorities in 58.8% of these countries, and it was only important (with their governments giving priority to other policy areas) in 41.2% of them. No EUPAN representative suggested that public administration was not an important priority of its government policy in 2013. Public administration was more frequently (30.8%) the top issue of government policy in those European countries where parliamentary elections were held more recently (in 2012–2013 compared to 2008–2011), which indicates the political origin of these priorities.

Table 1

Importance of public administration in government policy according to types of European countries (%)

	EU-15 and EFTA countries	EU-13, candidate countries and potential candidates	Total
Top government priority	6.3	33.3	20.6
One of a few top government priorities	50.0	27.8	38.2
Important but the government gives priority to other policy areas	43.8	38.9	41.2
Not important	0	0	0
Total (N = 34)	100	100	100

Source: analysis of the EUPAN data, 2013.

All respondents who argued that public administration was a top priority represented Southern European countries. Most of them are EU-13 or candidate coun-

tries (see Table 1 above) whose performance is monitored by the European Commission as part of the post-accession monitoring exercise (in Bulgaria or Romania) or EU accession requirements (in the candidate countries). This finding illustrates the salience of EU accession conditionality to the design of public-administration reforms in this country group.

According to the EUPAN data, European public administrations faced a number of difficulties in the delivery of public-administration reforms. Insufficient coordination of different reform initiatives and insufficient financial resources were perceived to be the biggest obstacles to the execution process (40 % of all respondents agreed with these statements, see Table 2 below). Those European public administrations whose reform was placed at the top of government policy suffered somewhat less from the problem of coordination compared to other countries (but there was no significant difference).

Table 2
The main obstacles to public-administration reforms in European public administrations, %

	EU-15 and EFTA countries	EU-13, (potential) candidate countries	Total
Lack of coordination of various reform initiatives	23.5	55.6	40.0
Lack of financial resources to reform implementation	23.5	55.6	40.0
Insufficient cooperation among the institutions responsible for public-administration reforms and other government organisations	29.4	38.9	34.3
Uncertain and quickly changing economic situation	35.3	27.8	31.4
Changes of government during reform implementation	23.5	38.9	31.4
Lack of political leadership to support reform implementation	29.4	27.8	28.6
Resistance from interest groups and various stakeholders (trade unions, employees, etc.)	17.6	38.9	28.6
Insufficient administrative capacity to implement public-administration reforms	11.8	44.4	28.6
Insufficient motivation of public servants to implement reforms	11.8	27.8	20.0

Source: analysis of the EUPAN survey data, N = 35.

Results of inferential statistics

We first tested correlations between the importance of public administration on governments’ agendas and the contextual variables (the crisis, election time and the EU’s influence) identified in the previous section. Only the influence of the EU had a medium strong but statistically significant relation to the level of priority (see Table 3 below). Government priorities were more important in those European public administrations that were more affected by various EU policies and initiatives related to public administration (such as better regulation programmes, e-government action plans, activities of the EUPAN network, EU support to administrative capacity-building or EU accession/membership requirements). A total of 71.4% of survey respondents who indicated that public administration was a top government priority strongly agreed on the importance of various EU policy actions in their countries.

Table 3

Output of the correlations between the importance of public administration on governments’ agendas and the contextual factors

			CRISI	ELECT	EUINF
Kendall's tau_b	PRIOR	Correlation Coefficient	-.011	.228	.473**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.945	.136	.002
		N	34	34	34

Source: analysis of the EUPAN survey data.

Note: ** correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

In addition, a one-way analysis of variance revealed statistically significant relations between the geographical groups of European countries and the place of public administration on their governmental agendas (ANOVA, $F = 7.186$, $p = 0.001$). The post-hoc test of Tukey HSD further suggested that the most significant differences in terms of public-administration salience were between Southern and Eastern European countries (mean difference = 1.107, $p = 0.002$) and Southern and Continental European countries (mean difference = 1.024, $p = 0.010$). This variation between these country groups points to substantial dissimilarities in the nature and status of government priorities in different country groups. Although both Southern (including both Western Balkan and Mediterranean countries) and Eastern European countries set out their priorities in comprehensive reform strategies and plans often in response to the requirements of EU accession or membership, the political salience of these documents was much lower in the latter group of countries.

We then tested correlations between the importance of public administration on the governmental agendas and reform results (changes and outcomes). The

outputs of the correlations between the locus of public administration and reform changes are provided in Table 4 below. First, there is no significant difference between the level of priority and the significance of reform changes. This means that the implementation of more important public-administration issues does bring more salient changes. Second, there is a weak statistically significant relation between the place of public administration on the governmental agenda and the extent to which public-administration reforms influence the whole public-administration system. Therefore, according to the survey data, more salient public-administration initiatives tend to produce more system-wide changes. Third, there is a medium strong but statistically significant relation between the level of priority and the extent to which reform changes are foreseen. Therefore, setting higher-level priorities tends to increase the certainty of reform-delivery efforts. The fact that the severity of the financial crisis was negatively correlated with the predictability of changes in European public administrations (Kendall's tau_b, $r(34) = -0.315$, $p = 0.038$) illustrates that certainty in the reform process can be attenuated by quickly changing economic circumstances.

Table 4
Output of the correlations between the importance of public administration on governments' agendas and reform changes

			SIGNI	SYSTE	FORES
Kendall's tau_b	PRIOR	Correlation coefficient	.222	.372*	.453**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.166	.016	.004
		N	33	34	33

Source: analysis of the EUPAN survey data.

Note: ** correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), * correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The outputs of the correlations between the importance of public administration on governments' agendas and reform outcomes on public administration are provided in Table 5 below. First, there are no significant differences between the level of priority and improved efficiency, quality or effectiveness. This means that the implementation of more salient public-administration issues does not produce better reform effects. Second, there is no significant difference between the place of public administration and the coordination of public policies and government organisations. This means that setting higher-level priorities does not bring positive coordination effects. Third, there is a weak statistically significant relation between the level of priority and the extent to which public-administration reforms affect transparency and openness of public administration. Therefore, more salient public-administration initiatives tend to add to administrative transparency and openness.

Table 5

Output of the correlations between the importance of public administration in government policies and reform outcomes

			EFFIC	QUALI	EFPEC	COORD	TRANS
Kendall's tau_b	PRIOR	Correlation Coefficient	.140	-.048	.031	-.003	.330*
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.401	.781	.856	.984	.040
		N	32	30	30	32	32

Source: analysis of the EUPAN survey data.

Note: * correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Finally, there are some statistically significant relations between the reform results and certain execution obstacles. For instance, variation in the level of efficiency is related to insufficient motivation of public servants to deliver reforms (Cramer's V, $r(33) = 0.539$, $p = 0.008$). Lack of financial resources to reform delivery constrains the achievement of several results: service quality (Cramer's V, $r(31) = 0.525$, $p = 0.036$), coordination of policies and government organisations (Cramer's V, $r(33) = 0.569$, $p = 0.014$) and transparency and openness of public administration (Cramer's V, $r(33) = 0.516$, $p = 0.032$). No execution obstacle explains the variation in the level of effectiveness of policies and government organisations.

Overall, *Hypothesis 1* has quite strong empirical support. In terms of reform scope and resources government priorities tend to bring more system-wide changes and increase the certainty of reform efforts. However, the level of priority has no influence on reform significance – most pressing government concerns are not focused enough or fail to produce important changes in practice. Also, there is evidence that the severity of the financial crisis and its dynamics make reform implementation more uncertain because of new policy concerns or shifting political attention on the governmental agenda. In terms of reform outcomes, as was expected, the level of priority is not related to positive reform effects (except for transparency and openness) – variation in the reform results is more related to some execution obstacles.

Furthermore, we tested statistical differences between the country groups in terms of public-administration reforms. New policies and initiatives from the EU institutions were found to be statistically more significant in the EU-13, candidate countries and potential candidates according to a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA, $F = 23.612$, $p = 0.000$). This confirms that the agenda of public-administration reform in this country group has strongly been dominated by the EU institutions for several recent years.

There was also some variation in the reform obstacles between these country groups. The EU-13 and other European countries aspiring to EU membership tended to suffer more from the problems of insufficient administrative capacities, lack of coordination and lack of financial resources in the implementation process (see Table 6 below). This could be imputed to a mismatch between the comprehensive reform strategies adopted by their governments on the one hand and the insufficient resources available for their execution on the other. It is not surprising that in the absence of sufficient administrative capacities the delivery of many reform initiatives “bundled” in comprehensive strategies or programmes does not produce better reform results – there are no significant differences between these country groups according to reform changes (significant, system-level and foreseen changes) or outcomes (efficiency, quality, effectiveness, coordination or transparency of public administration).

Table 6
Statistical variation between the country groups in terms of obstacles to reform implementation

Obstacles	Correlations (and p where significant)
Uncertain and quickly changing economic situation	-0.081
Changes of government during reform implementation	0.165
Lack of political leadership to support reform implementation	-0.018
Lack of coordination of various reform initiatives	0.327^ (0.053)
Insufficient cooperation among the institutions responsible for public administration reforms and other government organisations	0.100
Resistance from interest groups and various stakeholders (trade unions, employees, etc.)	0.235
Lack of financial resources to reform implementation	0.327^ (0.053)
Insufficient administrative capacity to implement public-administration reforms	0.362* (0.032)
Insufficient motivation of public servants to implement reforms	0.200

Source: analysis of the EUPAN survey data.

Note: differences between the country groups tested using Chi Square; N = 35; ^p < .10, *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Overall, there is some empirical evidence to support *Hypothesis 2* that more wide-ranging reforms meet greater implementation challenges in the countries with weaker administrative capacities. The EU-13, candidate countries and potential candidates, which pursue comprehensive reform policies, tend to face more execution constraints, especially those related to insufficient capacities to deliver reforms.

4. Discussion, conclusions and suggestions for future research

How one can interpret the results of our statistical analysis? As part of their design government priorities tend to be more system-wide in contrast to other reform initiatives. Therefore, it could be even more challenging to carry them through the entire system. This is especially true in the EU-13, candidate countries and potential candidates from the Western Balkans, where comprehensive reform policies are pursued with scarcer administrative and financial resources. As a result, according to our evidence such public-administration reforms neither produce more significant changes nor do they bring better results in these countries.

This is in line with previous research results which indicate significant gaps between the announcement of policy reforms and their delivery in specific areas of public administration or different sets of countries. For instance, SIGMA reports, which assessed the sustainability of civil-service reforms in the new EU member states of Eastern Europe after EU membership) and the professionalisation of the civil service in the Western Balkans, found that only a minority of these countries (namely the Baltic states) continued to invest in the professionalisation of the civil service (Meyer-Sahling 2009), whereas prospects of achieving sustainable civil-service professionalisation in the Western Balkans were low (Meyer-Sahling 2012). Although Macedonia was the first former-Yugoslav republic to adopt a comprehensive public-administration reform strategy in 1999, it was officially admitted that its implementation failed in 1999–2010 (Cierco 2013, 484). A substantial gap between the objectives of public-administration reforms and the real situation was also found in Slovenia (Kovač 2014, 11).

More generally, recent Europeanisation research revealed that the conditionality of EU membership is not very effective and the EU's political impacts in the new EU member states have been rather limited (e.g. Epstein and Jacoby 2014). For instance, the EU has been largely unsuccessful in fighting corruption in Romania and Bulgaria, despite the annual monitoring of these countries' performance by the European Commission and the possibility of sanctions because of other domestic priorities (Spendszharova and Vachudova 2012). Therefore, the fact that public-administration reforms are formally placed at the top of government policy as a result of the EU's leverage does not ensure their successful delivery because of more salient and competing political priorities. Therefore, public-administration reforms in Eastern Europe "need to be carefully assessed and adapted to the existing levels of administrative capacity and resources as well as to the broader political, administrative, financial and cultural context" (Dan and Pollitt 2014, 13).

There is no straightforward link between our evidence and previous research results on the influence of the financial crisis. The severity of the financial and economic situation was previously associated with more ambitious public-administration reforms undertaken in different (mostly Western) European countries (Kickert

et al. 2013, 60). The fact that no significant difference was revealed between government priorities and the financial crisis in the analysis of our survey data could be ascribed to the different nature and status of most pressing government issues in various European countries (see the third section of this article).

Furthermore, although there is a large body of empirical evidence suggesting that “crises can create significant reform opportunities, both by demonstrating the unsustainability of the status quo and by disrupting the interest coalitions that have previously resisted reform” (OECD 2010, 31), quickly changing economic circumstances can also change the focus of government politics. For instance, despite the announcement of several bold and ambitious reform priorities, the Lithuanian authorities were only able to successfully execute the most salient programme of fiscal consolidation (Nakrošis et al. 2015), whereas the implementation of other structural reforms was incremental and suffered from the problems of an unstable base of legislative support and shifting political attention in the executive during the crisis period of 2009–2012.

In terms of reform processes European governments put more efforts into the formulation of priority initiatives by engaging different stakeholders, communicating between ministries or building reform into a long-term strategy (EUPAN 2013, 12). This adds to the transparency and openness of public-policy processes and can increase reform ownership. Also, European public administrations mobilise more resources for the delivery of major reform initiatives, which increase (but do not guarantee) the certainty of execution efforts. For instance, the delivery of the Irish Public Service Reform Plan was accompanied by a number of actions strengthening its execution capabilities (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform 2012).

However, these characteristics of reform processes can also make these reform policies more vulnerable because of strong resistance from opposing coalitions or societal groups. Reform publicity can be a double-edged sword – whereas it can contribute to establishing reform consensus, it can also mobilise opposition, depending on particular circumstances. An empirical analysis of four large-scale institutional reforms in Denmark illustrates that the veil of vagueness facilitated the delivery of two such reforms (Christiansen and Klitgaard 2010, 197).

In general, the statistical analysis of the survey data found that the place of policy priorities on the governmental agenda partially explains the process of public-administration reforms. However, the salience of public administration cannot account for the variation in the (perceived) reform results in European public administrations, which is more related to certain implementation circumstances. If the quantitative analysis was able to uncover some broad trends common to European public administrations, such measurements of systematic relationships between important reform drivers cannot be expected to capture specific contexts and changing processes in different European public administrations on which delivery progress is inevitably contingent.

Therefore, the characteristics that are specific to public administration as a policy domain (Barzley and Gallego 2010) and the changing behaviour of politicians and other policy actors within this domain should be part of research designs and empirical evidence on processes and results of public-administration reforms. Two specific observations on the importance of political context and interplay of policy actors could be mentioned in this regard.

First, political instability or fragmentation can lead to policy instability. Previous reforms can be suspended or reversed, and new waves of reforms can be initiated without replacing the old reforms. Policymakers can shift their political attention as a result of electoral considerations or other important political circumstances (Jones and Baumgartner 2012). Therefore, one can assess if those public administrations or government priorities whose execution is characterised by stable political attention over a sufficiently long period of time stand a better chance of being delivered compared to other policy concerns influenced by frequent changes of governments, coalition conflicts or other salient political events. This factor can be particularly pertinent in some EU member states from Eastern Europe whose political systems are characterised by a polarised pattern of party competition between competing blocs of parties (Savage 2013). There is some evidence that the priorities of winning elections and holding power prevent the governments of Eastern Europe from effectively implementing public-administration reforms, as was the case of Bulgaria and Romania concerning fighting corruption (Spendzharova and Vachudova 2012).

Second, it is important to examine the interaction of advocacy coalitions that can explain policy changes or a lack of them in specific policy subsystems. For instance, the reorganisation of state territorial units, which was one of the most salient reform issues on the governmental agenda in France and Spain from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s, achieved little success because of the blocking game between different actors (Bezes and Parrado 2013, 31–32). More specifically, Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1999, 140) observed the tendency of actors in high-conflict situations to perceive their opponents as more evil and powerful than they probably are. Opponents tend to exercise the strategy of “devil shift” by exaggerating the malicious motives, behaviours and influence of their counterparts in order to mobilise their resources (Weible et al. 2011). Therefore, it is pertinent to consider if the implementation of government priorities at the domestic level is less likely to succeed if such strategies are being employed. If yes, the argument of political-economy authors that reformers should mask their intentions to the general public or specific interest groups in order to enhance reform chances (Williamson 1994) could be true.

Furthermore, in order to study how particular political events and occurrences shape policy implementation at the domestic level, it is useful to undertake more qualitative approaches in the future. More specifically, causal process-tracing can offer rich accounts of causation in both between-case and within-case analysis (Kay

and Baker 2015, 18). Empirical information necessary for drawing causal inferences can be provided by comprehensive storylines, smoking-gun observations and confessions (Blatter and Haverland 2014).

A similar qualitative approach is pursued under our research project “Performance Priorities of the Lithuanian Government: Implementation Process and Results”, which examines the execution of the following six priorities of the 2008–2012 Lithuanian Government: (1) preparations to build a Visaginas nuclear power plant; (2) higher-education reform; (3) civil-service reform; (4) restructuring the network of personal health-care organisations; (5) pension reform and (6) execution of the housing-renovation programme. We will compare findings of these case studies in order to provide a causal assessment how the interaction of advocacy coalitions during the implementation process affects policy changes and results in different policy subsystems.

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