

# 1. Introduction: public administration reforms in Europe

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## INTRODUCTION

Public administration reform programmes are often grand visions, filled with hopes and dreams of real change. Sometimes, they are merely statements aimed at addressing real or perceived policy problems or aim to seduce certain parts of the electorate. Whatever their origins, the actual reforms that governments introduce can be quite different from those presented to the public, and the effects of those reforms frequently diverge substantially from what was intended, if it is possible to discern any tangible effects at all. To study public administration reform and its effects in depth, one therefore needs to move beyond discourse, cheap talk, reform propaganda, and hype. While not immune to self-aggrandisement and social desirability bias, the civil servants leading those organisations subject to reforms or reform ideas are arguably well informed about what has really happened in the wake of administrative changes. Indeed, many studies on public administration reform have relied on interviews with top executives as key informants. They have seen reforms emerge, unfold, and then succeed or fail. In many cases, senior civil servants have witnessed successive reform programmes roll through the public sector, and have been or are responsible for the implementation of specific reforms, or even the development of entire reform packages.

For this book, we have surveyed 6701 top public sector executives in 17 European countries to record their views on the state of public administration, and on administrative reform and its effects. We address national senior executives specifically because we maintain that they have a pivotal role in administrative reform policies and in the ordinary running of key bureaucratic institutions. The analyses we present provide a unique insight into public administration reforms and reveal interesting differences and similarities between European countries, including many countries not often included in comparative studies so far.

### THREE REFORM PARADIGMS DOMINATING CURRENT DEBATES ON PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION REFORM

Public administration reforms have long been a salient topic on public agendas throughout Europe and beyond. Starting with the Thatcher and Reagan governments in the UK and the United States and since then spreading across the globe, the business-like reforms associated with the New Public Management (NPM) were a response to the perceived weaknesses of bureaucratic structures and an increasingly overstretched and underfunded public sector. In recent years, however, observers have pointed to some of the unintended, and often negative, effects of NPM reforms, such as an increasing fragmentation of public administrations, coordination challenges, an erosion of social cohesion, and a weakened public service ethos within government. In response, alternative reform approaches linked to the ideas of network and public governance and focusing on improved internal coordination and cohesion have appeared. At the same time, new channels for citizen involvement and participation to improve responsiveness to user demands have opened up, especially through innovative technologies and digitalisation.

Across Europe, three major reform paradigms have been distinguished, and the COCOPS (Coordinating for Cohesion in the Public Sector of the Future) Top Executive Survey, on which this book is based, sought to systematically capture elements of each of these reform paradigms.

A first reform paradigm relates to the implementation of Weberian-style structures and processes, transforming patrimonial systems into modern administrations with transparent formal procedures for due process and rule of law. Sadly, patronage, politicisation and an abuse of power remain characteristics of many public administrations in some parts of Europe. While some countries introduced merit-based systems in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, others have struggled to implement the foundations for an independent and autonomous public bureaucracy. Indeed, one of the core elements of public administration reform in the formerly communist countries in Europe has been civil service reform aimed at (re)introducing basic Weberian elements into public administration and embedding merit-based principles. That said, many scholars have claimed the crucial importance of Weberian bureaucratic features for well-functioning governments, suggesting that ‘maybe it is time to rediscover bureaucracy’ (Olsen 2005) and classic bureaucratic roles, identities and values (Du Gay 2000). Within this paradigm, legality and hierarchy are key characteristics.

A second reform paradigm, often labelled as New Public Management

(NPM) style reforms, is mainly concerned with the introduction of market-type mechanisms and a business management logic into the public sector. These reforms are typically implemented to improve efficiency and strengthen government accountability. NPM and related reforms swept through the European public sector in the 1980s, and influence governments' thinking to this day (Hood 1991). While some countries have moved beyond the orthodoxy of NPM, its ideas and the managerial tools associated with it remain permanent fixtures within most European public administrations. In some countries, NPM still is the main reform paradigm which shapes administrative thinking, with an emphasis on efficiency, performance and innovation as key characteristics.

The third reform paradigm brings together elements of Weberianism with aspects of NPM. Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011) describe this as Neo-Weberianism, which is an attempt to reconcile Weberian impartiality, legality and neutrality with NPM instruments designed to enhance responsiveness to citizens and public demands. Within this context, they argue for a rediscovery of the state. Some authors believe we have now entered a post-NPM era, dominated by governance and network-style approaches to combat the fragmentation following NPM reforms and to reassert central political control (Dahlström et al. 2011). These approaches are sometimes referred to as second generation post-NPM reforms (Christensen and Lægreid 2007), or as third generation reforms (Halligan 2007). For Osborne (2006), they represent the 'new public governance'. While the terminology used to refer to this third reform paradigm remains in flux, key characteristics associated with its evolution include a focus on coordination, effectiveness and outcomes.

While these paradigms have had a clear impact on administrative practice, they have also often been criticised for lacking the capacity to reflect the precise empirical realities of national administrative reforms (Lynn 1998; Lodge and Gill 2011). Such reforms do not come with an instruction sheet derived from one paradigm but emerge through processes of bureaucratic politics and muddling through. The temporal dimension of administrative reforms which leads to successive layers of reforms sedimenting within public organisations increases the complexity and variety of the reform landscape within different countries. These dynamics suggest that understanding national administrative reform patterns requires in-depth comparative research frameworks aimed at capturing the entangled diversity of reform contents.

## MANY REFORMS, BUT LITTLE KNOWLEDGE ABOUT OUTCOMES

Despite the salience of public administration reforms in Europe, there is surprisingly little systematic research identifying how and whether public sector reforms have been implemented, and with what outcomes. Moreover, existing research tends to be confined to specific countries, policy fields or government areas – making the identification of any general patterns, learning and solutions extremely difficult (Van de Walle and Hammerschmid 2011). Reform evaluations, if available at all, tend to be impressionistic, and often only cover specific elements of a given initiative. In addition, such assessments are generally made years after the reforms have been announced and may have little relation to the original aims of the reform programme. In fact, analysis of reform evaluations across European public sectors undertaken as another part of the COCOPS project found that numerous important and expensive reform programmes are never properly evaluated by governments themselves (see Pollitt and Dan 2013). At the same time, academic accounts have rarely provided a comprehensive narrative of the trajectory of public administration reforms in Europe and instead typically focus on specific types of reform or on single countries (for an overview, see Andrews and Van de Walle 2013). Critically, a dearth of high quality comparative data has hampered research efforts in this regard.

Until recently, researchers and practitioners interested in public administration reforms across Europe relied largely on Pollitt and Bouckaert's seminal work *Public Management Reform: An International Comparison* (first published in 2000), specialised OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) studies or work focused on specific issues, such as political-administrative relations (see Peters 2001) or civil service reform (see van der Meer et al. 2015). The publication of the OECD's first edition of 'Government at a Glance' in 2009, which combined a wealth of statistics and indicators about the functioning of public sectors, has made a broader base of information on public administration reform available. Other data sources are also increasingly being used to analyse public sector change across Europe, including the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators, the sustainable governance indicators developed by the Bertelsmann Foundation, the survey-based work of the Swedish Quality of Government Institute and the Global Competitiveness Report and the World Competitiveness Yearbook (Van de Walle 2006). In addition, the European Public Administration Network (EUPAN) has occasionally produced reports that provide a comparative insight into public administration reforms in European countries.

In this context, the great merit of the COCOPS project is to offer a unique and systematic country-comparative approach of data gathering that relies on a common questionnaire jointly developed by an international team of researchers from different disciplines. The COCOPS research aimed for a full census of top central government executives in a large number of European countries and has become the largest survey ever conducted in Europe of this kind. The focus of this book will be on how top public sector executives in European central governments perceive the dynamics and outcomes of public administration reforms. By collecting the views of this key group of stakeholders and by offering a unique comparative perspective based on a common measurement applied in all countries, we contribute to the growing body of comparative data with a specific European focus.

## CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE IN EUROPEAN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION REFORM

Administrative reform in Europe knows many variations across countries and in time. While some countries are regarded as reform pioneers and have highly respected and efficient public sectors, others are seen as laggards with notoriously inefficient public administrations plagued by enduring patterns of patronage and politicisation. At the same time, administrative reforms have clearly been analysed and investigated more intensively in some countries than in others.

In some countries, NPM is still all the rage, while other countries have already embraced a variety of post-NPM ideas. In others, NPM-esque labels are publicly rejected, but the reforms that are implemented show a remarkable resemblance to those associated with NPM. Variation in administrative reform is high, and not only depends on administrative culture, but also on different starting points of their government systems (see Torres and Pina 2004; Pollitt and Boukaert 2011). Reform terminology used across countries also varies greatly, or, where this is not the case, similar terminology may disguise very different reforms. Even when based on similar sets of ideas, national public administration reforms differ considerably. This variety of reforms, interacting with an even greater variety of administrative systems and administrative cultures in Europe, has led to a considerable heterogeneity in reform practice across Europe. At the same time, there is considerable discussion about whether convergence is taking place in national public sector reform trajectories (Pollitt 2007), especially at a European level due to increasing integration and the possible emergence of a so-called 'European Administrative Space' (see

Olsen 2010; Sager and Overeem 2015). On the whole, there are some broad trends, but much more national variation (Kettl 2000), and there are fewer commonalities and convergence than generally assumed (Pollitt 2007). Pollitt and Bouckaert originally identified clear differences between a core NPM group of marketisers including Australia, New Zealand, the UK and sometimes the US and a second group of European modernisers such as Finland, Sweden and the Netherlands, that continued to assign the state a central role (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011). But, recently, these groupings have evolved (2011), revealing the fragility of such categories and the flux of reform activities. For this reason, processes of convergence and divergence in public administration reform continue to receive considerable attention.

A combination of EU enlargement and the need to bring new member states' administration up to scratch, coupled with the more recent austerity in Europe, has put the central role of public administration in countries' economic development firmly on the agenda. Having an efficient and effective public administration is seen as critical for successful economic growth. Hence, interest in public administration reform has grown substantially, especially among international organisations. In 2014, the European Commission for the first time included 'enhancing institutional capacity and an efficient public administration' as a thematic objective in its current EU 2020 strategy for the period 2014–2020. In 2015, it also published a 'Quality of Public Administration Toolbox for Practitioners' to support, guide and encourage public administration modernisation in European member states. Such new priorities and developments at a European level clearly signal the need for more empirical evidence on comparative administrative reform.

Building on a unique country-comparative dataset, this book aims to enrich the growing body of evidence on public administration reform and its effects on performance. Previous research focusing on administrative sector reform or on top public sector executives has utilised limited sets of in-depth interviews, or relied on document analysis and secondary data. In contrast, we are able to draw on what is currently the largest academic survey of top public sector executives ever undertaken in Europe. In doing so, we seek to reveal the real administrative practices beyond the reform discourse. The book reports on and compares reforms in 17 European countries, taking into account some countries which are rarely included in such comparisons. The countries covered in the book are Austria, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Serbia, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

## THE COCOPS PROJECT: ONE OF THE LARGEST EVER PUBLIC MANAGEMENT RESEARCH PROJECTS IN EUROPE

This book is a product of the COCOPS research project.<sup>1</sup> Funded by the European Commission's 7th Framework Programme, the COCOPS project (Coordinating for Cohesion in the Public Sector of the Future) was set up by a consortium of 11 European universities, with the aim of investigating in a comparative manner the impact of public administration reforms across the continent, of identifying and finding recommendations to current challenges and of projecting an image of the future public sector through different scenarios. The general purpose of COCOPS has been to assess the impact of NPM-style reforms in European countries, especially as they relate to cohesion, and to explore emerging reform approaches, not at least those following the financial crisis. In total, researchers within the COCOPS project from 2010 to 2014 worked on eight related research projects or work packages:

- A meta-analysis of the impact of NPM on efficiency, effectiveness, quality and social cohesion;
- An analysis of the changing role of government by looking at the effect of NPM on government outlays;
- A survey of top public managers on the perceived impacts of NPM;
- A study of satisfaction, choice, and voice in European public sectors where citizens have become customers;
- An analysis of innovative coordination practices in public management;
- An exploration of emerging reform trends and their effects on policy cohesion and social cohesion;
- A study of the financial crisis in the public sector as an emerging coordination challenge; and
- The development of scenarios in public administration reform.

Each of the projects has resulted in a number of reports, articles and books; a full list can be consulted at [www.cocops.eu](http://www.cocops.eu). The current book is the result of the third work package. Eleven universities and research institutions formed the core of the COCOPS project (Erasmus University Rotterdam, Hertie School of Governance, University of Exeter, Cardiff University, Tallinn University of Technology, Bocconi University, KU Leuven, University of Bergen, University of Cantabria, Corvinus University and French National Center for Scientific Research) with many other universities and institutions joining the consortium

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## STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

This book is structured as follows: Chapter 2 introduces the COCOPS Top Public Executive Survey and provides readers with information about the sample, questionnaire, and fieldwork, and the motivations behind the choices that have been made during the research. It also highlights the difficulties involved in doing cross-national research in public administration, and elaborates on the challenges of relying on the perceptions of survey respondents for social scientific research. Chapter 3 then looks at the values, attitudes and motivations of top public sector executives, thereby providing a unique insight into the bureaucratic 'elite' of European central governments. Subsequently, four sets of country studies are presented, ordered geographically in four parts (Continental Europe in Part I, Central and Eastern Europe in Part II, Northern Europe in Part III and Southern Europe in Part IV). All country studies follow a similar design. First, an overview of recent public administration reforms in the country is given. Then, public administration reform trends are displayed quantitatively, and the country in question is compared with the other countries analysed.

The concluding Part V analyses major challenges and outcomes of administrative reforms in Europe from a cross-comparative perspective. Chapter 20 shows how top executives assess the reform process in their country, and how management tools and instruments are used. In Chapter 21, the effects of the fiscal crisis on European public administrations are examined. Chapter 22 explores how recent reform initiatives have tried to improve coordination within the public administration following earlier fragmentation. Then, in Chapter 23, reform outcomes are analysed and compared in more detail. The concluding chapter summarises key trends and findings and derives some general conclusions and perspectives for the future of the public sector in Europe.



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