5   The background, direction, ideas, triggers, and durability of public sector reforms

A conceptual analysis of the EU28 and the Visegrád 4

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1. Introduction

"Examining the output of political science and public administration scholarship in the area of political-administrative reform …, we detect a pandemic of public management reforms" (Van der Meer, 2002/2009). This observation pertains to the reform experience in all the EU28 member states. Since it was made in 2002, the volume of academic output and government reforms efforts have not diminished (Van der Meer, Raadschelders, & Toonen, 2015; Raadschelders & Bemelmans-Videc, 2015). Despite this apparent enthusiasm for reforms, their practical outcomes are nevertheless mixed. They substantially vary across the political-administrative systems across Europe, including the Visegrád 4 (Verheijen 2015). The variation not only involves the extent, intensity, and pace of reforms, but also their success and failure rates. The reform outcomes can be disappointing if they appear too slowly or fail to materialise at all. Reforms can even be reversed over time. The latter phenomenon has been reported in the Eastern European Union member states (EEU11; for explanation of the term see Kovač & Bileišis, 2017) with several exceptions, and in the Visegrád 4 countries (Verheijen, 2000; Meyer-Sahling, 2009, 2011). Their reasons and consequences will be discussed below.

To put it bluntly, failures are sometimes attributed to a political "perversion" of rationally devised reform initiatives. In other words, the fundamental problem is seen as an apparent conflict between the "rational" vs. the "political" dimensions of reform. Although it is somewhat unfair and not entirely correct in terms of its geographical reach, popular opinion in the so-called fast-reforming nations tends to specifically point to the eastern and southern rims of the EU. Formulated in less blunt terms, such a conflict is, however, apparent in all the EU member states. The imprecise use and multiple connotations of such concepts as "politics" and "rationality" in public discourse on reform do not facilitate a proper understanding or scrutiny of the reasons behind a reform's success or failure. Our preliminary aim is to assess the potential incongruity of these two reform perspectives with a special focus on the Visegrád 4 countries as seen in the broader context of the EU28. We must overcome this rather simplistic dichotomy, since it deflects attention from the impact of the existing institutional arrangements within political-administrative systems on reform. We must also examine the effects of the prevailing political-administrative arrangements and legacies. It is often claimed that a nation and its governments' past may offer a better understanding of the extent, method, durability, and content of the proposed political and administrative reforms (Painter & Peters, 2010; Raadschelders, 1998). Reforms never start from scratch, as the prefix re- implies. Even major political-administrative and societal transformations hardly ever start with a completely clean slate. This was certainly not the case in post-communist countries or in Germany after World War II (Meyer-Sahling, 2010; Verheijen, 2010).

We shall start with a conceptual analysis of "public sector reform" and thus provide an outline of the contents and consequences of reform for public services addressed in the next section. Thereafter, the ratinal, political, and historical institutional perspectives on reform will be explored in depth in order to assess their effects on reforms in the Visegrád 4 compared with those in the EU28.

2. Public sector reform: rationality and politics

Relevance, meaning, and content of reform

Reduced to its essentials, reform refers to plans and efforts to amend a perceived unsatisfactory situation, here applied to reforming the government, the political-administrative system, and society. Raadschelders and Bemelmans-Videc (2007, 2015) argue that "reform is the conscious attempt to plan and implement change in (components of) an existing (political-administrative) system." Their definition – similar descriptions can be found elsewhere (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011) – overemphasises the formal and deliberate aspects of reform while ignoring the relevance of emergent and incremental (reform) change processes. Thus, the formal approach to reform implies larger, all-embracing, intended, and rationally construed change processes.

However, the rational dimension of reform provides little or no clues to both the actual content and nature of the intended reforms and their desired effects. Moreover, the effects tend to be perceived as almost "mechanistic" process outcomes. In other words, the process dictates the effects and outcomes. When examining content-related issues, we have to look at the ideas behind and the origins of the adopted objectives, effects, as well as take into account their durability. What is considered (un)satisfactory and the direction of change unavoidably depend on the original choice. The success or failure of reform is conditional on authoritative choices made between the available alternatives. This authoritative choice component makes reforms political by definition. Reform failures and disappointments are sometimes blamed on political arbitrariness, self-interest, and misuse of power. The blame can be similarly attributed to the so-called self-serving (and politicised) bureaucratic elites suspected of shying away from "genuine" reform. Such a position is adopted by the press, and societal and academic discussions on EEU11 and Visegrád 4 reform transgressions, for instance in the area of the judiciary or the limitation of social and academic freedoms. The definition of "genuine" is, however, open to discussion. Below, we will address these issues in more detail. Thus, a conflict exists between the (instrumental) rational and political reform perspectives. However, this line of reasoning is too simplistic. The origin of the problem should be sought in a conceptual confusion or even a simplification of the concepts of what is rational and what is political. Furthermore, both the rational and the political dimensions of reform processes tend to disregard the historical importance of institutional settings, which influence the available room for manoeuvre, and the scope and direction of reform.

Public sector reforms originate from the fact that societal transformations demand government change. The latter, in turn, leads to civil service reform. Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004, 2011) add that reform strategies and trajectories should include an idea (vision) of the desired future, an analysis of the current situation, and the measures necessary to reach the desired situation. The verb "demand" and the reform strategies mentioned by Pollitt and Bouckaert may suggest that these interconnections tend to be mechanical. Nevertheless, the

mechanical aspect is not without major caveats, which we shall explore below. The interconnections do not invariably point one way. For example, civil service system reform may also be intended to lead to the institution of a transformed public service delivery by government. In this way societal changes occur. A large number of public sector reforms in the EEC directly after the fall of communism and during the EU accession process, as well as those undertaken in the West after 1980, were designed in this manner. From this vantage point, the latter interconnections may be considered even more government-centric, technocratic, and overtly (instrumental) rational in nature. Nevertheless, from an analytical point of view, examining the interconnections among the political, administrative, and societal systems in this way may prove quite useful as a starting point.

Examining reform programmes across countries we find that they consist of a number of interlocked reform dimensions. They are interlocked, because one reform invariably exerts an impact on the others. Public sector reform, ranging from system-wide to more specific, involves changes in the following (Van der Meer, 2002/2009):

1   the demarcation between the public and private realms of life, thus determining the scope of state involvement in issues such as privatisation and deregulation,
2   the distribution of power among the central and territorial branches as well as the operation of decentralised forms of government,
3   relations between government and the public: people as subjects, citizens, clients, and civil society,
4   relations between politically appointed and permanent officials,
5   personnel management system, including changes in the legal status of civil servants, optimising the size and functional distribution of the civil service, introducing HRM and management development programmes,
6   internal management procedures and structures associated with NPM, including decentralising and disintegrating the formerly unified system of internal management by handing over power to line managers, introducing civil service leadership, and civil service empowerment.

(Van der Meer, 2002/2009)

As was argued by Raadschelders and Bemelmans (2015), who invoked the meta-theoretical institutional analytical framework proposed by Kiser and Ostrom (1982), these reforms can be classified with reference to three interdependent levels of analysis important for our examination of the rational and political dimension of reform in the Visegrád 4 and EU-wide:

1   constitutional level – regime reform, complete overhaul of the political-administrative system,
2   collective level – a) political system reform in relatively stable polities, b) administrative or bureaucratic reforms (both structure and process),
3   operational level – a) political actor reform, b) administrative (civil servant) actor reform.

Over time, the emphasis of reform shifts from the first to the second- and third-level reforms in the EEU11 (Nemec & Spaček, 2017; De Vries in Kovač and Bileišis, 2017). After the collapse of the old communist regimes, first-level reforms involved far-reaching economic and societal transformation, complete with rebuilding the public sector as well as the position of

government in that sector. Political actor reform is much less frequently encountered in practice, perhaps with the exception of large-scale regime changes, such as those during the fall of communism. In other EU28 countries, reforms predominantly focused on the second and third levels. It should be noted that third-level reforms have direct consequences for the role and functioning of the civil service within government and society (Meyer-Sahling, 2009, 2012; Verheijen & Rabrenovic, 2015). Reforming competencies in the civil service includes raising awareness of the relevance of intergovernmental, legal, social, network, political-administrative and strategic policies, public values, and transparency dimensions in order to successfully operate in a multilevel governance system. Van der Meer, van den Berg, and Dijkstra (2012) argue that civil servants thus have to operate as public servants and avoid being submissive, as disengaged, autonomous professionals, or as public managers devoid of technocratic contents. Such a role entails acting as a self-aware, yet professional "servant" operating between politics and society. This includes the latitude for loyal contradiction not only with respect to political and administrative superiors, but also to colleagues in the workplace (Van der Meer & Dijkstra, 2018). In this sense, public officials embody a reliable bureaucracy: a bureaucracy that is an incarnation of the democratic rule of law or Rechtsstaat (Van der Meer, 2002, 2009). This necessitates a formidable change in civil service capacity, mind-set, and structural embeddedness. The statement originates from a deep-rooted political-administrative and constitutional doctrine, namely the democratic Rechtsstaat tradition, which is central to the Western European and EU's political institutional design. Obviously, this principle is not a given, as is seen, for instance, in Viktor Orbán's doctrine of illiberal democracy in Hungary and reforms pursued by the PiS cabinet in Poland with all their attendant consequences (Pakulski, 2016; Kreko & Enyedi, 2018). Having discussed the reform context, we can now examine the rational and political approaches to reform processes.

"Rational" and "political" approaches to reform

Notwithstanding its popularity, the rationale for reform is often implicitly taken for granted. Using the word "rationale" instead of "justification" goes beyond mere wordplay. Reforms are often not only justified by, but also articulated in rational terms. Political considerations are presented as secondary, less valuable and more biased. What factors explain the prominence of the rational take on reform? Even though the adjective "rational" and the noun "rationality" are popular and often used, they also include a wide range of contested meanings and manifestations. We shall desist from getting involved in any intricate and necessarily tricky discussions on rationality; for our purposes it is sufficient to remark that the concept of rationality as used in practical reform discourse is often of an instrumental, goal-oriented, formal-deliberational, and value-neutral nature. The root "ratio" denotes that acting and thinking are based on reason and intent, and thus "rationality" suggests a degree of objectivity. Problems and solutions are defined and analysed in a rational manner. Objective knowledge applies scientific reasoning to the exclusion of subjective opinions and emotions, specifically those pertaining to political choice. Finally, only the best (politically neutral) solution is to be found and applied. Such a neutrality doctrine as applicable to reform can be called reform with politics left out.

For a long time, the rational unidimensional and apolitical visions of the direction of economic and technological reforms have been open to criticism. Though presented as neutral, they contained implicit value assumptions. To give but one example, the preferred solution to tackling the economic crises of the 1980s was based on a resurgence of neo-classical

and pro-market economic thought aimed at transforming government. It gradually became the dominant vision as New Public Management and led to cutbacks, privatisation, and/or closure of state-owned enterprises, contracting out public services, and the adoption of private sector methods in the public sector, including the provision of public services. The same recipe was applied during the post-communist transformation in Central and Eastern Europe, as discussed in more detail below. In contrast, in the wake of the 2008–2009 crisis, a difference of opinion was seen regarding the approach of governments to dealing with the consequences of the worldwide banking crisis. Although during the Obama presidency the US pursued an expansionist policy, in most European countries, due to the pressure of the German economic leadership, an austerity approach typical of the 1980s was encouraged. The word "encouraged" is perhaps understated, since it implies voluntary choice, even though the reforms were clearly imposed on Greece or more recently on Italy, as was the case with the majority of the EEU11. This disparity in response was thus not merely generated or dictated by a formal and restricted instrumental rational reform approach, but was an outcome of political and societal choice.

In order to gain a better understanding of the use and limitations of the rational perspective, we must remember that in almost all the countries under discussion external reform pressures and examining the best practices pursued by other countries were instrumental in putting reform programmes on the political and societal agendas. The durability and sustainability of these reforms once these external pressures have subsided remains a major question (Meyer-Sahling, 2009, 2011; Dimitrova, 2010; Verheijen & Rabrenovic, 2015). The importance of these external pressures does not lessen the significance of the internal dimensions of reform. Reforms, which stemmed from the need for a political and socio-economic reconstruction after the fall of communism in the EEU11, including the current Visegrád countries in the late 1980s, were extremely necessary given the looming threat of a societal system breakdown. Furthermore, the consequences of the economic crisis, public dissatisfaction with the world of politics, government and societal reawakening constituted equally important internal reform triggers. Nevertheless, external pressures by international reform sponsors constituted the very core of the exact contents of a string of reform programmes. Early reforms in post-communist countries were inspired by New Public Management with a focus on limited and business style managerial dimensions. The popular dislike of the old world of politics triggered a denial of the essential role of the state in bringing about fundamental reforms (Randma-Liiv, 2008). "Neutral" market forces were preferred instead, which can be seen as yet another manifestation of the neutrality doctrine. The effects of hard-core NPM and neoliberal economic reforms attracted a substantial amount of criticism (Randma-Liiv, 2008; Randma-Liiv & Drechsler, 2015). The institutional capacity of the state to reform was thus underappreciated at first.

From the 1990s onwards, with an eye on EU accession, the European Administrative Space principles were formulated and promoted by OECD-SIGMA. The Copenhagen (1993) and Madrid (1995) criteria provided further guidance for administrative reform processes (Cardona, 2009; Meyer-Sahling, 2009, 2011) and provided for a meritocratic, competent, transparent, accountable, and politically neutral administration. Unlike the NPM approach preferred in the early stages of reform, this framework reveals close similarities to Weberian, rule of law/Rechtsstaat, good governance, and institutional capacity doctrines. On a more negative side, these principles are rather abstract, open to interpretation, while their operationalisation is often disputed. Moreover, while designing reforms in this area, a mainly positivist

legal approach was preferred, which was to a certain extent somewhat naive. Legal provisions were almost directly and automatically translated into practice in target countries without taking due consideration of their political and societal contexts. Again, this preference for a positivist legal approach was rooted in the aversion to the former discredited political system (and social science) under the old regime; moreover, it was supposed to rectify the perceived political dysfunctions of the present. Though in terms of discipline it originates from a different angle, the positivist legal approach is yet another exponent of the neutrality doctrine as applied to reform: reform with politics left out.

Furthermore, the idea of rational, synoptic, all-embracing, integral reforms has also been criticised as being too monolithic and hierarchically imposed. As a result, it undermined the legitimacy of and support for reforms among the relevant stakeholders. Recent dissatisfaction with the reforms and resistance across Europe can be explained in these terms. Such a blueprint approach sharply contrasts with the incremental approach to reform. Thus, abundant inconsistencies and limitations are evident in the instrumental rationality-based perspective on reform. To provide an illustration, in the discussion of factors that induced reform efforts, economic causes are often considered as primary and objective triggers. Naturally, reform can also be triggered by an evident need to adapt society to a new economic, technological, and political order. Financial and technological reform programmes contain certain assumptions about how to properly run the economy, society, and government, and thus, what mix of coherent goals and instruments should be applied. These economic and technological drivers inspire a rational answer derived from economics and built on administrative and technical considerations. These considerations are then touted as being based on objective and non-contestable scientific knowledge, which society and politicians simply have to accept. In short, answers and reforms are presented as technical and, as was argued above, purely legal solutions, which limited room for political and societal choice. When done deliberately by bureaucrats and/or politicians, this amounted to a political attempt to defuse value-loaded issues; yet depoliticising issues is itself a highly politicising instrument. Another motivation can be sought in the desire to avoid potentially acrimonious political and societal debates, which may endanger the political and societal status quo.

The last observation invokes the political dimensions of reform more specifically. The adjective "political" is, as was said above, used in a variety of ways and meanings. A neutral interpretation of the meaning of politics reflects the definition of the concept as authoritative allocation of values and thus making choices for and on behalf of society (Easton, 1953). As seen from this perspective, deciding on reforms is always intrinsically political inasmuch as it pertains to choices on the contents, direction, and approach to reform. More often than not, however, in common usage it has negative connotations, as in the case of reform failures. The effects of the latter have certainly been felt in numerous reform projects as well as reported not only by investigative journalists, but also in EU, OECD, SIGMA, and World Bank reports, as well as in academic writing.

Even though it is subject to a negative popular perception, the role of politics with regard to the reach, results, and outcomes of reforms in the EU member states is never understood in a single and uniform manner, but tends to reveal several distinct layers. Issues of private use of public resources, abuse of power, disregard of basic democratic principles and rule of national and EU law have been discussed in relation to political office holders and bureaucratic elites in some, but not only, Visegrád 4 countries and other new Eastern European EU

member states (Kotchegura, 2008). In their cases, reforms have produced results, but they are negatively viewed from the perspective of good governance principles formulated and enforced by the EU, standards set by international organisations or the wider academic community. The latter observation also pertains to recent reform reversals in the Visegrád area (Meyer-Sahling, 2009; Randma-Liiv & Drechsler, 2017; Nemec, 2018). Even when devoid of negative associations, the role of politics can be considered problematic when trying to deliver durable and tangible reforms. Not only does the short-term time perspective depend on the timing of elections, but it also includes factors associated with public service delivery. For both politicians and top bureaucrats (in this negative perspective, the government elite) the attractiveness of a technical, procedural, and content-poor approach to reform may stem from the lack of substantive ideas and vision. A vision is essential for any robust reform strategy, as argued by Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004, 2011), although intentional eschewal of "vision" can be beneficial in terms of avoiding large-scale conflicts or detrimental in terms of a possible erosion of their position in power.

Perhaps less intentionally, across parts of Europe a change has taken place from policy to managerial process oriented senior civil service. The latter approach includes managing the "business" of government, managing the survival of political appointees, managing policy processes, and managing reorganisations. It does not include or preclude a party's (de)politicisation of the civil service. The managerial inclination does not necessarily, however, include content-specific knowledge or expertise needed to appraise reforms or even generate substantive ideas for reform. Here appraisal refers to civil servants prioritising issues and consulting office holders on policy alternatives. It also includes the idea of loyal contradiction (Van der Meer & Dijkstra, 2018), an essential part of the idea of a politically neutral (not politically bound) civil servant, and considered a bureaucratic virtue. Party and patronage politicisation as well as the pure managerial approach to civil service may reduce this bureaucratic added value (Van der Meer & Dijkstra, 2018). The problematic dimension of the lack of vision equally holds true for political office-holders. Detached from reform digressions originating in political, bureaucratic, and dysfunctional behaviour, a substantive vision on the direction of reform grounded in a choice between alternatives (the core of the political dimension) is often wanting in both political and bureaucratic quarters and thus hampers actual reforms capable of being sustained. This applies not only to the Visegrád countries, but also more widely to the EU28. Perhaps somewhat confusingly, vision may also be anathematic to the enthusiasts of "genuine" reform (EU and good governance backers; see the discussion on the movement towards illiberal democracy in some of the Visegrád 4).

The lasting effects of the political-institutional design

Now we must examine the effects of the political-institutional system design, the associated administrative models, and traditions of reform, which will offer a better understanding of the extent, methods, and durability of reforms with respect to the existing political-administrative system. When discussing the ubiquity of reforms and pointing to reform revolutions over time and sometimes concentrated in time, attention is often focused on the present or the recent past (cf. e.g. Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011) with an emphasis on the 1980s and later years. Moreover, a great deal of attention was focused on the cross-national nature and scale of reform. Systems were exposed to a large range of external and internal change pressures (Van der Meer et al., 2015) and thus had to respond accordingly. The degree of uniqueness or similarity of that response is being discussed in depth (Painter & Peters, 2010; Van der Meer et al.,

2008). The idea of convergence was reinforced by the European integration process, the rise of the influence of international organisations other than the EU, such as the IMF, OECD, and the World Bank, and the globalisation of the academic community and consultancy in the areas in question (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004, 2011; Van der Meer, 2002, 2009). Isomorphism and mimicry were familiar features in political administrative reform processes both in the recent and more distant past. The copying of city charters by local governments in the Middle Ages is a well-known example. The same principle applies to the bureaucratic revolution in nineteenth-century Europe (Van der Meer, 2009). To use the modern concept, best practices were always sought, but they were invariably adapted to local needs and circumstances. The word "adapted" is important, since the emphasis on isomorphism and mimicry departs too far from the relevance of the singular and unique aspects of the reform implementation process over time and across geographical areas.

The promise and actual results of both rationally and politically stimulated reforms overemphasise the novelty of the current circumstances. There are limits on any system's amenability to change through reform. The rational approach (in technocratic terms) to redesigning government is often thwarted, when particular historical and institutional contexts of political-administrative and societal systems are disregarded. These systems have evolved over time as products of historical events and decisions. To what extent and how reforms are designed and how they fit in with a certain political-administrative and societal system and culture depends on the specific course of events in a particular political-administrative and societal history. History matters. It is almost impossible to start from scratch; hence, if we attempt to do so, we often encounter "a blast from the past." What are its impacts on the specificity, identity, and continuity of both the government and political-administrative system and on the efforts to reform them?

In order to answer these questions, the origins of institutions as embodied in a given political-administrative model as well as the enduring effects and consequences of decisions, organisations, and institutional design choices made long ago must be addressed. Though it is a risky area, given the shifting connotations (e.g. Van der Meer, Raadschelders, & Toonen, 2008) concerning historical legacies, we enter the area of administrative traditions and models viewed as part of historical institutional analysis. Institutions do matter since they impose order on the functioning of any political-administrative system. Here, the concept of path dependence, so popular in historical institutional analysis, becomes relevant. Historical institutionalism is sometimes considered rather deterministic by nature. The point is that systems do change, but the question is in what way and by which mechanism (Painter & Peters, 2010). Without delving too deeply into the growing body of literature on this topic, Raadschelders (1998) sees path dependence as a way out the traps of historical determinism and unchangeable institutional order. Path dependence prescribes the route for change. Over time, political-administrative systems change slowly or more rapidly, but certainly, and the process follows a specific route. Internal and external pressures can duly influence and put pressure on reforms, but the reforms are likely to take their manifestations and forms after the structure and culture of the system handed down over time.

Talking about the impacts of the past, administrative traditions, and path dependence, we have to be careful and precise (Meyer-Sahling, 2010; Yesilkagit, 2010; Meyer-Sahling & Yesilkagit, 2011). In their article "Administrative models, traditions and reform: Explanations of last resort?," Van der Meer, Raadschelders, and Toonen (2008) argue that though history

matters, uncritical use of administrative traditions and models in political science and public administration must be criticised. These traditions and models are often utilised as last-resort explanations and overemphasise certain common features; furthermore, their construction is often ahistorical and artificial in nature. This not only refers to the habit of blending different EU models and traditions (Verheijen, 2010), but also to an attempt to return to an idealised or preferred past (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). Such reconstruction or even a genuine return to a political-administrative past is rarely feasible, because time passes and new experiences accumulate. Reconstructed administrative models and traditional approaches thus misjudge the level of historical experience and dissimilarity among countries as they try to focus on or recreate a common past, which never actually occurred. When applied in this manner deliberately, it also constitutes a political act, as can be seen in the rediscovered or reinvented traditions during the Yugoslav Wars and the Kosovo conflicts.

Furthermore, having a Russian, Austrian-Hungarian, and Ottoman administrative past, gaining independence from the respective empires, becoming subjugated to communist rule, and regaining independence again in 1989 makes the continuous administrative line or clear path less visible in view of the process of institutional sedimentation over time (Painter & Peters, 2010). The Visegrád 4 countries and most other Central and Eastern European EU member states share a common experience under the Soviet rule. The post-communist transition and accession to the EU have all had huge effects on the economy, society, and governments, not to mention challenges to reforming their political institutional systems, the associated administrative models, and traditions embedded in the respective systems. This explains the failure of attempts to resurrect the administrative models and practices in existence before the communist takeover and World War II.

The institutional heritage of the past is, however, relevant on a more modest scale: we cannot start from scratch since we never encounter a tabula rasa. For instance, the resilience of civil society thanks to Roman Catholicism throughout the communist rule has its effect on societal reform directions. Intriguingly enough, references to history when used in a normative sense, as in the political dictum "our historical norms and values dictate that …" may also serve as a rallying cry intended to mobilise popular sentiment with a view to limiting or even preventing political debate and narrowing down the array of alternative options by appealing to national culture. This amounts, as such, to a political vision.

Conclusion

We started with the observation that a prosperous and (self-)confident society depends on a public sector that performs, delivers, and operates according to good governance standards. Nevertheless, the urge to reform provides few or no clues as to the origins, direction, contents, approach to, and durability of the actual process. Its outcomes can be disappointing, because they do not appear at all or appear too slowly, or can even be reversed over time, as is argued in the case of the Visegrád 4 countries. However, the disappointment with reform is far more widespread. Then again, what can be considered a disappointment or a reversal? It is often argued that the clash between the rational (instrumental) and the political (bureaucratic) approaches is at the root of the lack of tangible reform outcomes or disappointment with them.

The distinction between the political and, for that matter, bureaucratic obstructions to the good intentions of rationally operating reformers often drawn in the literature and popular opinion is too easy and is not helpful in explaining the developments in the EU28 or even the

Visegrád 4. Though somewhat mechanical in appearance, Pollitt and Bouckaert's concept of reform strategies quite effectively explains this misconception. The authors argue that any reform strategy should include a vision of the desired future, an analysis of the current situation, and the measures necessary to reach the desired situation. The most important political choice components are the first two: a vision for the future and an assessment of the current situation. Naturally, the measures to be implemented are not neutral either, but they are conditional on these first steps. Decisions on these issues are highly political as they involve making binding choices as to that future and the existing problems on behalf and for both society and government. This is not a mere technical exercise to be completed by neutral internal or external experts. Even when reform follows a rational (or apolitical, pejoratively speaking) path, it contains implicit normative assumptions (and those involving political choice). EU-inspired reform initiatives for creating a meritocratic, competent, politically neutral, and efficient administration in the EEU11 contain a heavy normative and hence political load. This does not in any way lessen their relevance, as research shows, but they are not neutral. The argument remains the same whether we refer to the democratic rule of law/Rechtsstaat principles or propose solutions which draw on the Neo-Weberian State (NWS). As a normative concept, the latter enjoys substantial popularity amongst Central and Eastern European scholars and reform thinkers (cf. the special issue of NISPAcee Journal (Pollitt, Bouckaert, Drechsler, & Randma-Liiv, 2008); Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004, 2011; Randma-Liiv, 2008; Mazur & Kopyciński, 2017). The NWS is a popular, but underspecified concept and in reality, though Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011) deny it, constitutes an amalgam of NPM (a conceptual hotchpotch itself) and Weberian ideas. No clear clues are provided as to how its components fit together. Pollitt and Bouckaert themselves see it as an untidy empirical concept handy for describing reform trajectories in Western European countries, which may partly explain its popularity. It is argued that its principles are abstract, open to interpretation, and making them operational in practice in the "older" EU member states is subject to debate. Another reason for the popularity of the NWS is perhaps that it is perceived as an anti-NPM model which permits avoiding a return to the older days, serves as a normative guide, and charts a reform path to be followed. Nonetheless, given that ambiguous nature of the NWS concept, disillusionment is easily built in. Things may take a turn for the worse, when reforms going against the grain of the major, dominant political and societal beliefs, lead to setbacks or even reversals. The current difficulties faced by some of the Visegrád 4 countries after the direct external pre-accession EU pressure has subsided can be explained in these terms. Conflicts are reignited when pressure is reintroduced by the Commission or via EU legal procedures, as was recently the case with Poland and Hungary.

Before finishing with a look at the political and bureaucratic aspects of reform success and disillusionment, we should mention the effects of historical institutional legacy on political administrative reform. At the outset, we mentioned that the subject received less attention in the past, though more recently, the situation has changed with the rising popularity of historical institutional approaches in political science and administration. Reform never starts from scratch, since the past lingers on. This sounds familiar and almost a cliché. Nevertheless, this belief, often reiterated in the early reform stages in the EEU11, proved to be seriously mistaken. The political-administrative and societal culture is more persistent and less open to intended change than some reformers hoped and imagined. Political-administrative ghosts from the past are still visible not only in the Visegrád 4 or the EEU11, but also in the other

EU28 member states. The Visegrád 4 and most other EEU11 member states have had a common experience of Soviet domination and communism. The rapid transition to a post-socialist situation and the EU accession process had huge consequences for the economy, society, and governments, in itself posing challenges to reform of the political institutional system, the associated administrative models, and traditions. We avoided talking about the effects of the past administrative traditions and path dependence in an offhand manner. Citing administrative models and traditions as explanatory mechanisms is associated with the risk of underestimating the diverging historical experiences in political-administrative systems design in individual countries, moreover, doing so may result in reinventing or reconstructing a shared past that never actually existed. Administrative experience develops over time layer by layer, like sediment. In the case of the Visegrád 4 countries, they comprise EU-related, communist, post-World War I independence, Prussian, Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and, somewhat longer ago, the Ottoman political-administrative models, traditions, and practices (Meyer-Sahling, 2010). Together they form an amalgam which defines and gradually produces specific national public governance models.

Finally, there is no point in denying the political-bureaucratic dimension of unsatisfactory reform outcomes. Dysfunctional political bureaucratic behaviours, positions, and attitudes, the lack of a substantive vision on the direction and path of reform can be an extra major factor in hampering real durable (material) reforms. However, this is not only the case in the Visegrád 4 countries. Though its magnitude may differ, it is also discernible in the other EU28 member states. To put it perhaps a bit cynically, a dysfunctional approach to reform at least contains a vision, albeit from a negative vantage point (cf. also Gajduschek et al. in Kovač & Bileišis, 2017). This tendency to favour technical/rational and positivist legal reform solutions may represent a doctrine of reform neutrality, which means that politics and society take a back seat. The elitist reform perspective proved to be quite risky, since the foundations for sustainable and enduring reforms provided by it were too shallow. When short-term effects of reform hit society, opportunities arise for dissenting voices and populist political movements. Again, this phenomenon is not confined solely to the Visegrád 4 – Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic – or the other EEU11 countries in varying degrees, but is seen to work in the EU, the USA, the Americas, and the CIS countries – in short, all over the world. Only through political reform, civil society development, and support can this issue be adequately addressed. An overtly instrumental rational reform strategy can thus lead to reform fatigue; in this way, political and societal dissatisfaction enhances populist tendencies and creates room for populist politics.

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