

ETHICAL VALUES IN ESTONIAN PUBLIC SERVICE ORGANISATIONS

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Abstract

Development of professional ethics within public service has been not very consistent in Estonia. After the adoption of public service (PS) code of ethics in Estonian Parliament in 1999, implementation and enforcement mechanisms of the code's principles were deficient. The anti-corruption strategy "An Honest State", adopted in 2004, delegated these functions to the State Chancellery. In the situation of lack of adequate information of actually held values and ethical beliefs in Estonian PS it was complicated to fulfil this task and go on with the implementation of professional ethics into PS. While the norms and values required by the European Ombudsman (European Code of Good Administrative Behaviour), the European Union and OECD documents are recognized in new member states, there was a question as to whether and to what extent these values are recognized among public servants in Estonia.

In 2005 the State Chancellery initiated the conduct of survey on roles, attitudes and values in Estonian PS. The survey was carried out by the Estonian Institute of Humanities, Tallinn University and research company Faktum. In sum 960 questionnaires were received from public servants of all levels and kinds of organisations, that is approximately 3.3 % of all public servants. The final report was presented in March 2006.

This paper will concentrate on two topics concerning values in Estonian PS. The first and more general issue is enquiry what kind of values are espoused in Estonian PS and are they different from the expected value clusters of PS of democratic states. The survey exposed that Estonian PS does not differ in value-attitudes from the expected values of international organisations (EU, OECD) and democratic countries. It is also widely acknowledged higher ethical demands for public servants that indicates existence of professional PS body.

The second question is raised on the ground that Estonian PS system is decentralised and this is why quite large responsibility is devolved to individual organisations. One objective of the survey was to find out specific ethical characters of different kind of organisations. Relevant knowledge on that issue was the current situation in human resources management (results of survey, conducted in State Chancellery in 2005-2006), because of lack of other structures in organisations whose responsibility comprises ethical issues. Comparing results of two surveys, we could come to conclusion that acceptance of professional ethical values in PS may not depend so much on the level of development of HRM work in organisation. In creating common values – common ethos might have bigger influence length of being in position and in PS commonly. This may lead to the conclusion that professional socialisation as a part of implementation of professional values into PS has decisive role in ethics infrastructure.

Introduction

In 1995 Estonian Parliament (Riigikogu) adopted Public Service Act (PSA) that became effective at the beginning of 1996. The aim was to shape the Estonian PS as an open, position-based system with some elements of a career-based system. Strong support to position-based system was also from politicians² and it looks so from the European perspective (Bossaert, Demmke 2003, 9 - 10). Open public service also means lessening the degree of central coordination and giving more responsibility to organisational level.

Development of Estonian public service ethics has not been very consistent. Ethics has not been in the list of priorities. In order to develop further the ethical standards of values for the public servants, Riigikogu approved the Public Service Code of Ethics as an appendix to the Public Service Act in 1999. Formally it is a supplement to the PSA that contains enforcement mechanisms for the code (Saarniit, 57). The Code does not specify any particular guidelines for action or any concrete punishments for wrongdoings (Palidaukaite, 2005). Initially, the chief purpose of the Code was to encourage public servants to act in a proper way (Tallo, 1999). Unfortunately, and partly because there were no actual implementation mechanisms for the Code for a long time, it has in fact been used as a

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² In 1999, the cabinet of PM M. Laar launched a new reform and declared the New Public Management (NPM) as an official reform ideology.

tool for punishment (Saarniit, 57). In ethics questions it was also lack of central coordination and questions of implementation were left for the organisations.

In 1999, Riigikogu adopted the Anti-Corruption Act. In 2004, an anti-corruption strategy called “An Honest State” was put forward. The strategy proposes a number of specific steps aimed at reducing the risk of corruption in Estonia. Responsibility for the development of questions of ethics in PS (raising awareness, organising trainings, changing information, etc) was left for the State Chancellery. To fulfil these tasks it was necessary to have information about actually held values and attitudes within PS.

Survey

Estonia is one of the new members of the EU. In general, Estonia may be seen as a typical Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) country where the PSE problems are very similar to each other (Brown 2003). The public policies and PSE systems in CEE countries are commonly produced in *ad hoc* and unsystematic ways³ (Brown 2003). Since the adoption, Estonian PS code of ethics has met implementation and enforcement problems (Saarniit, 2003, 2005). A major problem in the Estonian PSE is the lack of proper implementation mechanisms for the code of ethics. Most Estonian public servants consider the Code as imposed by Riigikogu and almost like a law (appendix to Public Service Act), rather than as an expression of their public service ethos.

On the other hand The Estonian Public Service Code of Ethics was put forward as a collection of values which express the public service ethos. As a theoretical source, the PS Code of Ethics contains all important (core) values which are declared by the international community. Code recognises the basic public sector values, which are commonly accepted in most European countries (Saarniit 2005, Palidauskaite 2005). As Saarniit pointed out, “Comparison of its contents to the value cluster in the OECD report (2000) shows great similarities to the most important values of public service in the member states of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development” (Saarniit, 53). Similar set of values is also launched by the European Union and other democratic countries (EU 2004, Finland 2000). The practical recommendations of the EU and the OECD for the implementation of ethics and integrity into PS seem to be based on the assumption that the public services of the member states are relatively similar as regards their value attitudes. While the norms and values required by the European Code of Good Administrative Behaviour or in EU and OECD documents are recognized in new member states, there was a question as to whether and to what extent these values are recognized among public servants in Estonia.

Raising of this question is also supported by an international study into values — 'The Inglehart Values Map'. According to this study, survival values play an important role in Eastern Europe, e.g in Estonia while in the English-speaking countries, and in protestant European states and Nordic countries, self-expression values are essential. „Societies which rank high self-expression values also tend to rank high on interpersonal trust. This produces a culture of trust and tolerance, in which people place a relatively high value on individual freedom and self-expression, and have activist political orientations. These are precisely the attributes that the literature on political culture defines as crucial to democracy.”⁴ Results of this survey enforces us to ask what set of values is held by Estonian public servants? Is PS inclined to hold the set of values characteristic to PS of other democratic countries or is it rather different because of different background of values in the whole society? This situation demands an empirical survey. Bossaert and Demmke also refer to the lack of empirical research into the PSE and that these researches must be undertaken (Bossaert, Demmke, 2005, 53).

This elicits the necessity to initiate the conducting of wide-range survey amongst public servants. In shaping problems for the survey there were two main targets. The first was to find out whether Estonian public service espouse same values as public services of other democratic countries or problems raised from historical background, short existence of PS, mobility of public servants and complications with PSA determinates shifts in these values. Another issue was to compare values and attitudes in different groups of organisations and public servants.

³ As an example, the Estonian Ethical Code of the Public Service says (p.3) that: 'An official shall adhere, in his or her activities, to the legally expressed will of politicians who have received a mandate from the citizens'. This principle was included in the code in response to a study which showed that the public servants saw themselves as policy-makers rather than policy-implementators. At the same time we may interpret this as an application of a general idea as required by particular needs.

⁴ See http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/organization/main_illustrations.asp

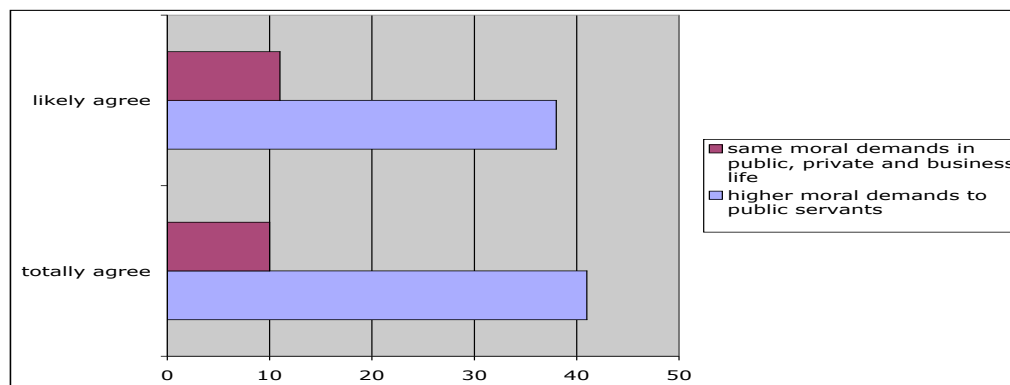
The survey was initiated by the State Chancellery and through outsourcing conducted by the Estonian Institute of Humanities, Tallinn University. Empirical data were collected in research company Faktum. Survey includes 960 civil servants in all levels, that is approximately 3.3 % of all civil servants⁵. Work on survey started in June 2005 and the final report was completed in March 2006 (Lagerspetz *et al* 2006). Below I will stop briefly on the first question on comparative approach to Estonian PS values and concentrate on the questions of values within organisation. Analysing questions of implementation of ethics and values into PS organisations seems to carry bigger practical value for the future planning of policies and actions in this field.

Values in Estonian PS

One characteristic of Estonian PS is mobility between private and public sector. During the last years there have been no big changes in the structure of length of being in the service. 36% of public servants in governmental level and 31% in local level have been in service less than 5 years. In county government level the number of public servants whose tenure is longer than 10 years is the biggest - 66.1%. (Riigikantselei 2005, 58 - 59).

Understanding of higher moral demands towards public servants is commonly accepted in Estonian PS. According to the survey 79% of public servants agree or strongly agree with the statement that there are higher moral demands in PS than in private or business life. It gives a good reason to believe that public service as a professional body with its own values and ethics norms has come into being. Being a public servant is not only a job. This is also perceived as a comprehensive role that can be identified as an ideology of the vocation of public servant (Lagerspetz *et al.*, 5).

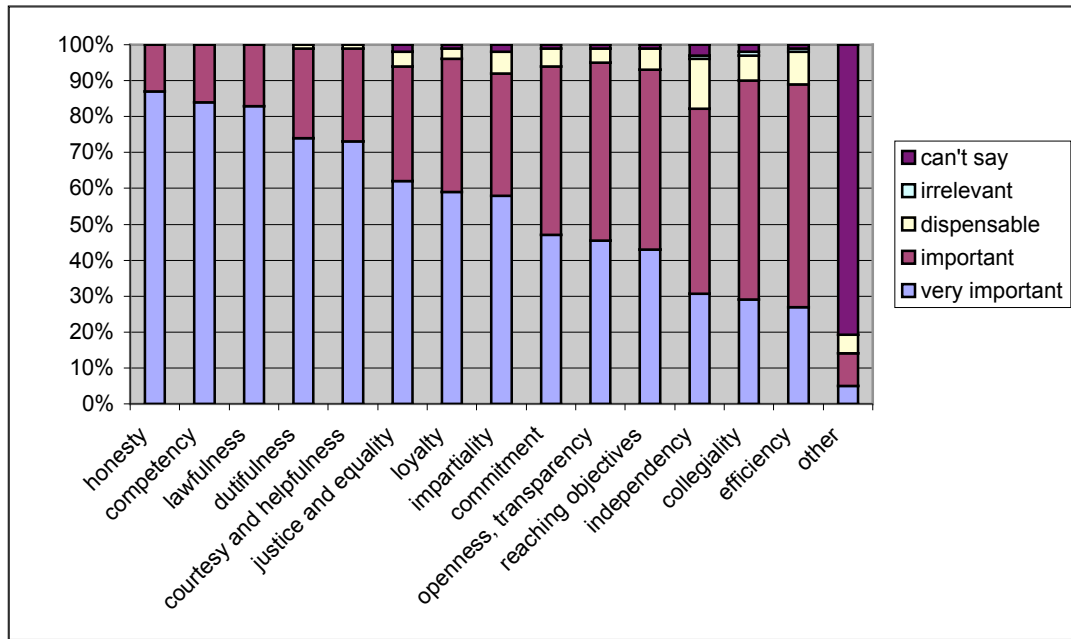
Figure 1: Moral demands in public, private and business sector.



In abovementioned reasons there was a question about commonly accepted values in Estonian PS. The questionnaire listed a set of widely recognised values in PS of democratic countries that are also mentioned in Estonian PS Code of Ethics. Next figure expresses common understanding of important values in Estonian PS.

⁵ On 31 December 2004 there were approximately 28,781 public servants in Estonia

Figure 2: Values in PS

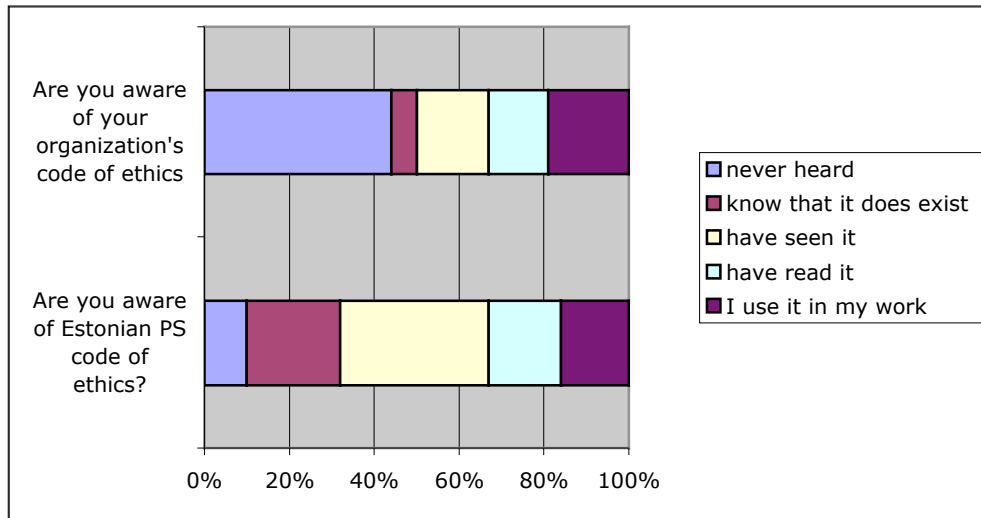


As we can see, values espoused in PS are the same as commonly recognised by international organisations (EU 2004, OECD 2000). Part of other values is relatively small (important and very important 14%). But it also has to be mentioned that the study revealed that public servants, when discussing ethical issues, do not really classify them as ethical; rather, they see them as issues arising from the nature of their work and also as manifestations of the characteristic of uncertainty of the situation in the Estonian society generally.

The survey revealed another interesting tendency in value-orientation in Estonian PS. According to the survey, the most important values are competency, honesty and lawfulness. In literature these values are defined as old, traditional values, related to weberian PA system. Reaching objectives, independency and efficiency are less valued. These values are indication of new, modern understanding of PA, New Public Management (Bossaert, Demmke, 2005, 54; Samier, 78). Here we can see that despite of PSA declaring Estonian PS to be as open, position-based system, actual public service values are more characteristic to career-system.

The report observes that discussing public service ethics evidently was a novel kind of issue. Problems were not seen as connected to ethical issues. They were seen as reason of uncertain ethical demands in the society in general and because of speciality of public activity (Lagerspetz *et al*, 5). It might be caused also due to the lack of ethical discussions within PS. Code of ethics as one of the basic documents was not well known. Despite the developed core values or codes of ethics of organisations awareness of these was also low.

Figure 3: Awareness of codes of ethics



Bigger awareness and use of PS code emerges in the groups of top-managers and higher officials (“use it in my work” accordingly 30% and 20%). Awareness of PS code of ethics is descending towards lower positions. In the group of public employees the percentage of users is zero. Same correlation does not emerge in the case of codes of organisations. Here the biggest users of code are senior officials (21%) and higher officials (18%). Top managers and public employees are using organisation’s code of ethics in the same level (13% and 11% accordingly). In different groups of organisations differences were not very big, fluctuating between 13% (constitutional institutions) and 18% (county governments) in the case of PS code and 14% (ministries) and 25% (other governmental institutions) in the case of organisational code of ethics.

We can conclude that even Estonian public servants carry proper values; they do not do this consciously, by using codes of ethics as basic documents for resolving ethical problems.

Values in organisations

Estonian PS system is highly decentralised. This gives important role to organisations and their departments.

“As departments define their own standards and ways of operating, concerns have been raised that system of “professional socialisation” – that is, the inculcation of public service values – are breaking down. This is exacerbated by increased recruitment from the private sector, often to management or leadership positions. As a result, the traditional coherent public service culture or ethos may be disappearing” (OECD 1996, 21).

Because of the highly decentralised PS it brings to ask what does the espousal of ethical values depend on. This evoked to look closer at the organisational level.

In shaping organisational culture and to enforce ethical values and best practices in PS, human resources management (HRM) departments plays an important role. They are also important because of the lack of other structures in Estonian PS organisations that could deal with ethical issues⁶. One of the hypotheses is that organisations with better HRM work are implementing important values in PSE better. To evaluate the work of HRM departments in organisations the results of recently conducted survey on Estonian PS human resources management (Riigikantselei 2006) are used. Whilst Estonian PS is decentralised, one of the questions was what types of Estonian PS are more aware of ethical problems and are more ready to deal with these kinds of issues.

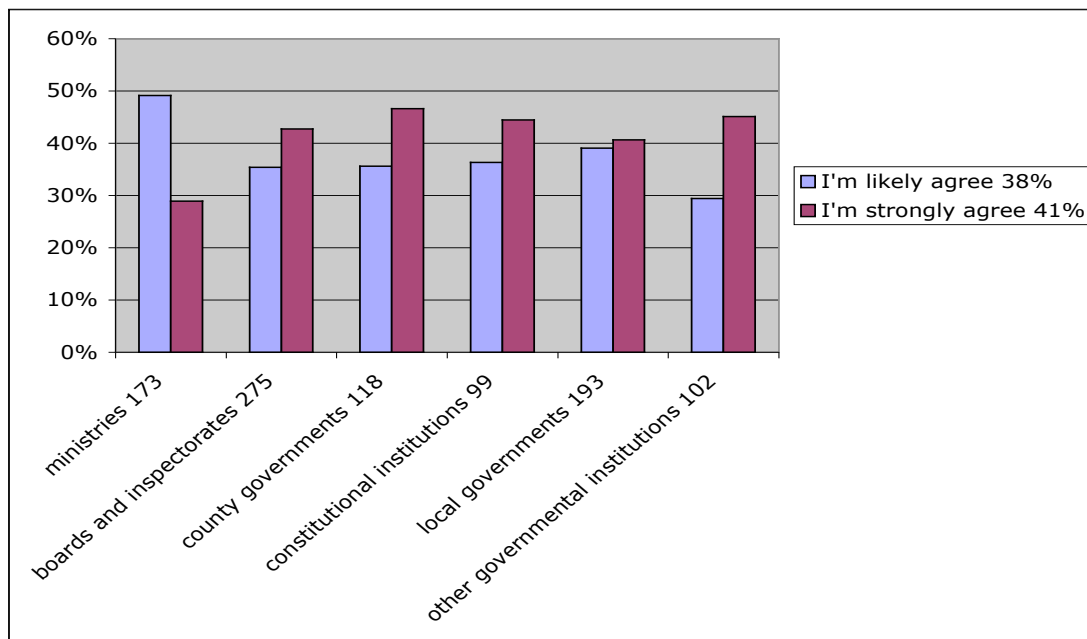
Evaluation of HRM survey assessed three important aspects of HRM: administrative order of HRM (in strategic and everyday level), role of HRM in organisation and cooperation (*ibid*, 13). According to

⁶ In whole Estonian PS there is only one official in State Chancellery, whose direct responsibility is developing and strengthening ethics in PS.

that, organisations can be divided into three groups. In ministries and constitutional institutions contentment with processes is relatively high. There exists good cooperation between top managers and HR staff, they participate in developing the strategic goals of the organisation, organisations have HRM strategy, we can talk about strategic HRM, etc. To the second group belong boards and inspectorates and other governmental institutions. Here the level of the HRM work varies on large extent. HRM personnel fulfils different roles. Work is devoted to minimise *ad hoc* cases. The third group is local and county governments. HRM is not here a systematic activity. In the half of county governments there is no HR stuff. HR work is less regulated than in other groups. HR stuff is not involved in the decision-making process (*ibid* 76-77).

Survey on ethics gives interesting data about common attitudes towards higher ethical demands in different organisations.

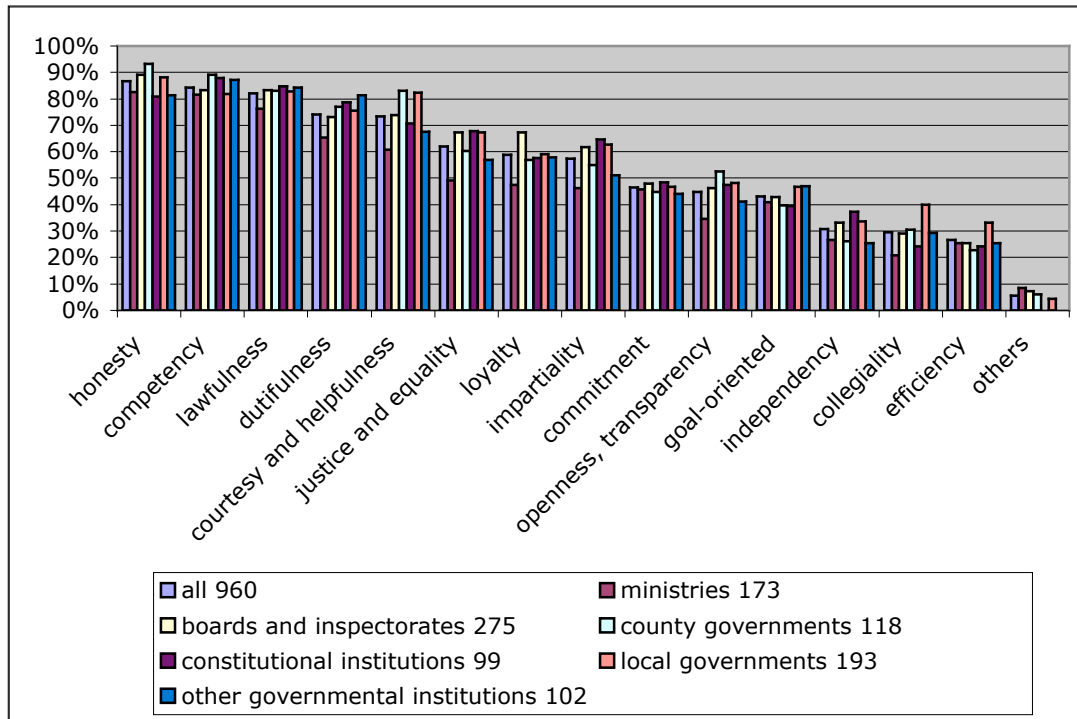
Figure 4: Higher moral demands to public servants (organisations)



As we can see in the figure, almost in all organisations an attitude that ethical demands in PS are higher than in other fields is strongly prevailing. Exception is ministerial level, where 49% likely agreed and only 29% strongly agreed with that statement. Most highly agreed with the statement about higher ethical demands in PS other governmental institutions, to whom mainly different police structures belong. In that case this result can be explained with constant work of awareness of values and ethics demands in police during the last years. In several organisations core values are being worked out. In February 2006 conference on ethics in police department took place. It reveals that in creating ethical professional PS, the important role in raising awareness is in paying attention to ethical questions.

Next figure shows, how ethical values are commonly held in different organisations. In this figure only answers 'very important' to the question 'what values are important in PS according to your opinion?' are indicated. According to above-mentioned figure 2, all named values are commonly recognised as very important or important in PS. I made an assumption that respondents marked as 'very important' the values that are more strongly held and in the case of others the recognition of their importance is commonly accepted but does not indicate strong belief.

Figure 5: Values in PS organisations

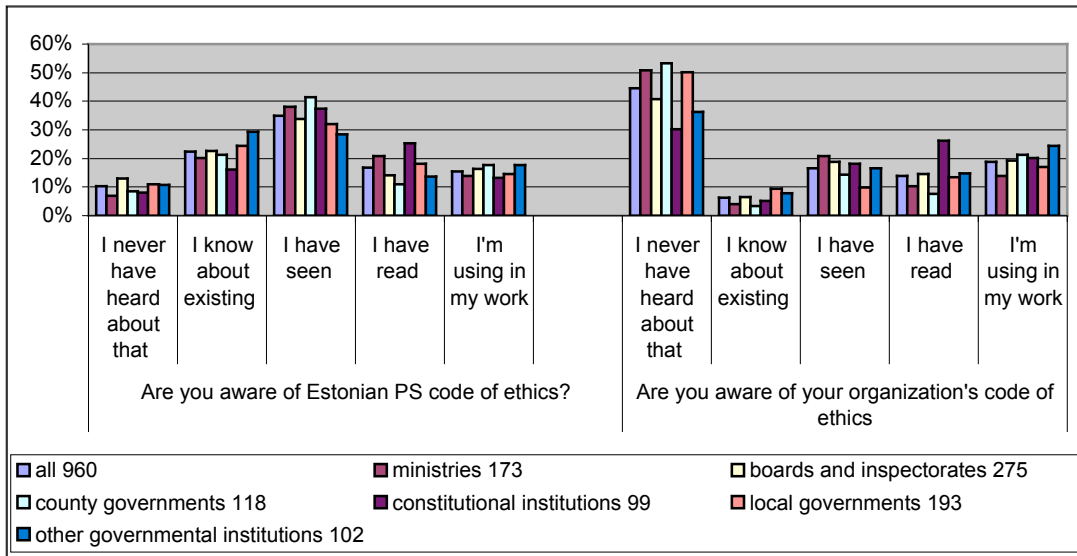


The figure reveals that in ministerial level all listed values are less held than in other organisations. The biggest differences were in justice and equality (average 62%, the smallest in ministerial level 49% and the biggest in constitutional institutions 68%), in courtesy and helpfulness (73%, 61% and 83% in county governments) and in impartiality (58%, 46% and 65% in constitutional institutions). The smallest differences were in efficiency, goal-orientation and commitment. As we can see, less held in ministerial level are values that are in literature named as 'old values' and in the same level with other institutions are 'new values'.

Hierarchical values, common to weberian understanding of PA are the weakest in ministries but at the same time values common to NPM are not more highly valued in there. As we saw from the survey of HRM in Estonian PS, work on human resources is the best in ministerial level. It brings to the conclusion that espousing values in PS is not in the strong correlation with the level of organising the work in HRM departments. It means that holding of values that is distinctive feature of shaping professional body does not depend on how good is HRM work in the certain PS organisation. If so, what does this depend on?

One indication to answer this question might be in looking at awareness of codes of ethics and interdependency of that with needs for training in ethics. In spite of the fact that there are no well-developed mechanisms for avoiding unethical actions in the Estonian PS, a lot of organizations and institutions have their own practices for dealing with these issues. At the same time awareness of these mechanisms is quite low. In the survey we were asking only about knowing the codes of ethics. At the same time organisations may have core values, organisation's inner norms and other regulative documents. On one hand questioning about codes reveals awareness of the Estonian PS code of ethics, mentioned in the oath that every public servant should sign when taking his/her position. On the other hand this shows the general situation in creating organisational regulative mechanisms in the sphere of ethics. Codes of conduct with professional socialisation are seen as one of four parts of ethics infrastructure (OECD 1996, 28). These elements can also be developed within organisation, even if the central coordination bodies in PSE are relatively weak.

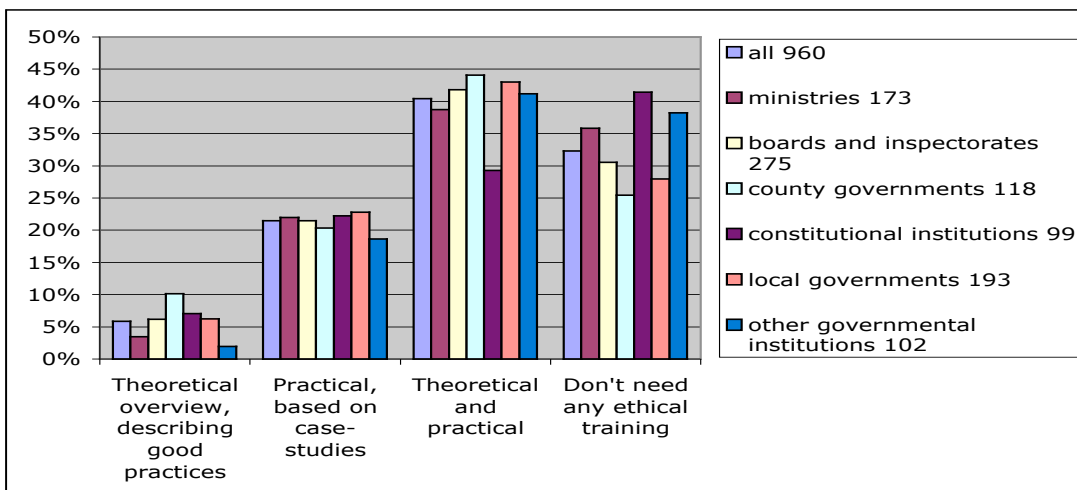
Figure 6: Awareness of the codes of ethics



As we can see, common picture of awareness is following same tendencies in all organisations. Most surprising may be the result that 10% of public servants have never heard about Estonian PS code of ethics. And this is despite signing the oath. One explanation might be that these 10% were appointed before 1999, when the code was adopted. Other reason might be the overall low awareness and weak HRM work in PS in general. In the group of top officials there was nobody who had not heard about the code. In this group the percentage of users of the code was also the highest (30%). Only 13% of top officials are using their organisational codes. The biggest group in this cluster are senior officials, from whom 21% are using organisational codes in their work. On one hand these results give hope that using codes is rising, because top managers are giving good example. At the same time it reveals that the habit to turn to codes in the cases of conflicts of values is not very common and probably codes do not provide enough certainty for the decision-making in the case of ethical problems.

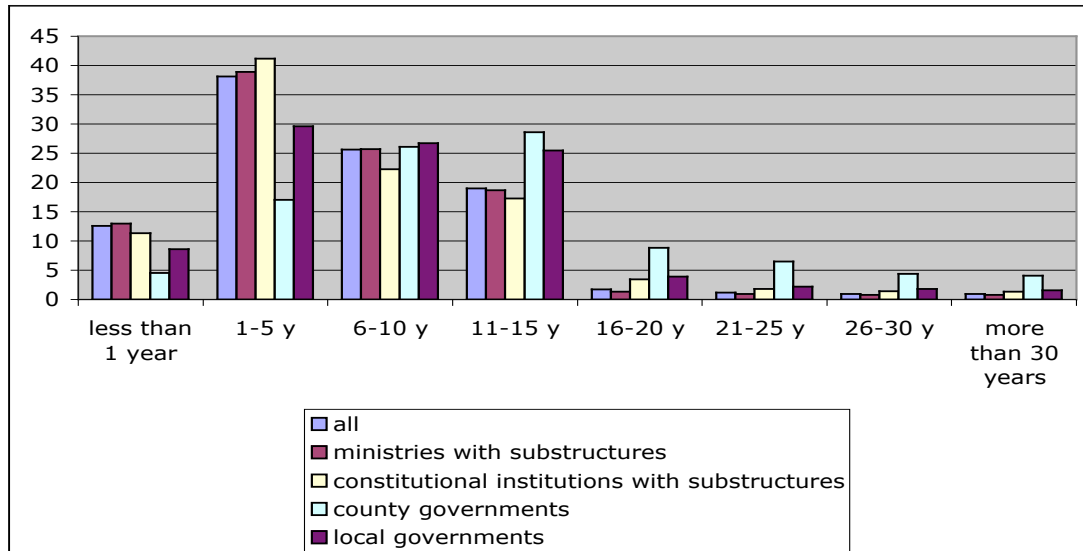
Low awareness of codes may bring to the conclusion that public servants require trainings in ethics. The survey does not affirm this assumption. As we can see, despite the fact that county governments and local governments are recognising all listed ethical values to a large extent, their need for ethical trainings is also quite high. At the same time need for ethical training is lowest in constitutional institutions (41%), in other governmental institutions (38%) and in ministries (36%). It seems hardest to explain the low need for ethical training in other governmental institutions because of above described reasons of good work in raising awareness in ethical questions.

Figure 7: Need for training in ethics



Public servants are relatively young. In 2004 28% of public servants were younger than 30 years and 54% were younger than 40 years. There has also been quite large rotation between public and private sectors during the last years. The public sector is frequently seen as a “jumping-board” for entering private sector. In 2004 14% of public servants left the position and 17% were newly recruits (Riigikantslei 2005).

Figure 8: Length of being in PS organisation



Interesting correlations in needs for training and in holding values occur in comparing with the length of being in position. In county governments we can find the biggest number of public servants being in one organisation more than 10 years (52.4%). In county governments need for ethics trainings is recognised. In these organisations PS values are also widely accepted. Attention has to be paid to the quite big number of public servants in ministries (13%) and constitutional institutions (11.3%) whose tenure in one organisation is less than one year (Riigikantslei 2005, 58- 59). And these organisations can be characterised as organisations with less acceptance of PS values.

Conclusion

Estonian PS is young. Processes in public service have not had strong central coordination and development of the processes is given to particular organisations. On one hand it has been given good results in flexibly resolving urgent matters. On the other hand creating of common ethos has been deficient. Ethics has not been on the top priorities in the development of PS and its organisations. Even if Public Service Act provides common framework to PS and code of ethics is its appendix, this does not assure continuity of processes taking place in PS. Common acceptance of ethics values meets resistance. Survey shows that important PS values for the democratic countries are accepted, but they are not seen as integral part of PS. Awareness of the codes of ethics is quite low and they are not used as one facet for creating professional PS body.

County and local governments are usually seen as less developed organisations in Estonian PS. At the same time survey on values and attitudes reveals that just in these organisations values are most recognised. It can lead to the conclusion that acceptance of professional ethical values in PS may not depend so much on the level of development of HRM work in organisation. In creating common values – common ethos might have bigger influence length of being in position in one organisation and in PS commonly. Longer tenure provides more time for recognising special demands for public servants and for creating organisational culture that is able to preserve such a culture. Young public servants can take over attitudes, and they do not have to invent them or take from the business life. Professional socialisation as a part of implementation of professional values into PS has decisive role in ethics infrastructure.

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