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Bureaucratic incapacity in transition democracies: A case study of decision behaviour in Hungarian central government organisations

DRAFT VERSION!

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The paper intends to conduct a preliminary investigation of the phenomenon of acute "non-decision-making" in Hungarian central governmental bureaucracy. The avoidance of public managers to make decisions and, instead, to push the up to ever higher echelons of bureaucratic hierarchy is, according to the paper's proposition, an important source of the destructive performance problems occurring throughout transition democracies' governments. The paper, first, proposes a conceptual framework, in which the actual subject of the study can be placed. Subsequently, it presents the results of a questionnaire survey of 567 civil servants employed by 47 Hungarian central governmental organisations. Empirical evidence suggests that, on one hand, decision structures in Hungarian central government organisations are strongly biased upwards indeed. On the other hand, however, the effect of shifting decisions upward is not unequivocally destructive. Instead, it is conditional upon the task and environmental characteristics of the organisation. Specifically, ministries – facing the complex and unstructured task of policy formulation and management in a dynamic and uncertain environment – suffer from upward biased decision structures. At the same time, centralised decision making is positively associated with performance in territorial organisations being primarily responsible for the more routine task of administering policies/delivering services in a relatively stable environment.

1 Introduction

From the forties and fifties on there has been an increasing body of scholarly work – and corresponding research results – on the unintended and/or undesirable aspects, or outcomes, of bureaucratic organisations. Be they called, in an encompassing manner, bureaucratic dysfunction or bureaucratic paralysis (Merton 1968 Chapter 8), or be they packed and labelled separately as "unresponsiveness", "red tape", "goal displacement", or "bureaucratic personality" (March and Simon 1993 pp. 55-65, cf. Selznick 1949; in the context of the NPM discourse see e.g. Hughes 2003), these depictions of today's large organisations exert a rather significant effect on how people – either researchers or clients – perceive bureaucracy.

Despite this commonality of critical perspectives on (public) bureaucracies, the key factor motivating the present study is the *déjà vu* seizing me when encountering symptoms of devastating bureaucratic paralysis in some government organisations. The extent of this paralysis seems vastly exceeding the one described in the classical, well-known critiques of bureaucracy both with regards to its scope and to the severity of its consequences.

Most of the above impressions come, understandably, from the Hungarian context; still it seems that to a significant extent other countries in, as well as possibly even outside, the CEE region share in these problems. There are some interesting attempts – for example, the one by Kovryga and Nickel (2004) – to identify the structural, historical, and cultural factors underlying the dysfunctions of public bureaucracies in transition countries (see also Cooley 2000).

Kovryga and Nickel's work is a useful point of reference in starting to map the conceptual terrain, on which the fundamental questions of the present study can be located. What the authors do is presenting a tangible and specific example of the mechanisms possibly leading to an institutionalised, systemic, and built-in "incapacitation" of central governmental bureaucracies. In analysing Ukrainian decentralisation reforms they give an insight into the coordinated networks of social practices functioning as a powerful tool of subverting central government policies. "Ancient" Soviet techniques and mechanisms, such as those of falsifying official statistics and reports by both public and private actors, of institutionalised corruption, and of shadow economy are only actual, specific manifestations, or social forms – as distinct from their underlying social functions – fulfilling this subversive role. Formulated in a functionalist language, from the perspective of stated goals and policies and the rule of law this "incapacitation" of (central) government policies and activities appears of course as severely dysfunctional, on the one hand. On the other, however, it is highly functional on the level of (local) social actors since doing so is a basic and immediate precondition of the survival of individuals and their groups linked together by social/occupational/economic ties: "[i]t simply is not possible [...]to

survive by blindly following centrally made decisions and centrally defined rules" (Kovryga and Nickel 2004 p. 626).

It is not stated here that the above description of "incapacitating" central governmental bureaucracy and policies is universally applicable to post-communist/transition countries' experience, or that it is identical with the problems to be found in Hungary. Still it is clear that if this kind of incapacity exists it is quite different from the types of bureaucratic failure identified by the classics of bureaucratic theory and referred to in the introductory paragraph. Classical failures of bureaucracy result from – or are closely associated with – the overly meticulous nature of procedural prescriptions, and/or the overly meticulous adherence to these ("bureaucratic") rules. In short, classical failures of bureaucracy *are failures of bureaucracy as a (Weberian) ideal type*; they result from the very fact that the affected organisations are, in the Weberian sense of the term, bureaucratic.

My key propositions serving as the conceptual framework of this study are the following:

(a) State incapacity in the sense exposed above is, clearly, different from other types of problems exposed in relation to government bureaucracies in general, and transition democracies' government apparatuses, in particular.

(b) Firstly, bureaucratic incapacity is different from bureaucratic dysfunctions described by the classic critiques of bureaucracy. It results from, or at least seems closely associated with, the non-existence of (sufficiently) detailed procedural prescriptions, and/or the lack of their tedious observance. In other words, this type of incapacity is not a failure of bureaucracy but, rather, a failure resulting from the lack of classical features (or even virtues?) of bureaucratic organisation.

(c) Secondly, it is different from organisational problems resulting from the lack of financial and human resources, or those associated with administrative expertise and know-how.

(d) Thirdly, bureaucratic incapacity is neither a kind of problem resulting from such "unfortunate" chance events/circumstances as the specific mistakes committed by leading politicians or high-ranking officials. But, to the contrary, it seems that bureaucratic incapacity has, like other phenomena of (central) governmental bureaucratic paralysis, a largely predictable and structural character – as opposed to being merely the result of some chance errors, or of some arbitrary deviations from an otherwise valid and effective ideal (hereinafter, I will refer to the first interpretation of decision problems as "structural failure", while the latter approach will be referred to as "chance error" interpretation of bureaucratic failure).

Despite the few attempts to explain the pre-programmed/predictable, systemic and, with Western standards, utterly significant nature of bureaucratic incapacity of many transition countries' central government still it seems that there is a huge scholarly dept even with regards to the mere empirical description of (for some interesting examples in a variety of policy fields in Romania see Ionita 2005; for an example in the field of civil service training see Gajduschek-Hajnal 2003).

Reviewing results of previous research it is peculiar that most attempts at analysing and evaluating public managers' decision behaviour in transition countries are usually characterised by either or both of the "lacking resources" and the "chance error" view. An illustrative example of this "chance error" interpretation of decision behaviour is presented by Evans and Evans (2001). On p. 940 of their study ministry compliance with deadlines for major items of Lithuania's government programme is described in quantitative terms: it is only 10% of the cases when the deadline is respected, meanwhile in about 2/3 of the cases the delay amounts to six months (!) or more. Although the authors admit that such contextual factors as the inherent institutional and political uncertainty seriously impede ministerial effectiveness in, say, preparing policy proposals, they seem to retain the view that the primary source of delayed or lagged ministry response is of a "chance error" character: "A major cause of departmental unreliability occurs when policy proposals are *unreasonably* delayed or simply not brought forward" (ibid. p. 939; emphasis mine).

The predominance of this interpretation of the problem – which might be called, with a grain of salt, "naive" – is nevertheless understandable. First of all, the scarcity of resources, and the resulting

insufficiency of organisational capacity is, indeed, an everyday problem of government administrations not only – but especially – in transition countries. Therefore it is by no means illogical – moreover, in many respects probably right – to identify undevelopment and lacking organisational resources as major sources of organisational underperformance. Moreover, in a broader perspective one might say that looking systemic factors responsible for bureaucratic problems beyond the ones described by classical critiques of bureaucracy is conceptually/theoretically not well established.

The systemic and structural character of a wide array of bureaucratic failures in transition democracies is, most probably, a multi-faceted problem complex, possibly producing a diverse set of problem phenomena. The present study focuses on a narrow, specific and, more importantly, theoretically more easily manageable subset of these problems. The focus is on the subset of these problems that are related to *decision making*; as I will call them, problems of *decision incapacity*. The term "decision incapacity" refers, in the sense used here, neither to the imperfection of the bureaucratic machinery, nor to the personal characteristics of public managers such as some deficiency in their skills or knowledge, or psychological limitations[1]. Before attempting to formulate an analytical style definition of this central concept of the paper it might be useful to give real-life example of the phenomenon it intends to grasp. (For reasons of confidentiality the story is economised.) This is presented in the below Box.

Agency X is one of the larges central agency in Hungary. It operates under the supervision of a large sectoral ministry, and has over one thousand employees located in all 20 county-level territorial units of Hungary. The agency was awarded a – according to Hungarian standards – quite significant chunk of Commission funds earmarked for the introduction of an agency-wide organisational development and quality management programme.

As soon as the tendering procedure was completed and the successful contractor implementing the project was selected an ad-hoc Organisation Development Project Directorate – comprising of all sections of the agency – was formed, and a senior Project Director – directly subordinated to the Director General was appointed. His task was to elaborate the Work Plan of the project. The Work Plan was a key document since its role was to to specify the technical content of the project, and thus its elaboration was an inevitable precondition of the commencement of the project. The Terms of Reference envisaged one month for the elaboration of the Work Plan – being the joint responsibility of the Project Director and the selected contractor –, and 10 month for the complete implementation of the project. What happened in the coming months was, instead, the following:

- *A number of project meetings were convened by the two parties and, as a result, the contractor elaborated a number of Work Plan versions. However, all of these proposals were rejected by the Director General of the agency. Consequently, the project implementation could not take a start.*
- *Naturally, the contractor was highly motivated in getting a Work Plan accepted since (i) the time available for actual work diminished every day, and (ii) the payment of instalments was conditional upon the completing part deliveries. Therefore the contractor made large efforts to reveal the true preferences of the agency management. However, the Project Director was unwilling to make even the smallest decisions in the course of elaborating the Work Plan. For example, it proved to be impossible to induce him to decide even between two minor sub-variants of a project sub-component amounting to a few percentage of the total project. Instead, all such questions, no matter how minor or technical – formally assigned to the Project Director – were transferred to the Director General.*
- *However, the availability of the Director General was, naturally, extremely limited. Consequently, the Work Plan didn't get accepted until the end of the fifth project month. As a result, the time available for project implementation shrunk to five months, instead of the original ten months. Naturally, this*

[1] Nevertheless it is noted that Merton's (1968) concept of bureaucratic personality – focusing on bureaucrats' specific stimulus-response patterns emerging in bureaucratic settings – forms a border-line between subjective, psychologically rooted and structural factors of decision behaviour

meant that the quality of the project became seriously jeopardised, and a large amount of time and effort of both the contractor and the Project Director was spent in vain.

Box 1: A case of decision incapacity

Now how can the phenomenon of decision incapacity be related to the received concept of bureaucratic theory? Not only the classical, Weberian view of bureaucracy (Weber 1980), but also its functionalist critiques (Selznick 1949, Merton 1968) as well as those rooted cognitive science (Simon 1971, Tushman and Nadler 1978) or contingency theory (Burns and Stalker 1961, Lawrence and Lorsch 1967) hold, either implicitly or – mostly – explicitly some assumptions regarding the array of procedural norms prescribing the rules of supervision, decision competence, and the division of labour. Firstly, it is assumed that these rules practically cover all, or at least most, decision situations the organisation might confront. Secondly, it is also assumed that this array of procedural norms is reasonably unambiguous.

However, these assumptions together imply that – as a general rule – bureaucrats can be/are held accountable only for (not) respecting the procedural norms underlying the organisation, irrespective of any further consequences of the observation of these norms. That is, they are freed from any personal responsibility as long as they adhere to the procedural norms underlying the bureaucratic organisation. In the above-mentioned critical models of bureaucracy it is mostly this strict adherence to set of rules fully prescribing the operation of the organisation and its members that leads to the well-known problems of bureaucratic dysfunctions.

Clearly, the problem of decision incapacity seems unlikely to emerge under these conditions of (classical) bureaucracy: bureaucrats can reasonably be expected to be both willing and able to take the decisions they are expected to take. It is only the "information processing system" view of the organisation, rooted in cognitive science, that recognises the threat of bureaucrats being unable to process all the information they need in order to perform the functions they are assigned to perform. But, to be sure, underperformance in processing information and reaching the necessary decisions is, even under such circumstances, still treated as an erroneous deviation from the effective model of bureaucratic organisational processes.

The concept of decision failure (or decision incapacity) can be located, in the context of the present study, within the following cornerstones.

(a) The term "decision" is used in a sense much broader than in, say, decision theory. It involves practically all acts of information processing performed regularly in administrative organisations; for example, the elaboration or the review of a proposal or of another type of document, the appointment of a committee member, the convening of a committee meeting, and so on.

(b) Decision incapacity is present when an act of decision is not performed (i) by the entity, and/or (ii) within the deadline, and/or (iii) with the content or quality prescribed, or customarily expected.

(c) Just like it was the case with bureaucratic incapacity in general, decision incapacity is distinctly different from the classical dysfunctions of bureaucracy in two respects. Firstly, classical dysfunctions of bureaucracy primarily occur when – and usually because – bureaucratic procedural prescriptions *are* followed, meanwhile decision incapacity occurs when these prescriptions are *not* followed. Secondly, classical dysfunctions of bureaucracy are, as you would expect, problems occurring in organisations exhibiting the virtues, or the vices, or Weberian bureaucracy. To the contrary, decision incapacity is – or, more exactly, it is hypothesised to be – a dysfunction of organisations *not* having an ideal typical Weberian character.

The ambition of the present paper is quite modest. It can be summarised as follows: (i) to give a rough insight into the prevalence of the problem of decision incapacity in Hungarian central governmental

organisations; (ii) to explore, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, its relationship with some basic organisational phenomena – most of all, its effect on some aspects of organisational performance.

2 Method

The method of the present study is, admittedly, rooted more in a careful analysis of some limited empirical evidence than in meticulous identification or creation of theoretical constructs and of models linking them together. The major features of this empirical material and the way is was analysed is outlined briefly in the below sub-sections.

2.1 The instruments used

2.1.1 Decision failure

The central question of the present study is civil servants' underperformance in regards to making the appropriate administrative actions within the expected deadline and in the expected quality. It has to be emphasised at the outset that asking evaluative questions regarding one's own work performance in a questionnaire survey, and especially in one based on personal interviews is, generally, a waste of time. No one could reasonably expect respondents to give an unbiased and critical view of their work effectiveness. To the contrary, in many cases there is probably even a systematic bias in that respondents more critical and conscious about the nature and scope of work related problems, while delivering higher work performance, might report lower levels of satisfaction than those lacking in these qualities.

While the above can be accepted as a general rule of thumb, it is especially true in the case of Hungarian central governmental agencies. The organisational political context characteristic of Hungarian central governmental organisations is highly fragile, politicised, and ambiguous. Moreover, it is characterised by periodically appearing across-the-board personnel "rationalisation" campaigns, and sweeping changes in management induced by changes in government or even by changes in top ministry management, reaching as many as three to four levels down from the top. Consequently, it would have been utterly unrealistic to expect even modestly unbiased answers to any direct, easy-to-recognise evaluative questions asked in relation to one's own work performance. This serious limitation had to be kept in mind when setting the specific goals/ambitions of the survey, and elaborating the instruments to be used.

The central variable of the study is "decision incapacity". In the view of the previous arguments, clearly, it would have been entirely useless to ask questions of the type "how often do you (or does your supervisor) fail to perform the administrative tasks prescribed or regularly expected?" Instead, a more limited, but more realistic approach was chosen in order to find/create a workable proxy measure of decision incapacity.

Namely, we tried to capture one specific manifestation of decision failure: namely, the extent, to which civil servants are attempting to "push decisions up one level", as opposed to making decisions autonomously. Specifically, management level respondents being entitled with **a**utonomous **d**ecision **c**ompetences (hereinafter: ADC) were asked to state the frequency, with which they consulted their supervisor in acting on issues of ADC[2].

[2] Note that the term "competence" refers, in its current usage, not to the personal abilities or skills of the manager, but – as a fundamentally legal term – to the existence of a legal ground for performing a specific (administrative) act

The rationale for choosing this proxy measure was as follows:

- Since the concept of ADC is, in a public administration organisational context, precisely defined by Hungarian administrative laws and regulations, it can reasonably be expected to have a rather general and uniform understanding both across respondents and between respondents and the researchers.
- An ADC means that, according to the administrative regulations in effect, the person entitled with the given competence has the full right (in the legal sense) to perform the given administrative act on his or her own, i.e. without consulting any superiors. Therefore "consulting the supervisor" in such matters can be assumed an equivalent – or, rather, a euphemism – of pushing the given decision up to the superior's level.
- Finally, it was assumed that the formulation used (that is, "consulting the supervisor…") seems sufficiently "innocent and harmless" not to provoke respondents' suspicion and thus it enables the researchers to yield relatively valid and unbiased responses.

In line with the Hungarian Law on Administrative Procedures effective in the time of the survey, the term "decision" used in the preceding paragraphs refers to a broad spectrum of administrative acts, including the review or commenting of a draft piece of legislation, personnel decisions, and so on. High frequency of refraining from taking such an administrative act autonomously and, instead, relying on the supervisor's approval means, in general, a lower efficiency of the bureaucratic organisation perceived as an information processing system. A lower frequency of avoiding autonomous decision making shows, to the contrary, a less widespread presence of this type of decision failure.

2.1.2 Organisational performance

As noted earlier, beside offering a descriptively oriented insight into the prevalence of decision incapacity in Hungarian central governmental organisations, it was also an objective of the research to examine its effect on organisational performance; after all, the starting point of the investigation was exactly the insufficiency of organisational performance. Therefore some measures of organisational performance were necessary to establish. But analysing performance, or effectiveness, of public organisations involves a number of difficulties. Three central difficulties are emphasised here, listed in a descending order or abstraction.

Firstly, organisational performance is a conceptually very broad and vague notion. For example, Quinn and Rohrbaugh (1983), in their seminal and overarching work on the meaning of organisational performance, differentiate between about thirty possible meanings and "sub-concepts" of the organisational performance (or, as they call it, organisational effectiveness) concept.

Secondly, an additional difficulty stems from the limited operationalisability of whichever concept of organisational performance is picked. In the case of business enterprises financial indicators (e.g. return on investment or on assets: Gordon and DiTomaso 1992, Newman and Nollen 1996) or market indicators (share and growth indicators) etc. are relied on. Operationalising performance – and especially performance change – in the case of public administration organisations is a distinctively more complex task (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2000 Chapter 5).

Finally, the very method of the current study – which was self-administered questionnaire survey – implied a third obstacle. Measuring/operationalising phenomena on the basis of the subjective assessments/perceptions of respondents is a relatively sound method only if the phenomenon under study relates mostly to the inner world of the respondent. However, in this case a phenomenon – which is in itself a complex and difficult-to-interpret theoretical construct – lies outside of the inner world of individual respondents is studied. In such cases there is a high risk that individual perceptions and responses are, possibly, biased by an innumerable number of contextual factors unrelated to the phenomenon studied in an uncontrollable way.

In the view of these difficulties it was decided that primarily those measures of organisational performance will be relied on which (i) can either reasonably be expected to be approximated by, or (ii) are, conceptually, part of, the respondent's subjective experience. Such measures might include, for example, morale/job satisfaction, perceived quality of team work, or the perceived value of human resources within the organisation.

Clearly, such measures seem to be quite "soft" in the sense that don't consider "the number of units produced in a given time (productivity) and the number of units produced for a given number of input units (efficiency)" specific for the "rational system model [characterised by a] mechanistic, instrumental bias" (Quinn and Rohrbaugh 1983 p. 364). Nevertheless, they are an integral part of the natural system approach of organisation considering "not only the production function, but also the activities required for the unit to maintain itself … from this organic view, attention is focused on such properties as morale and cohesion" (ibid.).

In order to increase the validity of the measures applied – i.e. to lessen the threats to the validity of measurement – instruments already in widespread usage were applied, since it was assumed that these measures have to some extent been validated and thus possess a somewhat greater extent of credibility. Therefore ,with a few exceptions, instruments applied in various U.S. federal employee surveys, like e.g. in the U.S. Office of Personnel Management's "National partnership for reinventing government employee survey (1999)" (Office or Personnel Management 1999), were utilised.

In order to increase the validity and the reliability of data on organisational performance individual level responses were aggregated on the organisational level. That is, organisational performance variables actually used in the analyses were calculated as the arithmetic mean of individual perceptions of organisational performance. The individuals whose perceptions were averaged included in this case not only those in managerial positions but all employees working in the given organisation.

2.1.3 Organisation type

The class of central government organisations is made up of three distinct types of organisations. On the top of the organisational hierarchy one finds ministries (at the time of the survey there were altogether 16 organisations of ministerial status). One level below one finds the organisation type of central agencies. These are quite similar to ministries, in that they form part of the executive branch and have nation-wide competencies. The main difference is in regards to their role in policy making. While ministries are led by Cabinet members (political appointees), and thus have a fundamental role in initiating and shaping government policies, central agencies and – especially – deconcentrated organs do not have such a role (at least formally). Moreover, agencies' and deconcentrated organs' task usually has a territorial dimension more expressed than it is the case with ministries: the fulfilment of their tasks requires them to maintain a territorial (regional, country, or even local level) organisational infrastructure. Examples for this type of organisations include the National Tax Authority or the National Bureau of Statistics. Finally, the third organisation type is called deconcentrated organs. They are strictly subordinated either to ministries or to central agencies, and their task is to provide a given, well-defined administrative service on a territorial (local, county, or regional) level. While some of these services are provided by county or municipal level self-governments, services requiring the same, universal standards in the entire territory of the country are usually allocated to deconcentrated organs. Examples of this type of organisations include the local sub-offices of the Employment Agency or the Regional Environmental Protection Inspectorates.

The type of organisation was hypothesised to have a pivotal importance in examining the nature and the consequences of decision failure as operationalised here. The most important factor underlying this importance is the large and systematic differences in some key contextual characteristics associated with different organisational types. The term "contextual characteristics" – as used here – involves both environmental features and those related to the internal work processes of the organisation referred to earlier (Burns and Stalker 1961, Lawrence and Lorsch 1967, Woodward 1958).

At the one extreme, ministerial organisations have largely unstructured and complex, unpredictable and dynamic task characteristics. They are exposed to the hectically changing political and public, including media, expectations and pressures, and are constantly confronted with substantial and ill-defined policy problems and dilemmas. Deconcentrated organisations, at the other extreme, are usually characterised by largely routine, mechanical task characteristics, mostly concentrating around the enforcement/implementation of administrative regulatory laws. One might think of such examples as food safety and sanitary control units, or lower level tax bureaux, where large numbers of similar, standard, and mechanic cases are processed. Central agencies are, finally, in between the above two extremes, in part characterised by the presence of unstructured and complex strategic problem, which is nevertheless substantially softened by the very narrow specialisation (competency area) and the resulting predominance of bureaucratic-professional – as opposed to political – influence.

2.2 The data

The empirical basis of the study is a questionnaire survey of Hungarian civil servants. The population surveyed is the entirety of public employees having the legally defined status of a civil servants. This includes those employed in the central and territorial organisations of central government as well as those employed by local (municipal) and territorial (county level) self-governments. According to the current legal regulations, the status of civil servant in Hungary is given only to employees employed in a substantive position in organisations exerting state power. For example, clerks and managers of ministries, of deconcentrated (territorial) organs of state administration, and of offices of local and county self-governments belong to this category. To the contrary, teachers, doctors, railway and post employees etc. are not civil servants. Moreover, technical staff – such as electricians, car drivers – employed by ministries or self-governments are not civil servants either[3].

The questionnaire survey was based on personal interviews. The survey was conducted in September 2003. At this time, the population surveyed – i.e., the entire Hungarian civil service – consisted of approximately 97 thousand civil servants. A nationally representative sample of n=1000 respondents was selected in a fully random, stratified, two-stage cluster sampling procedure. For the purpose of the present study only a sub-sample of the original one was used: those employed by (i) ministerial, (ii) central agency, or (iii) territorial organs of central government administration. Civil servants employed by local and county self-governments were omitted, since the present study focuses exclusively on central governmental administration.

The sub-sample of central governmental civil servants consisted of a total of 567 respondents, who were employed by 47 public administration organisations. These organisations included 5 ministries, 9 central agencies, and 33 territorial (deconcentrated) organisations. However, for certain analyses – most of all those related to the decision behaviour of civil servants in managing positions – due to reasons outlined in the previous sub-section the population surveyed and thus the sample was further restricted to include only those employed in a managerial position. This included n=162 managers in central government organisations. For other analyses, such as those related to the measurement of organisational performance, the larger sub-sample of n=567 respondents was applied, which includes civil servants in non-managerial positions.

The participation in the survey was voluntary, and anonymity of individual responses was guaranteed throughout the entire process of data collection, analysis, and reporting.

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[3] Some "border line" categories of civil servants – such as those employed by the Central Bank or by the House of Parliament – were omitted from the population for conceptual reasons. However these groups amount to only a negligible fraction of the entire population of civil servants.

3 Results

3.1 Patterns of decision failure

The below chart summarises the responses of central government civil servants employed in managerial positions. 77%, that is, a total of 125 respondents gave valid answers to the question "How often do you consult your supervisor in acting on issues of ADC?". The most remarkable feature of the figures is that approximately 70% of respondents reported that such consultations take place in "most" or "all" of the cases.

When interpreting this figure one should keep in mind that – as noted in the section on methodology – in relation to most issues of ADC managers are, so to say, supposed to be act and decide on their own. The legally defined entitlement of managers with ADC is, usually, awarded only in those cases/subject areas, in which there is a real and straightforward possibility as well as necessity of acting autonomously.

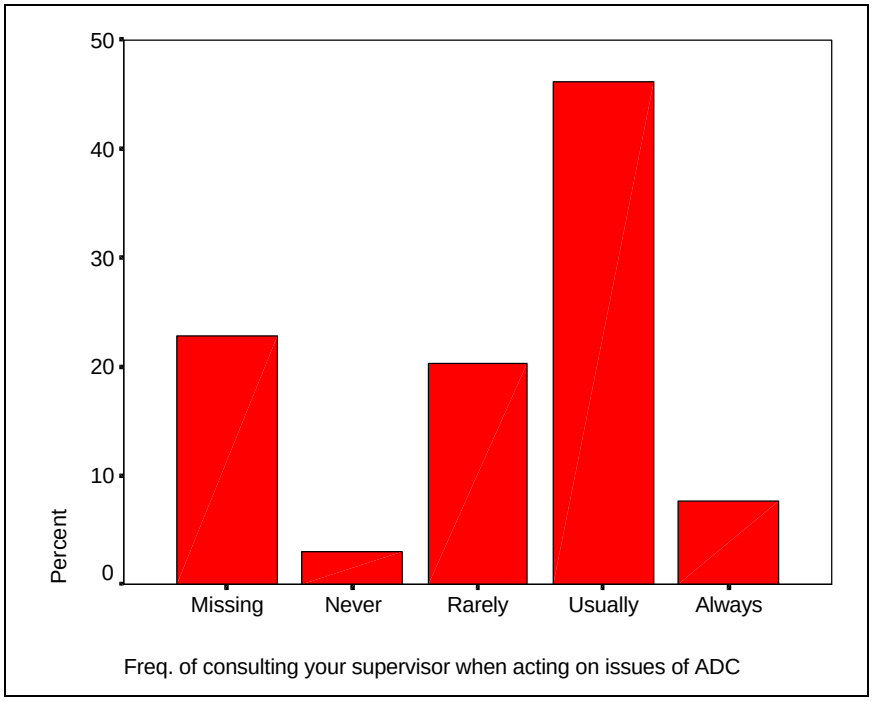

Figure 1: Observed relative frequencies of various types of decision behaviour related to issues of "Autonomous Decision Competence (ADC)" (n=162)

On the next chart the responses to the same questionnaire item are plotted, but this time subdivided according to the type of organisation. As noted in the methodology section the contextual features (environmental characteristics and task profiles) of administrative apparatuses strongly differs across different types of organisations – ministry, central agency, and deconcentrated organs. These differences might play an important role in analysing the consequences of decision behaviour since e.g. in the case of by largely mechanical and routinised organisational processes – which is the case in of most deconcentrated organs – one would, theoretically, expect "bureaucratic" (i.e. having a higher degree of specialisation, of formalisation, and of decentralised decision making) organisations perform better. In other words, one may expect, both on grounds of theoretical considerations and on those of common sense, that managers of deconcentrated (territorial) administrative organisations, routinely handling and deciding upon large numbers of similar/standard cases, act in a substantially more autonomous manner than do managers of central agencies, let alone those of ministries.

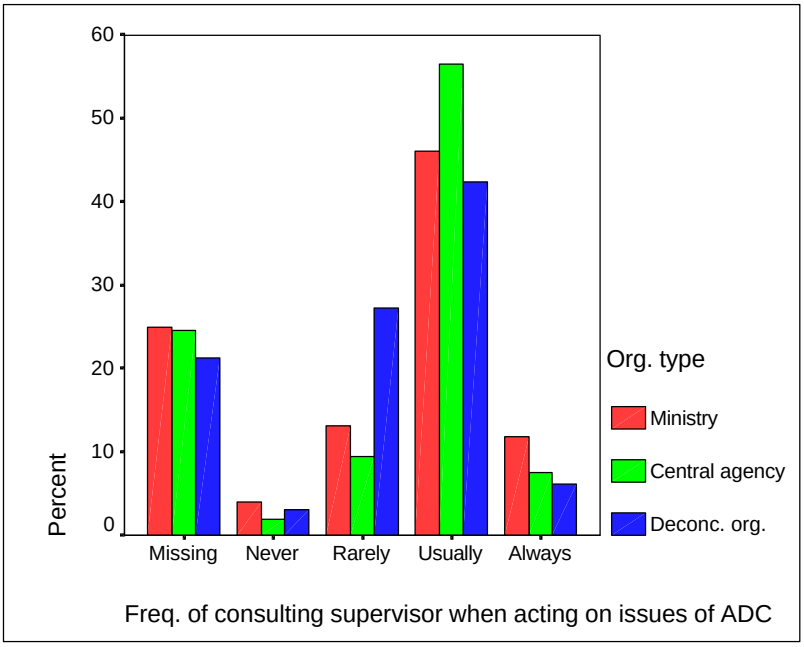

Figure 2: Relative frequencies of various types of decision behaviour related to issues of ADC, broken down by organisation type (n=162)

However, the most interesting feature of the pattern is that there are no real differences across organisation types in the extent of pushing up decisions[4]. If non-respondents are excluded from the analysis and percentages are calculated on the basis of valid responses only, the picture becomes somewhat different. The proportion of those consulting their boss when acting on issues of ADC either "usually" or "always" is in this case 77% in ministries, 85% in central agencies, while only 62% in deconcentrated organs.

All in all, such comparative analyses across the three layers of Hungarian central government administration do not alter the basic picture: managers' avoidance of acting independently – or, in other words, the extent to which they try to push/transfer the decisions one level up – is more or less univocally large in the entire central government administration. While this finding is surprising on theoretical grounds, it is mostly in line with *a priori* expectations.

In the next sub-section I go on to identify some of the consequences of the pattern revealed so far. According to the preliminary hypothesis, these consequences are rather destructive for the operation of both the organisation in particular, and that of the entire governmental administration, in general. However, the empirical data presented below sheds a somewhat different light on this question. Before proceeding to review the analyses of the organisational performance-decision behaviour link a few words about the methodological aspects of performance measurement are in order.

3.2 Assessing organisational performance

Until now, the individual respondent served as the basic unit of analysis. This was justified since (i) the actual subject of the analyses was, conceptually, an individual level phenomenon (perceptions on one's own decision behaviour) and (ii) the origin of the data used was individual responses of managers.

However, in this sub-section I proceed to assess the link between decision behaviour and performance. From a methodological aspect this is a significant change. Firstly, organisational performance is

[4] Pearson's Chi-square test – which is used to measure the association between categorical data – shows no significant relationship between organisation type and the frequency of pushing up decisions; the corresponding p value is 0.345

definitely not an individual level concept. Individuals don't have "organisational performance", even if we focus only on some specific, relatively narrow aspects of the broad concept of organisational performance. However, organisational performance is assessed on the basis of individual responses. This is similar to e.g. the comparative analysis of student performance, whereby each country's score is assessed on the basis of individual level measurement, the results of which are aggregated at the country level.

Secondly, in addition to the above, theoretical argument, there is another – more practical, but not less compelling – argument. Namely, when it comes to assessing an organisation's performance, whatever the actual sub-concept and its operationalisation is, it is highly likely that managers' perceptions differ from those of subordinates in a systematic and predictable manner. Exactly this is the case with the performance measures applied in the present study: out of the 9 measures, the managers scored significantly higher in the case of 5 measures (below the p=0.0005 level). The measures applied and the corresponding significance levels are plotted in the below table.

Var. #	Performance dimension/variable	Significance level of difference in managers' vs. non-managers' perceptions[5]
1	"Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your job?"	0.337
2	"A spirit of cooperation and teamwork exists in my immediate work unit"	<0.0005
3	"I am satisfied with my salary"	<0.0005
4	"I have all material conditions necessary for performing my job on a high level"	0.442
5	"Are you clear about how "good performance" is defined in your work unit"	0.161
6	"At the place I work, my opinions seem to count."	<0.0005
7	"In the last two years my autonomy in work has increased"	<0.0005
8	"In the past 2 years, the productivity of my work unit has improved"	<0.0005
9	"Recognition and rewards are based on merit."	<0.0005

Table 1: Performance measures (or dimensions) applied and corresponding significance levels of t-tests of the difference in managers' vs. non-managers' perceptions

The question whether decision behaviour as operationalised here – i.e., the extent of "pushing up" decisions on issues of ADC – can be understood as an organisational level concept also deserves some attention. However, if we recall what was written in Section 1 exposing the problem of decision failure it becomes clear that decision failures – thus, "pushing up" decisions as one specific type of decision failure – was defined as being far from an individual level characteristics. To the contrary, it is associated with meta-individual, systemic features, most probably appearing on an organisational level, or even on the level of the entire administrative system.

[5] p-values of independent-sample t-tests

On the basis of the above arguments it is justified to change the level of analysis from the individual to the organisational level[6].

3.3 Assessing the link between decision behaviour and organisational performance

In this final sub-section of reviewing analytical findings the question asked is twofold.

(a) Firstly, does the phenomenon of "pushing decisions up" affect certain, selected aspects/proxy measures of organisational performance?

(b) If yes, secondly, is there a difference in this pattern of relationship when examining it in different layers/organisation types of central governmental bureaucracy, such as in ministries, central agencies, and deconcentrated organs?

The primary means of answering the former question was calculating bivariate correlation coefficients between the dependent variables (i.e., the performance variables), and the explanatory variable (pushing up decisions). In the case of question (b) the method remained the same, except that the correlation analysis was separately performed among ministries, central agencies, and deconcentrated organs.

Ad (a):

The answer to the first question is very brief and, for the first sight, disappointing: there is no recognisable relationship between decision behaviour and performance across various central governmental organisations. In other words, while the organisations surveyed do differ significantly with regards to the extent, to which "pushing decisions up" exists in them, these differences do not seem to affect the performance of the organisations.

Ad (b):

The above results become much easier to interpret in the light of examining the same relationships separately in ministries, central agencies, and deconcentrated organs. However, analysing the correlation in data containing very few observations (records) poses some problems (note that the number of ministries in the sample is five, and even the most numerous type of organisations – deconcentrated organs – amount to only 33 in number). When such a small number of cases are analysed even one "extreme" organisation can fundamentally destroy/bias the analytical results.

Being "extreme" – or, in statistical jargon, being an outlier – means that the given organisation is, for some specific reasons not present in other organisations, "very different" (e.g. in terms of its observed characteristics or in terms of the pattern of relationships between these characteristics). For example,

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[6] However, there is an additional question related to what Hofstede (1984) terms as the "reverse ecological fallacy". In the present context, this term refers to the often-committed mistake of aggregating individual level responses on a higher (in this case organisational) level of analysis without looking for any *empirical* proofs that individual perceptions refer to the same, "meta-individual" phenomenon.

One way of making sure whether this is the case indeed is checking if individuals' perceptions of the same organisation coincide, while individuals' perceptions in different organisations differ to a "significantly large" extent. A commonly used statistical technique for doing this is analysis of variance (ANOVA). Separate ANOVAs were carried with all performance variables as well as for the decision behaviour variable as dependent variable, and organisational membership as independent (factor) variable.

The result of these analyses was that it is justified to aggregate performance variables on the organisational level: between-organisation differences are significant well below the 0.05 level for all ten performance variables (except for variable no. 2). The case is somewhat different with regards to the decision behaviour variable. Here the results were not significant. However, when the analysis was repeated on a newly calculated, dichotomous variable ("high vs. low extent" of pushing up decisions) the results became significant at the $p=0.067$ level.

the National Tax Authority faced, in the time of the survey, a downsizing/rationalisation programme the seriousness of which was almost unprecedented in the history of the agency. This created a large uncertainty and anxiety throughout the organisation which, in turn, resulted in extremely poor performance perceptions (note that most of these perceptions have a slight "job satisfaction" character). Moreover, there might emerge an even larger problem of undifferentiated perceptions (in this case the variance of performance perceptions is very low). Clearly, in such a case it is reasonable to exclude the given organisation from further analyses. In our case, there was one such outlier in all three categories of organisations. Consequently, one ministry (the Ministry for Environment and Water Control), one central agency (the National Tax Authority), and one deconcentrated organ (the Hajdúszoboszló Territorial Office of the National Office of Registry of Title Deeds) was excluded from further analyses[7].

The result of correlation analyses – repeated separately on ministries, central agencies, and deconcentrated organs – was that *in ministries and deconcentrated organs* (i) there is a *large and significant correlation* between "pushing up" decisions and various aspects of organisational performance, and (ii) the sign (*direction) of this relationship is opposite*. Specifically, while pushing decisions up deteriorates organisational performance in ministries, it is positively associated with performance in deconcentrated organs.

#	Performance dimension	Ministry	Central agency	Deconcent-rated organ
1	"Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your job?"	-0,943**	0,575*	0,476*
2	"A spirit of cooperation and teamwork exists in my immediate workgroup"	-0,917*	0,375	0,580**
3	"I am satisfied with my salary"	-0,966**	0,360	0,367*
4	"I have all material conditions necessary for performing my job on a high level"	-0,040	0,088	0,510*
5	"Are you clear about how "good performance" is defined in your work unit"	0,147	0,300	0,761**
6	"At the place I work, my opinions seem to count."	-0,952**	0,612*	0,378*
7	"In the last two years my autonomy in work has increased"	-0,311	0,792**	-0,037
8	"In the past 2 years, the productivity of my work unit has improved"	-0,887*	0,570*	0,373*
9	"Recognition and rewards are based on merit."	-0,370	0,520*	0,363

** Significant correlation (below the ~0.2 level) ** Highly significant correlation (below the ~0.05 level)*

Table 2: Person coefficients of correlation between decision behaviour and performance variables in ministries, central agencies, and deconcentrated organs

[7] The organisations to be excluded were selected on the basis that they exhibited (i) very low levels of performance assessment, whereby (ii) performance indicators were unequivocally poor in all nine dimensions measured. Practically, the organisations excluded were identified as the poorest performers in almost all imaginable aspects of organisational performance and job satisfaction.

Nevertheless, correlations measured in the class of central agencies are – although statistically less significant – similar to those that can be found among deconcentrated organs. This fact is interpreted so that central agencies (i) stand in-between the other two organisational types in terms of the nature of the performance-decision behaviour relationship but (ii) "behave" more like deconcentrated organs with respect to how decision behaviour affects performance.

Focusing to the remaining two organisation types, it is variables no. 1, 2, 3, 6, and 7 where the significance level is below the level of approximately to 0.2[8]. The average correlation in the case of these five variables is –0.933 among ministries, while +0.435 with respect to deconcentrated organs. This means that while "pushing up" decisions affects ministry performance in a highly damaging manner, it is conductive of organisational performance in the case of deconcentrated organs.

In the case of the remaining performance dimensions/aspects – where significance was above the 0.2 level – the pattern of the relationship is similar to the one described above (except for performance variable #5).

4 A summary: Putting the findings in perspective

The starting point of the research was the proposition that transition democracies' (central) governmental bureaucracies are "incapacitated" not/not only (i) by well known, classical dysfunctions of bureaucracies, (ii) by the lack of material, know-how, or knowledge resources, or (iii) by the simple "mistakes" committed by the executives and politicians commanding them, but by systemic, structural factors different from the ones listed above. However, existing theoretical and empirical work surveying the nature and the scope of these factors is insufficient.

The present study intends to go one step forward on the way of creating an adequate empirical description and theoretical explanation of the problem complex of the bureaucratic incapacity supposedly characteristic for many transition countries' governmental organisations. The means selected for fulfilling this ambition is a case study of decision behaviour in Hungarian central governmental organisations, based on a representative questionnaire survey.

"Decision behaviour" of public officials is an important factor since, according to my proposition, one specific aspect, or instance, of this systemic incapacity is the pattern of decision behaviour I call "pushing up" decisions. This term refers to the reluctance of managers to act independently and, instead, their inclination to push decisions upwards in the hierarchy. It follows from this framework that pushing decision upwards is hypothesised to have a highly destructive effect on the operation of central governmental organisations. Empirically founded answers were sought to the following questions:

(a) Does the behavioural pattern of "pushing up" decisions exist, and if yes how prevalent is it in the various layers of central governmental organisational hierarchy?

(b) If the phenomenon of "pushing up" decisions is indeed a widespread one what is its effect of organisations' operation? Specifically: does it really have a detrimental effect on organisational effectiveness?

As it follows from the framing/exposition of the problem the answer to both questions was expected to be, according to the initial hypothesis, "yes". That is, pushing decisions up was assumed to be a systemic, and thus widespread, feature of Hungarian central governmental bureaucracy; and moreover, it was assumed to have a highly destructive effect on how organisations operate. (Although it is noted

[8] Note that we are speaking about data sets with as few as 4 and 33 cases (data records); therefore the customary rule of thumb setting the significance threshold at 0.05 cannot be applied here

in parentheses that the extent of damage caused by "pushing up" decisions was expected to be definitely smaller in the case of lower tiers of governmental organisational hierarchy.)

The empirical findings presented in the previous section partly reinforced, but partly disaffirmed the above hypotheses.

As to Hypothesis (a), the behavioural pattern of managers shuffling the responsibility of autonomous decision making off and, instead, relying on their supervisor's guidance is a widespread phenomenon indeed. Not less importantly, its presence is largely uniform irrespective of the layer of organisational hierarchy: ministries, central agencies, and deconcentrated organs exhibit the same characteristics in this regard. This fact strongly supports the idea that "pushing up" decisions is not a circumstantial phenomenon depending on the actual organisational and personal contingencies, but a systemic feature, being probably deeply embedded in the cultural and structural characteristics of public bureaucracies.

As to Hypothesis (b), the finding reached partly reinforces, but partly contradicts to the initial hypothesis. On the one hand, the hypothesised relationship – i.e., that avoiding decision making harms organisational performance – holds true in the case of ministries. On the other, however, the opposite is true in the case of deconcentrated organs of central government.

It is not quite unexpected that the type of organisation (ministerial vs. deconcentrated) plays such a decisive role; the type of organisation was selected as a control variable exactly because (i) contextual (environment and task) characteristics were thought to play an important role and because (ii) organisation type is a good (proxy) measure of these contextual characteristics. Still it doesn't seem to be a trivial task to interpret the finding reached.

One of the more immediate objections to the conclusions reached might be of a methodological nature. In this regard it must be admitted that the robustness of the finding is less than optimal. While the results of the statistical analyses seem convincing the instrument chosen to measure the "extent of pushing up decisions" is not sufficiently validated. That is, it would – ideally – need further empirical examination to make sure whether the questionnaire instrument applied measures what it is intended to measure, indeed. However, on the basis of available information – including follow-up interviews with practitioners and scholars familiar with the Hungarian administrative context – it seems justified to accept the finding if not at its face value but, at least, as a strong argument deserving attention and interpretation[9].

If, however, this is the case indeed than a number of further questions emerge. To mention but the two most central and obvious ones:

(a) Why does this behaviour exist; how can it be explained on the level of the individual actor (i.e. what the underlying psychological motifs/interest structures are), and how can it be explained/mapped on a system level?

(b) Why is it that avoiding autonomous acting and, instead, pushing decisions upwards is not, as one would expect, generally detrimental for organisational performance but, instead, seems even to promote performance under certain circumstances?

The first question, clearly, points further towards the necessity of building theoretically grounded concepts of decision incapacity and of bureaucratic incapacity, and to relate these concepts to the other ones used in bureaucratic/organisational analysis. I have to admit that it is clearly beyond the scope of ambition set for the present paper to give such a general, overarching conceptual foundation for the

[9] Moreover, one should not forget about the fact that the performance was operationalised as encompassing only a specific and narrow sub-concept of the true meaning of the term. This means the numerous key aspects, or dimensions, of organisational performance were not included in the analyses. Nevertheless, one should note that organisational performance is an inherently multidimensional concept, as opposed to being homogenous and composed of only one conceptual dimensions; that is, an organisation can have high performance in one respect and low in another one (Cheng and McKinley 1983, Quinn and Rohrbaugh 1983).

problem complex of bureaucratic incapacity. Nevertheless, there are certain important points of reference useful in setting the conceptual boundaries of analysis. In addition those exposed in the introductory section some additional ones are suggested below, in relation to discussing the second question.

Now turning to the second question, the situation is somewhat different from – and possibly better than – the above one. The finding that the (relative) lack of autonomous managerial behaviour might, under certain circumstances, improve the performance of governmental bureaucracies implies that the very concept of autonomous managerial behaviour – and its counterpart, the "pushing up" of decisions – has to be to some extent re-evaluated.

According to the initial framework of the study, autonomous managerial decision behaviour was seen definitely as a factor advancing organisational performance. Indeed, "letting managers manage" and "getting rid of red tape" has been a leading motive of New Public Management reforms seeking ways to improve organisational performance. This attitude is reinforced by the findings of the present research *with regards to ministries* – but only ministries.

The finding that in a context characterised by uncertainty, complexity, and unstructured task characteristics "letting managers manage" is beneficial for organisational performance is in accordance not only with the well-known NPM-style considerations referred to above. This result also in agreement with some more classical results of organisation research – dating back at least to the heydays of contingency theory – suggesting that organisations having *certain* bureaucratic features may, under specific circumstances, perform better than without those features (Lawrence and Lorsch 1969, Woodward 1958). Focusing on the specific context of Hungarian central governmental organisations, the same conclusion was reached a previous study performed among Hungarian central governmental organisations (Hajnal 2004, 2005a). The study – focusing this time only on ministerial organisations – found that bureaucratic organisational practices/organisational culture deteriorates the perceived performance of ministries.

Now let's turn to the lower tier of central governmental organisational hierarchy – namely, deconcentrated organs –, where the lack of autonomous decision behaviour seems to promote organisational performance. This finding is remarkable because it is contrary to much of the mainstream NPM-style argumentation. Moreover, it is – to some extent – surprising even in the view of the *ex ante* hypotheses of the present study. On the other hand, however, the well-foundedness of this finding is reinforced by some important pieces of existing organisational research.

Firstly, deconcentrated organs are responsible primarily for law enforcement/regulatory supervision; that is, they are characterised by an overwhelmingly static, low uncertainty environment and by standardised "mass production" organisational processes. Observing the results of research rooted in contingency theory it is therefore not surprising that hierarchical style of decision making is beneficial for organisational performance.

Secondly, some important results reached by bureaucracy research can be utilised if one recognises (or, rather, accepts) that "decision incapacity" and ideal-typical bureaucracy are – irrespective of their numerous differences – similar to one another in that both form a polar opposite of autonomous management behaviour. That this is the case indeed might not be straightforward; so let's consider that in an ideal-typical Weberian bureaucracy all strategic/policy decisions are made at the very top of the organisation (by the "ruler"/*Herr*). All officials of the bureaucratic organisation restrict their activity to only implementing rules, i.e., complying with bureaucratic procedural prescriptions – which can by no means be called "autonomous decision" but, rather, the complete lack of it.

Putting the finding in the conceptual framework of studies on bureaucracy is useful since this offers a number of additional points of reference. For exemple, Cheng and McKinley (1983) examined the role of environmental uncertainty in shaping the bureaucratic control-organisational performance relationship. The study examined this question specifically in public bureaucracies, as opposed to corporate organisations forming an almost exclusive focus of contingencialist studies. The authors'

conclusions strongly reinforce those of the present study: in a low uncertainty environment bureaucratic control of administrative organisation does in fact promote organisational performance.

In sum, the present study suggests that the lack of autonomous decision behaviour, being one of the specific manifestations of the bureaucratic incapacity, is not a "global enemy". It destroys only the performance of government organisations dealing with policy making, while doesn't hurt – or even promotes – the effectiveness of organisations primarily dealing with the administrative implementation of policies. However, in this narrower range of effect its detrimental effect seems to be fairly strong and unambiguous.

The question of whether these conclusions are conceptually and empirically sufficiently firm and sufficiently generalisable to other transition countries' central governmental sectors is to be answered by additional, future research.

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