

THE OPERATION OF ADVISORY BODIES WITHIN VARYING POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXTS: THE CASE OF THE LITHUANIAN SUNSET COMMISSION

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Abstract

This article analyses the use of information provided by advisory bodies during policymaking and implementation. The main purpose of our research was to assess the impact of the Sunset Commissions' recommendations on public management policy in Lithuania, as well as to explain which factors determine the successful use of advice. We explored these questions by linking different types of variables (related to an external context, a public policy subsystem and an advisory structure) into a single framework for analysis and conducting empirical research based on desk research, an analysis of available administrative information, a series of interviews and a survey of the Commissions' members. The results of our assessment reveal a good deal of variation in the use of the Commissions' recommendations across different governments and make it possible to identify the configuration of conditions that best explains the effective use of advice in the policy subsystem.

Keywords

Policy advisory systems, advisory bodies, public management, policymaking, Lithuania.

governments. Therefore, we focus on the impact of policy advice in the subsystem of public management policy instead of assessing the evolution of advisory structures or their externalisation and politicisation (Hustedt and Veit, 2017; Craft and Halligan, 2017).

By mixing the advisory systems and policy process literature, our research hypothesised causal links among the main factors affecting information use. The main variables of our research include the following: (i) initial economic conditions; (ii) the political support of a parliamentary majority and government attention to policy issues targeted by advice; (iii) the compatibility of recommendations with prevailing policy ideas; (iv) the government's expectations towards the functioning of advisory structures; (v) the role of change leaders during policy change; and (vi) the composition of advisory bodies. We integrated these variables in a single framework for analysis provided in section 1 of the article below.

Our empirical research was based on desk research, an analysis of available administrative information, a series of interviews and a survey of the Commissions' members (with a total of 33 interviewees/respondents). Drawing on the results of our desk research and field work, we first assessed the impact of the Sunset Commissions on public management policy. We then determined causal configurations underpinning the use of the Commissions' advice based on the results of causal process tracing (Kay and Baker, 2015).

The results of our assessment reveal a good deal of variation in the use of the Commissions' recommendations. For instance, the 1999–2000 and 2009 Commissions that advised the governments led by Prime Minister A. Kubilius from the Conservative Party during economic downturns were the most successful in terms of the recommendations adopted and implemented in the country. In contrast, advice of the advisory bodies that worked during 2006–2008 and 2013–2016 (when the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party was in power) was less impactful due to weaker political attention in the Lithuanian government in the context of economic growth.

Our research also suggests that such internal factors as an efficient operation of the advisory body are not sufficient to explain the extent of information use due to the importance of political and economic conditions shaping policymaking and implementation in the public management subsystem. A combination of economic crises, a high level of recommendations' compatibility with dominant policy ideas, political expectations of the Government to the performance of these advisory bodies, as well as Prime Ministers' transformational leadership created the configuration of sufficient conditions for the effective use of advice in the country. This conclusion indicates that advisory bodies with a high level of political control achieve better results during policymaking and implementation compared to the performance of more autonomous bodies.

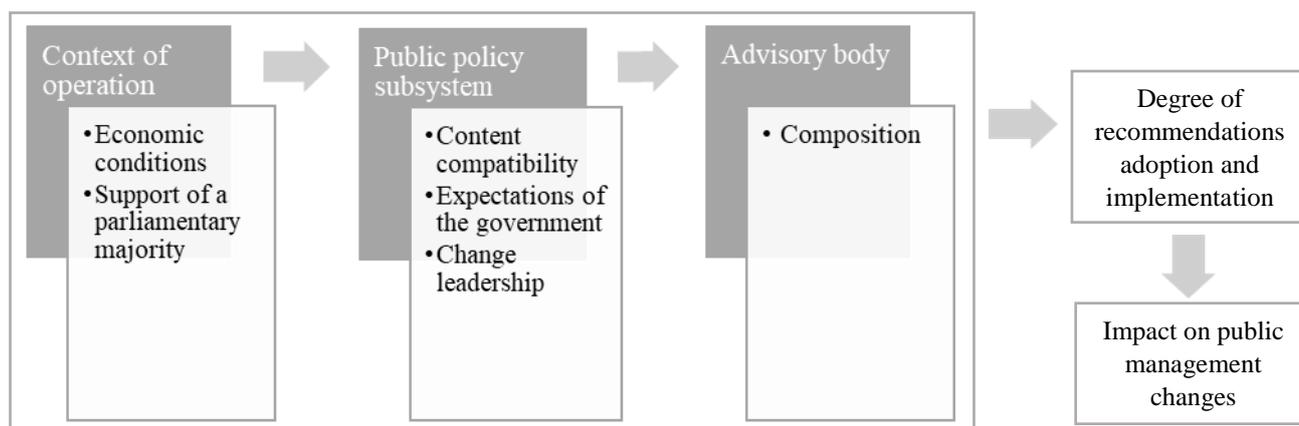
This article is divided into the following sections. The next section elaborates a theoretical framework for analysis, offers a series of six hypotheses, and outlines our research methodology. The empirical part of the article presents the background information on Lithuania and the main results of our empirical analysis. We conclude by summarising our research results and outlining suggestions for future research and improvements to the performance of the Sunset Commission.

1. Framework for analysis and methodology

There is a vibrant academic debate on conditions that determine the impact of recommendations provided by advisory bodies. While some authors stress the importance of advisory bodies' distance to the government and a balance between their autonomy and control (Halligan, 1995a; Rich and Cheol, 2000), other researchers argue that integrating the logic of a policy subsystem is key to explaining the success of advisory structures (Craft and Wilder, 2017). However, previous studies rarely paid attention to a broader context within which advisory structures operate. Since external conditions permeate policy subsystems, it is crucial to consider their impact on public policy change (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1999; Gouglas et al., 2017).

Taking these research insights into account, we based our research on a combination of the literature on advisory systems and public policy process (see Figure 1 below). We connected different types of variables (an external context, a public policy subsystem and an advisory structure) into a single framework for analysis by following the characteristics of the multiple streams framework (MSF). This helped us reveal causal relationships between the interaction of decision-makers, their interests and the context of operation (Smith, 2018), as well as to integrate the importance of policy entrepreneurship (change leadership) (Kingdon, 1995a) during decision-making into our analysis.

Figure 1. Framework for analysis: factors determining the impact of recommendations provided by the Sunset Commissions



Source: the authors of this article.

To begin with the context of operation, economic conditions play an important role in the policy process by catalysing necessary reforms in the public sector. A deteriorating economic situation might interrupt the normal development of a public management system by bringing new challenges and creating instability in the existing norms, practices, and institutions (Norhstedt and Weible, 2010). Decision-makers are usually more eager to implement public management reforms to avoid losses rather than to improve an already existing situation. As a result, it is likely that they will be more open to recommendations that could help prevent a further deterioration in the situation (OECD, 2010). Changes can occur as savings, cuts in government expenditure or as an incentive to implement other public management reforms that would be difficult to incorporate into the political agenda under normal conditions (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2010). However, even if it is “critically important if the proposal is to be heard at the right time” (Kingdon, 1995b, 109), an economic downturn is not a sufficient condition for the successful use of advice. An economic crisis can be seen only as a “window of opportunity” whose impact depends on external financial support, political leadership and other factors (Vilpišauskas, 2009).

Hypothesis 1: Since an economic downturn acts as a “window of opportunity” for policy or institutional change, it is likely that the Sunset Commissions’ recommendations that were provided during the economic crisis had higher chances of being adopted and implemented than those offered during the period of economic growth.

Government attention to public management policy and the political support of a parliamentary majority are important to the use of policy advice because of a few reasons. The way in which limited political attention is allocated within the political system (Baumgartner and Jones, 2015) has critical consequences for the implementation of policy recommendations. Previous empirical work showed that more significant policy changes in Lithuania took place in the policy areas that attracted persistent political attention from executive politicians (Nakrošis et al., 2018). Also, even if recommendations are accepted by the government, lack of political support in the parliament might block the passing of reforms during the policymaking phase. Choosing a particular recommendation from a variety of ideas requires an assessment of future opportunities and constraints, such as financial possibilities, public acceptability and politicians’ receptivity (Kingdon, 1995b). Following this argumentation, the government would tend to pay less attention to those recommendations that would face stiff resistance in the parliament. The political support of a ruling majority is especially important in Lithuania because of confrontational politics between two main blocs of political parties in the political system and due to the fact that the Parliament adopts a lot of detailed laws, thus narrowing the remit of the Government’s action.

Hypothesis 2: The political support of a parliamentary majority and persistent political attention of the Government to policy advice increased the possibility of adopting and implementing the recommendations of the Sunset Commissions and vice versa.

Moving to the features of public policy subsystems, it is important to explore the compatibility of recommendations with dominant policy ideas. Politicians usually have limited interest in actively engaging in the process of public management reforms because this would require participation in complex but barely visible processes. Because of politicians’ focus on reform results, an essential criterion for choosing the “right” advice is adhering to electoral programmes, party commitments or even personal preferences (Fafard and Hoffman, 2018). As a result, it is likely that decision-makers will accept and implement recommendations that match existing policy ideas, while the advice that is not consistent with these ideas is more likely to be treated unfavourably (Craft and Wilder, 2017). Also, a strong level of ideational compatibility might also positively influence the attitudes of a bureaucracy. If public policy changes are seen as emerging

from a broad political agreement (e.g. part of the government's programme or priorities), civil servants would treat them as more legitimate and would be more willing to implement them (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2010).

Hypothesis 3: The recommendations of the Sunset Commission that were more compatible with the Government's priorities had higher chances of being adopted and implemented. Meanwhile, the recommendations that were targeted at less salient policy issues had lower chances of being accepted.

Another type of policy compatibility is the expectations of a government towards the activities of advisory bodies. It reflects what kind of information decision-makers anticipate and for which action it will be used (Craft and Wilder, 2017). Broadly, two main purposes exist for the use of recommendations: (i) to legitimise decisions that have already been planned by the government or (ii) to obtain professional advice to inform evidence-based decision-making (Barker, 1993). Also, a more nuanced interpretation is possible. If the government expects to use advice in a *political* way, a recommendation is meant to justify the activities of a government, to strengthen its position in political discussions, or to reinforce the relevance of a given issue. If the work of an advisory body relates to a *learning* purpose, it is expected to monitor and analyse existing programmes, as well as to provide evidence-based information on possible policy options rather than to offer specific recommendations for policymaking. Finally, advisory bodies that serve an *instrumental* purpose are expected to provide rational solutions to emerging public policy issues and suggest the most effective policy option (Weible, 2008). The governments' expectations are closely intertwined with content compatibility – it is likely that the government will be the most interested in accepting the recommendations that support its decisions and make them more legitimate (Weible, 2008).

Hypothesis 4: Those Sunset Commissions whose mandates were dominated by political objectives achieved a higher level of recommendations' adoption and implementation than those Commissions whose mandate was limited to learning and/or instrumental objectives.

Public leadership affects the chances of achieving policy or institutional goals. The MSF points to the importance of policy entrepreneurs during the process of public management reforms by bringing attention to actors who raise an issue from the subsystem level to the government agenda by combining a problem, existing political circumstances, and a certain public policy suggestion (Kingdon, 1995b). Leadership qualities are also important for achieving the goals of advisory bodies: the exercise of strong leadership can facilitate the achievement of public policy objectives by mobilising policy support and reaching consensus among the key stakeholders (Nakrošis et al., 2018). Different styles of leadership can produce different results during the reform process. Transactional leadership is linked to action control, monitoring, and required performance adjustment. Meanwhile, transformational leadership is related with two main features: (i) team building (the exploitation of personal and professional networks to form support coalitions for policy change) and (ii) the impact of a personal example (assuming responsibility for the ongoing change, engaging in the reform process, feeling determined to take complex and politically unpopular decisions) (Gill, 2002). The latter style of leadership has an intrinsic importance for consensus building: while transactional leaders perform managerial functions, transformational ones bargain and modify a policy position, moving from the ideal one to the one that would gain wider support (Kingdon, 1995b).

Hypothesis 5: Transformational leadership is important for both adoption and implementation of the Sunset Commissions' recommendation that require legislative change and consensus building among different policy stakeholders, while transactional leadership was more significant for the implementation of more technical reform proposals.

Finally, the composition of an advisory body and the background of its members matter to its performance. Members who contribute to the decision-making process themselves or have direct connections with decision-makers could contribute to a more successful use of policy advice. Advisors can be divided into four types, depending on their career background: (i) *experts* (external actors not involved in political activities); (ii) *coordinators* (career civil servants responsible for managerial processes); (iii) *partisans* (representatives of political parties focused on political goals and power); and (iv) *minders* (civil servants of political confidence pursuing political goals of the government) (Gouglas et al., 2017). The least likely impact on public policy change is expected from advisory structures dominated by experts as they yield no direct influence on decision-making processes (Haas, 2004). Also, structures that are made up mainly of civil servants have a higher potential to put recommendations into practice (especially those of more technical nature). If civil servants back changes and feel responsible for them, they are more likely to support and contribute to their implementation (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017). The dominant role of party members could be useful for solving urgent issues that require an agreement from different stakeholders, but their focus on personal political goals should be taken into account. Finally, the dominance of political appointees in the composition of an advisory body can well reflect the main issues of the political agenda and other policy ideas because of their focus on the implementation of the political programme (Craft, 2017).

Hypothesis 6: The political composition of the Sunset Commissions contributed the most to the adoption of the recommendations, the Commissions dominated by career civil servants had a significant influence on the implementation of the adopted recommendations, and the Commissions dominated by external experts had the lowest impact in terms of both adoption and implementation.

To test these hypotheses, a two-stage field work was carried out. In the first stage, we assessed the impact of advice provided by Sunset Commissions. Our impact assessment was executed by gathering information on the outputs and immediate outcomes of the recommendations in the four main fields of the Commissions' activities: an institutional set-up, the management of government expenditure, civil service policy, and the quality of the public sector. In the second stage, we applied causal process tracing (Kay and Baker, 2015) to reveal causal mechanisms and sets of necessary and sufficient conditions that can best explain the adoption and implementation of recommendations.

Our research used a mixed methodology during this research. We examined different documents of the Sunset Commissions: performance plans, meeting agendas, minutes of the meetings (containing a total of 1,191 recommendations), performance reports, etc. Also, 33 out of 65 members of the Sunset Commissions participated in our online survey. In addition, we conducted a series of 7 semi-structured interviews with the heads of the Sunset Commissions and their members who were involved in the activities of more than one Commission. The results of our desk research, quantitative and qualitative field work informed our impact assessment and causal process tracing.

In this article, policy advice means a series of recommendations provided by the Sunset Commissions on improving different functions of public management in Lithuania that includes desk research, data analysis, consultation with stakeholders, formulation and deliberation of recommendations, policy guidance, monitoring of recommendations and other activities. The adoption of advice refers to the Government or other institutions' decisions taken to implement specific recommendations. By referring to the implementation of recommendations we mean the adoption or amendment of laws or other regulations needed to actually implement the advice provided by the Commissions.

2. Empirical analysis

2.1. Background information on Lithuania's political system and economic crises

Lithuania is a unitary state, a semi-parliamentary democracy. Power is divided among the legislative, executive and legal branches. The Lithuanian parliament (*Seimas*) is a one-chamber parliament with 141 members elected for a four-year term. Lithuania has a dual executive: the President and the Government. The President, who is elected directly for five years, is the Head of State. The President appoints and dismisses, upon approval of the *Seimas*, the Prime Minister (the Head of Government) and the rest of the cabinet. The Prime Minister and 14 ministers form the cabinet in the executive.

Since the late 1990s Lithuania has experienced two economic crises. The first crisis was the result of the financial crisis in Russia during 1998–1999. The Russian government devalued the ruble that caused a steep increase in the price of imported goods, negatively affecting Lithuanian exporters. The second crisis, which was triggered by the global financial crisis, severely hit the Lithuanian economy in terms of falling output and rising unemployment during 2008–2010.

The country's political system is characterised by high fragmentation in its party system (leading to frequent changes in the ruling majorities and governments); confrontational politics between the main political party blocs outside the main areas of national consensus (namely EU membership and defence spending); as well as weak change leadership in the legislature and executive. From 1990 to 2000, the Lithuanian central government was controlled or dominated by a single majority party (the right-wing parties in 1990–1992 and 1996–2000 or left-wing parties in 1992–1996). Since the end of 1996, coalition governments have been in power. Since 1990 two main parties or party blocs (one led by the Homeland Union—the Lithuanian Christian Democrats and another dominated by the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party) have been replacing each other in power after major pendulum swings in the political system.

2.2. Lithuania's administrative and advisory system

The country's administrative system is rather complex and fragmented. There are many public administration institutions that can be grouped into a few sets. The first and most important group of budgetary institutions include the Presidents' Office, the Parliament's Office, the Government's Office and 14 ministries. The second set of budgetary institutions is government agencies and agencies under the ministries operating in the executive. Third, some public non-profit institutions receive funding from the state budget or municipal budgets. The total number of budgetary and public institutions at the central level was 712 at the end of 2017 according to the Lithuanian Ministry of the Interior (Vidaus reikalų ministerija, 2018).

Lithuania has a fragmented advisory system, with a total of 213 advisory bodies working at the central level of government in 2017: 144 councils, commissions, committees and boards; 36 working groups or other groups; and 33 different state institutions and organisations performing advisory functions (agencies, bureaus, centres, departments, inspections, institutes and services). Therefore, together with Sweden having established well over 50 advisory bodies Lithuania was one of the leaders in terms of the number of such bodies (OECD, 2017, 33). Only the public institutions that perform advisory functions have an independent legal status; almost all other advisory arrangements have no separate legal position. If the former institutions are able to select their own staff, members of other advisory bodies are appointed by political authorities on the basis of their institutional affiliation or professional expertise. Although Lithuania has both *ad hoc* and permanent advisory bodies, the former bodies had low average lifespans (they existed for periods of about 4–12 months) and the latter often had no secretariats that could operationally support their activities.

The Sunset Commissions were an exception from this trend because they operated within a stable and well-developed institutional framework. First, they advised Lithuanian governments for more than ten years - from 1999 to 2016 (with some interruptions). Since it was necessary to renew the mandate and composition of the Sunset Commission after each change of government, a few Lithuanian governments - the 2001–2004 and 2004–2006 Lithuanian governments led by Prime Minister A. Brazauskas, as well as the 2016–2020 Lithuanian government led by Prime Minister S. Skvernelis - decided not to continue its activities. Second, the Sunset Commission had a permanent secretariat whose functions were executed by the Government Office (Prime Minister's Office during 2009–2012). The secretariat organised the meetings of the Commission and prepared its minutes, as well as sought observing the implementation of the Commission's recommendations. Third, in addition to the main governmental Sunset Commission, during different terms of government Lithuanian authorities set up ministerial Sunset groups or other working parties operating within a broader Sunset network. Therefore, a long-term and systematic nature of the Commission's functioning makes it possible to expect a tangible impact of this advisory body on the country's public management policy compared to other advisory bodies.

2.3. Performance of the Sunset Commissions during 1999–2006

The first Sunset Commission was set up following the example of the Sunset Advisory Commission in Texas, the United States, where the performance of every state agency was reviewed on a regular basis. Under the Sunset Act, every agency has a specific date on which it is automatically abolished unless the Commission recommends extending the agency's sunset date based on positive review results. It was expected that the Lithuanian Sunset Commission will act as a filter reviewing the results of budget programmes every few years, but such mandate was never assigned to this advisory body. It instead provided recommendations to the Lithuanian government and its ministries on improving the institutional set-up, increasing effectiveness in the management of government expenditure, improving the performance of the civil service and increasing the quality of performance in the public sector.

A total of five Commissions operated during the period 1999–2016: (i) the 1999–2000 Commission that advised the Lithuanian government led by Prime Minister A. Kubilius; (ii) the 2001 Commission that advised the Lithuanian government led by Prime Minister R. Paksas; (iii) the 2006–2008 Commission that advised the Lithuanian government led by Prime Minister G. Kirkilas; (iv) the 2009–2012 Commission that advised the Lithuanian government led by Prime Minister A. Kubilius; and (v) the 2013–2016 Commission that advised the Lithuanian government led by Prime Minister A. Butkevičius. We did not carry out an in-depth analysis of the operation of the 2001 Commission because of its short work span, its deficient activities and limited evidence on their execution. However, we split the performance of the 2009–2012 Commission into two units of analysis - the 2009 Commission that operated from January to July 2009 and the 2009–2012 Commission that operated until the end of the 2008–2012 government term - because of significant changes in the operating context and composition of these two Commissions.³ The table below summarises the main characteristics of the Sunset Commissions analysed in this article.

³ If the 2009 Commission was more political, the 2009–2012 Commission was more bureaucratic. The former Commission operated during the severe economic crisis, was headed by a senior political advisor to the Prime Minister and was composed of politicians and civil servants. In contrast, the latter Commission worked during the period of economic recovery, was chaired by deputy Government Chancellors and its membership consisted of civil servants and independent experts.

Table 1. The main characteristics of the Sunset Commissions analysed in this article

No.	Title of the Sunset Commission	Prime Minister of the Lithuanian Government	Type of government
1.	The 1999–2000 Sunset Commission	Prime Minister A. Kubilius, the 1999–2000 Lithuanian government	Coalition government led and dominated by the Homeland Union (Lithuanian Conservatives)
2.	The 2006–2008 Sunset Commission	Prime Minister G. Kirkilas, the 2006–2008 Lithuanian government	Coalition government led by the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party
3.	The 2009 Sunset Commission	Prime Minister A. Kubilius, the 2008–2012 Lithuanian government	Coalition government led by the Homeland Union (Lithuanian Christian Democrats)
4.	The 2009–2012 Sunset Commission	Prime Minister A. Kubilius, the 2008–2012 Lithuanian government	Coalition government led by the Homeland Union (Lithuanian Christian Democrats)
5.	The 2013–2016 Sunset Commission	Prime Minister A. Butkevičius, the 2012–2016 Lithuanian government	Coalition government led by the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party

Members of each Sunset Commission were appointed by the Government on the basis of their institutional affiliation (for civil servants representing the Government Office, ministries and other state institutions, as well as representatives of the Lithuanian Association of Municipalities and business organisations), political party membership (for politicians of the governing coalition who participated in the activities of the Commission in 2009) and professional expertise (for independent members from academia or think tanks). The Sunset Commissions did not have any operational budget for their activities, but the Government Office provided a secretariat to support the Commissions' work.

During our research we first assessed the functioning of the Sunset Commissions and their impact on public management policy based on quantitative and qualitative criteria. According to the monitoring data, the Commissions met from 8 to 40 times a year, with the 1999–2000 and 2009 Commissions that worked during the periods of economic crises holding their meetings most frequently (40 and 22 times a year). Participation in the Commissions' meetings ranged between 56–77%, with the members who belonged to the aforementioned Commissions attending most often (71 and 77% respectively). The number of proposals submitted by the Commissions varied from 68 to 182 a year, with the 1999–2000 and 2009 Commissions again being the most active in terms of their recommendations (182 and 145 recommendations respectively).

In qualitative terms, the recommendations of all Commissions matched their objectives, which indicates that they followed well their mandates set by the Government. The quality of submissions to the meetings of the Commissions was assessed to be average or good, with the Commissions advising the 2008–2012 Lithuanian government receiving higher-quality information from the Commissions' secretariat, Lithuanian ministries and working groups. The level of adopting and implementing the Commission's recommendations also varied, with the 1999–2000 and 2009 Commissions achieving the best results based on our survey data. For instance, the Commissions that worked during the period 2009–2012 scored 3.1 and 2.3 out of 5 for advice adoption and implementation. In comparison, the 2006–2008 Commission scored 2.5 and 2.2 for advice adoption and implementation respectively, and the 2013–2016 Commission scored 2.6 and 1.9 for the same categories.

This evidence indicates that the 1999–2000 and 2009 Commissions were the most successful in terms of their operation and results. Although these Commissions worked for less than a year, their functioning was the most intensive in terms of meetings, participation of the Commissions' members and the submission of recommendations to the Government. The 1999–2000 Commission worked together with working groups set up to address a series of specific questions, and the 2009 Commission cooperated with mini-Commissions established in each sectoral ministry. The activities of these Commissions were aligned strongly with the political agenda of the Government that focused on reducing the scope of the public sector and optimising government expenditure during the economic crisis. The recommendations of the 1999–2000 Commission informed significant changes to the institutional set-up (including the reform of government agencies, rationalisation of the system of interior affairs and consolidating the system of business regulation), making the management of government expenditure more effective (e.g. privatisation of some state infrastructure or abolishing some budget programmes), and improving the quality of public management (e.g. the implementation of strategic planning reform). The 2009 Commission contributed to the optimisation of the institutional structure (including the reform of government agencies and agencies under the ministries) and improving effectiveness in the management of government expenditure (e.g. recommendations on a reduction in the number of civil servants; evaluation of the functions analysis of the Government institutions following the advice to reduce the expenditures).

Table 2. Assessment of the functioning of the Sunset Commissions and their impact on public management change

Commission	Number of Commission meetings	Level of participation (percentage)	Quality of submissions to the Commission	Match of recommendations with the Commissions' objectives	Number of proposals submitted	Level of recommendations' adoption	Level of recommendations' implementation
1999–2000	40 (40 a year)	71	Average	High	182	High	High
2006–2008	34 (about 17 a year)	59	Average	High	245 (about 133 a year)	Average	Average
2009	22 (22 a year)	77	High	High	145	High	High
2009–2012	49 (about 16 a year)	56	High	High	352 (about 117 a year)	High	Average
2013–2016	33 (about 8 a year)	60	Average	High	271 (about 68 a year)	Average	Low

Note: in order to assess the quality of submissions to the Commission and the level of recommendations' adoption and implementation, we used the results of our survey. If the average score of survey responses was less than 2, our value is low; if the average score was between 2 and 3, our value is average; if that score was higher than 3, our value is high. However, given the subjectivity of the respondents' opinion, these results were somewhat modified on the basis of monitoring and interview data. The match of recommendations with the Commissions' objectives was estimated on the basis of proposals' compliance with official policy objectives: if less than 75% of goals were taken into account, the value is high.

2.4. Factors determining the adoption and implementation of advice provided by the Sunset Commissions

This section of the article examines variation in the adoption and implementation of the recommendations that were put forward by the Sunset Commissions. By using causal process tracing, we tested the hypotheses set out in our theoretical framework and explored the dynamics of advisory and decision-making practices in the subsystem of Lithuanian public management policy. Since a single factor cannot determine the performance results of an advisory body, we also identified causal configurations that best explain the use of advice within the subsystem of public management policy.

The main factor affecting the use of recommendations provided by the Sunset Commissions is their *content compatibility* with the dominant policy ideas of the Government. One of the purposes of the Sunset Commissions was to contribute to the implementation of the Government's programme (a set of governmental policy objectives, priorities and activities). During the functioning of the 1999–2000, 2009 and 2009–2012 Sunset Commissions, the right-wing governments put strategic planning or civil service reforms among their political priorities. Strong political focus on public management reforms allowed Lithuanian authorities to achieve a high degree of compatibility between the Government's policy positions and the content of recommendations. Given that "political support is the key criterion for the Commission's success" (interview with a member of the Sunset Commission 4), all these Sunset Commissions managed to reach a high level of recommendations' adoption and implementation (with some exception of the 2009–2012 Commission whose advice's execution was average).

In contrast, providing advice on topics that were not on the list of the Government's priorities had only a minor effect on public management policy. For example, the Butkevičius government announced a broad set of political priorities that lacked ambitious goals for improving public management. The executive politicians focused their efforts on such key issues of government policy as the introduction of the Euro, reform of the Labour Code and strengthening the country's energy independence. Therefore, the recommendations provided by the 2013–2016 Sunset Commission were compatible with only one fifth of the Government's priorities. Since the Butkevičius government had no interest or opportunities to devote more attention to public management changes, only an average level of recommendations' adoption and a low level of their implementation was achieved during the period 2013–2016.

The degree of content compatibility is closely intertwined with *the expectations of the Government*. The higher was the compatibility with the dominant policy ideas, the more political attention was paid to the recommendations of the Sunset Commission during policymaking, treating them not only as a problem-solving instrument but also as a means to political ends. Despite the fact that "all Commissions were set up to achieve the political goals of the Government" (interview with a member of the Sunset Commission 1), the performance of only a few Commissions (1999–2000, 2009 and 2009–

2012) were clearly linked with the Government's expectations. For example, by discussing a concept paper on the improvement of the civil service or guidelines for the creation of a higher civil service the 2009–2012 Sunset Commission intensively deliberated the civil service reform that was among the key priorities of the Kubilius government. A series of recommendations were provided on this politically salient topic, which enabled the Commission to achieve a high level of recommendations' adoption. Despite this fact, the extent of carrying out this advice was only average due to the lack of political support in the *Seimas*.⁴

The performance of those Sunset Commissions whose activities were characterised by lower content compatibility and more instrumental expectations was less successful. The left-wing Kirkilas government pursued a political agenda that lacked focus on public management reforms. Operating as a minority government, it needed to balance the positions of different political forces in the Lithuanian political system. In the absence of own reform initiatives in the social democratic leadership, the mandate of the 2006–2008 Sunset Commission was renewed largely because of the political pressure from the President's Office (interview with a member of the Sunset Commission 5). Due to the lack of sufficient political attention in the Government the level of adoption and implementation of recommendations provided by this Sunset Commission proved to be only average.

While exploring content compatibility and the Government's expectations it is important to take into account *the economic situation* because it increases the openness of a policy subsystem to reforms and puts pressure on national institutions to adopt urgent policy solutions. The 1999–2000 and 2009 Sunset Commissions that were operating during the economic crises were characterised by the highest levels of content compatibility because the Government employed advice on the institutional set-up or the management of government expenditure as part of its fiscal consolidation programme. In 1999–2000, the Kubilius government exploited this window of opportunity for implementing one of its governmental priorities – the strategic planning reform⁵, while in 2009 the same circumstances enabled the adoption of plans for optimising the institutional set-up in the executive branch of power. In addition to shaping the political agenda, the economic crises encouraged overall enthusiasm for improving public management “because a lot of people agreed to participate [...] in the individual working groups as well as in the Sunset Commission” (interview with a member of the Sunset Commission 3).

In contrast, rationalising the public sector was an unpopular idea among policy stakeholders during the periods of economic growth. Politicians were not willing to make unpopular decisions of institutional optimisation that were opposed by the representatives of individual state institutions affected by reorganisation. As political efforts were directed to other political issues, the activities of the 2006–2008, 2009–2012 and 2013–2016 Sunset Commissions were less intensive: “in a lot of cases procedures were prolonged, deadlines were postponed or submissions were poorly prepared, which brought additional delays: so there was more of this muddling through” (interview with a member of the Sunset Commission 2). However, even if an economic downturn might create favourable conditions for the use of advice by changing dominant policy ideas and thus increasing demands for advice, it is not the only driver of policy change. For example, the 2009–2012 Sunset Commission was also able to achieve a high level of adoption of its recommendations, despite the fact that the economy started recovering in the second half of 2010.

Our research points that the overall demand for advice (including the economic conditions and the Government's expectations) might affect the *composition* of the Sunset Commissions as it could be used as a leverage during the phases of policymaking and implementation. More politically affiliated members (elected politicians or appointed civil servants of political (personal) confidence) were appointed to these advisory bodies when the Government embarked upon substantial public management change, and the Sunset Commissions were perceived as an instrument to contribute to reform design and execution. Political appointees dominated the 1999–2000 and 2009 Sunset Commissions that achieved good results in terms of recommendations' adoption and implementation. The participation of civil servants of political (personal) confidence was valuable because they belonged to the “change team” (interview with a Head of the Sunset Commission) led by the Prime Minister. However, an experiment to involve elected politicians in the activities of the 2009 Sunset Commission “was surprisingly unhelpful. These members of the Commission did not feel obliged to convince members of their parliamentary groups or committees to support the Commission's recommendations endorsed

⁴ After the opposing coalition, some influential members of the leading Conservative Party and President Dalia Grybauskaitė criticised the *civil service reform* as destabilising and demotivating civil servants. The Kubilius government was forced to terminate system-wide changes to the civil service system. See Nakrošis, 2015.

⁵ During the strategic planning reform, recommendations of the Sunset Commission were used to legitimise the pre-determined decisions of the Government. Although the reform was formulated during the implementation of an external support project, it was presented as one of the proposals of the Sunset Commission (without any thorough discussion in this advisory body) in order to strengthen its credibility.

by the Government” (interview with a member of the Sunset Commission 2). Also, their involvement brought tensions to the organisation and functioning of the Commission: it was difficult to decide which political forces should be represented in the Commission and to ensure that they do not merely represent party interests during their activities (interview with a member of the Sunset Commission 3).

The involvement of civil servants in the Sunset Commission’s operation was particularly useful during the implementation phase. As the example of the 2006–2008 Commission demonstrates, the role of career civil servants helped achieve average results even in the absence of high content compatibility and political attention in the Government. As a major part of the recommendations provided by this Commission were of technical nature and did not require approval in the Parliament, efforts at the administrative level were sufficient to achieve some incremental changes. In line with our expectations, the impact of experts on the Commissions’ performance was the lowest, depending purely on the operating context. For instance, the 2013–2016 expert-based Commission, which was characterised by low compatibility with the overall goals of the Government and the absence of political aims in the field of public management, had no tools of promoting its recommendations and their use in decision-making. The situation was different during the period 2009–2012 when the Sunset Commission focused on the political issues that required approval of the *Seimas*, but resistance “stopped or slowed down a lot of things” in the legislative branch of power (interview with a Head of the Sunset Commission).

Therefore, it is important to explore the impact of *political support in the parliament* on both adoption and implementation of recommendations. If the Government was usually responsible for the adoption of advice during government meetings and sessions, it was the Parliament that frequently needed to pass legislative changes to ensure the implementation of the Commissions’ recommendations. Between 1999 and 2000, when the Commission’s proposals matched well the political agenda and the Government had a supportive ruling majority in the legislature, the legislative process was relatively smooth. However, the “war between position and opposition without no exceptions for the issues promoted by the Sunset Commission” (interview with a member of the Sunset Commission 6) became more visible between 2009 and 2012. Then, after a change in the composition of the ruling coalition, the Government almost became a minority one. Thus, the reform team was forced to terminate some recommendations of the Sunset Commission or to soften their tone in order to gather support in the *Seimas*.

The lack of political support for the Sunset Commissions’ recommendations from members of the Parliament was mentioned in most performance reports of this advisory body. Resistance often arose from the representatives of the institutions affected by rationalisation. Trying to protect their bureaucratic interests, officials of state institutions were looking for backing among the members of the Parliament: “I did the most serious work: to fight with the ‘sunset’ [...] I was able to mobilise many like-minded people to prove our point in the *Seimas*” (Ruškys, 2012). “Lengthy legislative process prolonged the implementation of advice” (Valstybės valdymo tobulinimo komisija, 2008), which was sometimes completely stopped or even cancelled after a change of government (interview with a member of the Sunset Commission 6). However, political support in the Parliament mattered only in those cases where the recommendations of the Sunset Commissions were compatible with the dominant policy ideas, and the Government was interested in their implementation. As the example of the 2013–2016 Sunset Commission demonstrates, a strong support of the Government in the Parliament alone did not increase the extent of recommendations’ implementation.

In addition to opposition to reform proposals in the Parliament, ministries were also reluctant to change: “despite repeated calls to execute the Government’s decisions, [...] ministries are not implementing them” (LR Vyriausybės kanceliarija, 2016). Strong political leadership was necessary to overcome insufficient administrative discipline and bureaucratic foot-dragging. During the period 2013–2016, when actors in the public management subsystem remained passive or opposed to the proposals made by the Sunset Commission, *transactional Prime Minister’s leadership* was too weak to break through the bureaucracy. This trend also occurred in 2006–2008 when the Prime Minister who paid little attention to the issues of public management failed to mobilise any support for reforms in this field. Ministries’ unwillingness to co-operate with the Sunset Commission led towards the failure of bottom-up approach. State institutions affected by reorganisation were providing low quality submissions and fragmented legal proposals, pursuing the tactics of “waiting for instructions or receiving decisions from the top” (Valstybės valdymo tobulinimo komisija, 2007).

In contrast, Prime Minister’s transformational leadership was noticeable during 1999–2000 and 2009–2012 when a higher level of Sunset Commission recommendations was adopted. According to one of the Commission members, the 1999–2000 economic crisis was marked by strong public sector dynamics and an internal willingness to improve the performance of the public management system because of an attractive vision of public management offered by the Prime Minister (interview with a member of the Sunset Commission 3). A combination of economic pressures and clear policy ideas enhanced the need for recommendations, while the transformational style of Kubilius leadership mobilised

decision-makers' support to the solutions proposed by the Sunset Commission. This proves that the role of change leaders should be considered together with economic conditions and political goals while analysing the adoption of policy advice during decision-making.

The analysis of each Sunset Commission presented below (see Table 3) allowed us to identify the most and least successful advisory bodies, as well as to compare and explain their performance results. The performance of the most successful Sunset Commissions that worked between 1999 and 2000 as well as in 2009 was marked by *the high level of compatibility* with the dominant policy ideas. Operating in *the context of economic crisis*, these Sunset Commissions provided advice on improving public management that also contributed to the implementation of fiscal consolidation and public management reforms in line with *the Government's expectations*. In addition to that, Prime Minister Kubilius effectively played the role of *a strong transformational and transactional leader*. Despite the fact that both times the Conservative Party had a *dominant position in a ruling majority*, the transformational leadership of Kubilius was important to evoke the necessity of reform and mobilise the stakeholders to support them. Finally, *the political composition* of the advisory body was selected to strengthen its position during the reform process. This type of composition allowed the Commission to maintain direct contacts between the members of the Government and the Parliament, thus facilitating the establishment of an inter-institutional coalition for public management change.

In contrast, the performance of the 2013–2016 Sunset Commission was the least successful. The content of the recommendations provided by this advisory body was *the least compatible* with the Government's priorities among all the Commissions analysed in this article. Operating in the period of *economic growth*, the Government felt no immediate pressure for reforms, so the activities of the Sunset Commission were treated more as an *excessive instrument* rather than a useful means for achieving political ends. Even if the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party had a *dominant position in the ruling coalition*, no sufficient political attention was paid to implementing the Commission's recommendations. In addition, because of *the transactional nature of Butkevičius leadership*, there was little ownership of public management reforms and limited willingness to push the advice of this advisory body forward during policymaking. Finally, *the expert-based composition* of the advisory body weakened the political position of this Sunset Commission, further reducing its influence during the reform process.

Table 3. Factors that influenced the adoption and implementation of the recommendations provided by the Sunset Commissions

	Economic conditions	Support in the Parliament	Content compatibility	Government's expectations	Change leadership	Composition	The level of adoption of recommendations	The level of implementation of recommendations
1999–2000 m.	Economic downturn	Coalition government (strongly dominant Conservative Party)	High	Political and instrumental	Transformational and transactional	Political	High	High
2006–2008 m.	Economic growth	Minority government led by the Social Democratic Party	Rather low	Instrumental	Transactional	Bureaucratic	Average	Average
2009 m.	Economic downturn	Coalition government (dominant Conservative Party)	High	Political and instrumental	Transformational and transactional	Political	High	High
2009–2012 m.	Economic growth	Coalition government (almost a minority government)	Rather high	Political and instrumental	Transformational and transactional	Expert	High	Average
2013–2016 m.	Economic growth	Coalition government (strongly dominant Social Democratic Party)	Low	Instrumental	Transactional	Expert	Average	Low

Note: The estimates of economic conditions, political support in the Parliament and the composition of advisory body are based on desk research or data analysis. Content compatibility was evaluated by comparing the Government's priorities (or an alternative document) with the recommendations of the Sunset Commission and assessing a difference between all the cases under observation. The evaluation of expectations was based on our interviews, while that of change leadership was established on the basis of survey and interview data. If the average score of responses on transactional/transformational leadership is above 2.5 points out of 5, a specific type of leadership is attributed.

Conclusions

The results of our assessment reveal a good deal of variation in the use of the Sunset Commissions' recommendations. The 1999–2000 and 2009 Commissions that advised the two Kubilius governments led by the Homeland Union-Lithuanian Christian Democrats were the most successful in terms of the recommendations adopted and implemented in the country. In contrast, advice of the advisory bodies that worked during 2006–2008 and 2013–2016 (when the Lithuanian Social Democratic Party was in power) proved to be less effective in terms of recommendations adopted and implemented.

Our research reveals that an efficient functioning of the Sunset Commissions is not sufficient to explain the level of adoption and implementation of their recommendations. It is economic and political conditions that shape significantly the use of advice within the public management subsystem, which is line with the results of previous research on the importance of the overall political system on the configuration of a policy advisory system (Hustedt and Veit, 2017). Our article finds that a combination of the economic crises, a high level of recommendations' compatibility with the dominant policy ideas, political expectations of the Government to the performance of these advisory bodies, as well as Prime Ministers' transformational leadership created the configuration of sufficient conditions for the effective use of advice. Operating in the content of the economic downturn, the 1999–2000 and 2008–2012 Lithuanian governments led by Prime Minister Kubilius not only set ambitious governmental priorities and clearly communicated them to the Sunset Commissions, but also involved members of the its reform teams in close cooperation with these advisory bodies. In other words, the Kubilius governments exercised a high level of political control over the work of the Sunset Commissions during 1999–2000 and 2009, which provided clear political directions and mobilised their efforts to bring about public management change. This ensured the high level of recommendations' adoption and implementation in the subsystem of public management policy.

Our research supports strongly the call to focus on the operation of advisory systems within broader policy subsystems (Craft and Wilder, 2017). More specifically, by demonstrating how the interaction of contextual, policy and advisory variables could be linked in a single framework for analysis and empirically examining how different advisory components combine in practice, we contributed to the second wave of advisory system studies and offered insights for future comparisons of advisory practices. For instance, our study confirms that strong political leadership is essential to the effective performance of advisory bodies – by exercising political control over the activities of advisory bodies executive politicians who operate at the intersection of politics and policy advice are able to steer the activities of advisory structures. In terms of the trade-off between the autonomy and control of advisory bodies (Bressers et al., 2018), our research demonstrates that a higher level of political control over the activities of the Sunset Commissions proved to be effective. Recommendations targeted at the key issues of the political agenda and provided on-time during the formulation of public management policy were relevant to governmental decision-making, making it possible for the country's authorities to adopt decisions and to implement them to a certain extent. On the other hand, too much government influence on advisory activities may undermine the reliability of policy advice and the trust of advisory bodies in public policy settings (OECD, 2017).

Our research also points to a few specific directions for future research. First, a comparative analysis of advisory bodies and practices in a few European countries characterised by variation in contextual, policy or advisory conditions could shed more light on the importance of different variables in the use of policy advice during policymaking and implementation. Since previous comparative studies have focused on the advisory systems in the Anglo-Saxon 'Westminster' family (Canada, UK, Australia, New Zealand) (e.g. Craft and Halligan, 2017) and some European countries (e.g. Bressers et al., 2018), it would be important to extend the comparative analysis to Eastern Europe. Second, specific cases of public policy could be analysed more in-depth in order to identify key specific factors and to determine the relative importance of policy advice compared to other sources of information during the process of policymaking and implementation. For instance, since all Sunset Commissions provided recommendations on the reorganisation of the State Tobacco and Alcohol Control Service, it would be interesting to explore the influence of this advice on the performance of this Lithuanian institution over time.

The Sunset Commissions had a substantial impact on Lithuanian public management policy with some variation across the different terms of governments. However, it is possible to make further improvements to the performance of this advisory body in the country. Our main suggestions include, but are not limited to, strengthening the political mandate of the Sunset Commission to review the performance of state institutions and the execution of budget programmes; enhancing administrative discipline during the implementation of its recommendations to ensure the achievement of policy goals in different policy areas; allocating additional financial and human resources to the Commission and its secretariat to increase the quality of submissions; and streamlining the processes of policy formulation and legal drafting to expedite the delivery of the Commission's recommendations that require legal changes in the Government and the Parliament.

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Interviews

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Interview with a member of the Sunset Commission 2, 10 April 2018, Vilnius, Lithuania

Interview with a member of the Sunset Commission 3, 4 April 2018, Vilnius, Lithuania

Interview with a member of the Sunset Commission 4, 4 April 2018, Vilnius, Lithuania

Interview with a member of the Sunset Commission 5, 23 March 2018, Brussels, Belgium

Interview with a member of the Sunset Commission 6, 21 March 2018, Vilnius, Lithuania

Interview with a Head of the Sunset Commission, 10 April 2018, Vilnius, Lithuania