

SLOVENIAN SOCIAL WORK CENTRES' REORGANISATION VS. ADMINISTRATIVE REFORMS IN AUSTRIA AND CROATIA

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Abstract

Administrative reforms are one of the most distinguishing characteristics of modern public administrations. Striving to meet the demanding needs and expectations of the citizens, administrative systems reorganise in many different ways. In Slovenia, the modernisation of social work centres – i.e. the primary social care and welfare public institutions dealing with the most sensitive issues of the people in need – had long been on the political and policy agenda. Finally, in October 2018, they were reorganised with the aim of improving the effectiveness and efficiency of their procedures, reducing red tape, and – first and foremost – improving the accessibility of services to the people and developing new working methods adapted to their needs. The paper presents the evaluation of this country- and sector-specific reform from a comparative perspective, comparing the above to the reforms of equivalent types of authorities in two neighbouring countries, Austria and Croatia. Based on a multidisciplinary content analysis of policy documents and its evaluation, the results show that the *Rechtsstaat* tradition prevails in the reform agendas of all countries. Nevertheless, strong tendencies to redefine the role of the state by implementing the principles of good governance are also evident. Despite convergence in the reform schemes of all three countries, reform processes in Slovenia and Croatia lack the implementation of the otherwise forward-looking and ambitious goals as well as proper and in-depth evaluation of hitherto reforms. The social work centres' reorganisation in Slovenia further revealed a wide-ranging problem of insufficient cross-sectoral collaboration and systemic strategic planning in reform practice, combined with poor stakeholder participation. The findings of the paper are applicable to both theorists and policy-makers, as well as practitioners dealing with the outcomes of administrative reforms on a daily basis.

Points for Practitioners

The paper contributes to the development of public administration by providing the necessary comparative grounds for reforms aiming to reach the holy grail of sound governance in contemporary public administrations. The paper focuses on the application of New Public Governance principles on the applicative level of public administration, analysing specific issues that practitioners in public administration face on a daily basis while striving to implement the principles of modern administrative reforms. Its findings are relevant for both practitioners dealing with the holders of public authority and those dealing with similar authoritative bodies, types of authorities, or services provided by them. The paper also contributes to the practice of policymakers by establishing bottom-up regulatory feedback loop, deriving from prior policy outcomes of administrative practice.

Keywords: social work centres, Slovenia, administrative reforms, Austria, Croatia

1. Introduction

In today's constantly changing and uncertainty-rising era, public administration (PA) is acknowledged as one of the most important governmental sub-systems. To be able to deliver sufficient answers to the complex issues of an unpredictable environment, PA – in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries as in any other country worldwide – consists of multiple administrative entities in addition to state or other (regional, local, supranational) administration. Those administrative bodies differ in their organisational, legal, financial and other characteristics (cf. Koprić, 2011, 3). Among such entities are also the holders of public authority with powers delegated to them for a more professional, effective, and efficient execution of authoritative tasks. In Slovenia, one of the many holders of public authority in the field of social security are the social work centres (SWC). As far as there is a need for constant administrative reform and development, also the SWC try to adapt

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to the changed circumstances in the society which they are a part of. The normal state of PA is not stability but mobility – only by such institutional adaptability is PA able to meet the demanding requirements of complex society (Bundschuh-Rieseneder, 2008, 49). In order to adapt to the wicked issues of its internal and external environment, PA reorganises constantly. Changes relate to organisation and structure, ways of functioning, legal regulation, personnel, relations with politics and citizens, etc. (Koprić, 2011, 4). In such regard, the authoritative parts of PA should act proactively and synergistically, constantly drafting and implementing rules and governmental policies by establishing a bottom-up regulatory loop (Kovač et al., 2016, 142). Bearing in mind that the SWC – as the primary social care and welfare public institutions – deal with the most sensitive and intimate issues of people and families in need and distress, their constant need of adapting to societal changes seems logical. However, in the past years, Slovenian SWC were subject to over-bureaucratisation and loss of professional power as formalisation and procedural rules prevailed over substantial foundations. Consequently, the content of their work adapted to the *form*, not vice versa, as would be expected (Rape Žiberna et al., 2020, 13). Therefore, in October 2018, a SWC structural reform, i.e. their reorganisation, was implemented, pursuing the goals of organisational structure modification, social activation of the unemployed, and introduction of pre-filled informative calculation of monetary social transfers. All the above were expected to result in effective and efficient procedures, accessibility for clients, removal of administrative burdens, and red tape reduction (Žnidar et al., 2020; cf. Rape Žiberna et al. 2020).

Although more than two years have passed since SWC reorganisation, no comprehensive evaluation of this reform in Slovenia has been done yet.² However, without evaluation, reform is only a reform *per se*, as assessing and evaluating the effectiveness of administrative reforms is essential for further development, either modernisation or further reforms, of the reformed area. In other words, the evaluation of the results of quality assuring and improving measures is of vital importance for further improvements (Promberger, Rauskala, and Cecon, 2004, 41; ff. Hammerschmid et al., 2016). Furthermore, according to Kuhlmann and Wollmann (2019, 50), administrative reform should relate to the entire policy cycle. Thus, evaluation should follow a prior policy initiation and implementation process and eventually be followed by the possibility of policy reformulation. Namely, as Bundschuh-Rieseneder (2008, 49) points out, PA reforms must comply with political rationality and efficiency. Evaluation – as a coherent determination of a phenomenon's merit, worth, and significance – is carried out to assess human activities in a formal, systematic way that will contribute to the understanding of the effect of the observed activity. There are no specific methods that make research an evaluation (Given, ed., 2008, 303). Hence, there are many ways and techniques for evaluating reforms. As far as comparative studies are one of the most fundamental methods to generate new knowledge in the social sciences and are therefore specifically useful for explorative purposes of achieving basic and introductory knowledge of selected phenomena, comparative studies seem convenient to evaluate SWC reorganisation as an object of research in this paper.

Considering that no comparative research has been done yet on this topic, the rationale for the current study is to analyse and evaluate the discussed reform by comparing it to similar administrative reforms in the two neighbouring countries, Austria and Croatia. Comparative studies seem to be an important source of information and experiential learning (Koprić, 2011, 2), and therefore useful for evaluation of the observed

² In general, the lack of systematic analyses and evaluations of administrative reforms seems to be one of the main problems in nowadays PA. Those existing often address only one segment of reforms, one country, or just one part of reform policies. See Hammerschmid et al., 2016 for further detail.

reform. The administrative systems of the two countries selected for comparison are based on the cultural-historical and legal-political traditions of the rule of law (*Rechtsstaat*), deriving from the foundations of Roman law, same as the Slovenian PA. To differentiate among them, the Austrian PA can be classified into a different PA sub-group. According to the common characteristics of their administrative systems, Austria belongs to the Continental European-Federal group, while Croatia and Slovenia belong to the Central and South-Eastern European group with post/socialist elements.³ When studying the above, the following hypothesis has been set and will be verified in the upcoming research process: *The Slovenian social work centres' reorganisation is comparable to the reforms in Austria and Croatia in terms of the goals set by the reformers and the results achieved.* The analysis and interpretation of the results will be multidisciplinary, addressing the object of the study from its legal, managerial, organisational, societal, and political aspects. At the same time, the comparison will assure enough space for the description and analysis of country-specific elements of administrative reforms (Koprić, 2011, 32).

The structure of the paper is as follows. Firstly, the introductory chapter provides a basic overview of Slovenian SWC reorganisation within the traditional rule-of-law administrative system and presents the importance of comparative studies to evaluate such reforms. Secondly, the methodology used in this paper is described and specified, followed by the presentation and discussion of results considering different perspectives of analysis, typical for PA as a multi- and inter-disciplinary science. Finally, conclusions are presented considering the specifics of each administrative system included in the comparison with suggestions for further research and policy-making processes with reference to administrative reforms.

2. Methodology

The research in this paper is based on the qualitative methodology of explorative nature. Comparative study is used as a basic method, whereas the methodology of the paper consists of various techniques and approaches to verify the results by using different methods, theories, and perspectives in a sense of triangulation. To get a holistic insight into the observed phenomena, comparative study was chosen as one of the fundamental methods in social studies to generate new knowledge. Comparison in this regard refers to the evaluation of the similarities, differences, and associations between entities. The entities chosen for comparison can be countless (e.g. individuals, statements, symbols, political configurations, etc.). The goal of comparative research is to search for similarity and variation between the entities that are the object of the research; in this case, the application of a more general theory and the search for universals across different contexts or categories take place (Given, ed., 2008, 100–101, cf. Neuman, 2014). To be specific, comparative studies addressing PA reforms combine the notions of complexity, dynamics, and interdependences, by intertwining the viewpoints of institutional⁴ and organisational theory (Koprić, 2011, 2). The methodological issues concerning comparative studies should also be mentioned at this point as possible limitations of the research. The most common issues in this regard are “the selection of cases (including the unit, level, and scale of analysis), construct equivalence, case versus characteristic orientation, and the debate regarding causality.” (Given, ed., 2008, 101).

³ See Kuhlmann and Wollmann, 2019 for more detail; cf. Hammerschmid et al., 2016; Koprić, 2011; Koprić, 2019; Kovač et al., 2016; Wollmann, Koprić, and Marcou, eds., 2016.

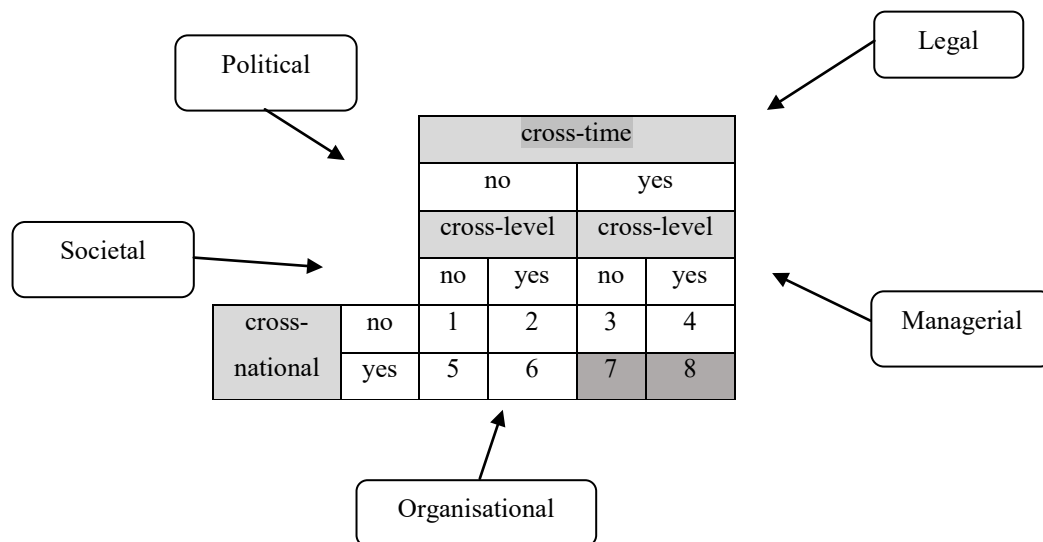
⁴ In addition to traditional institutionalist theory, Kuhlmann and Wollmann (2019, 58 ff.) distinguish three approaches within the neo-institutionalist paradigm: rational choice or actor-centred institutionalism; historical institutionalism, and sociological institutionalism (cf. Hammerschmid et al., 2016; Raadschelders and Vigoda-Gadot, 2015; Wollmann, Koprić, and Marcou, ed., 2016).

Considering the specific object of research that is at the core of the comparison, i.e. reorganisation of SWC in Slovenia, the research in this paper can also be categorised as a case study. A case study is a research approach to exploring an object of research in-depth. Not being restricted to one observation, case studies can concentrate on specific phenomena or units of analysis, they have a detailed focus, but they also tell a greater story. Case studies can embrace the complexity of the observed phenomena and simultaneously focus on the details, they study context as well as the internal factors of the social changes, enable multiple perspectives, and can trace multi-factor processes over time and space (Neuman, 2014, 42). Case studies can be carried out by using various approaches and from many different perspectives, depending on the context and characteristics of the observed object. Comparative analysis is often a primary approach within case study research (Given, ed., 2008, 100), as applies in this paper, too.

To be more specific, considering the studies of PA, according to Raadschelders and Vigoda-Gadot (2015, 463), there are three main types of comparison. As seen in Figure 1, comparison can be cross-national, cross-level, or cross-time. By combining and intertwining these three frameworks it is possible to get eight specific types of comparison (e.g. cross-national–cross-time comparison, etc.). In this paper, the cross-national type of comparison prevails, supplemented by comparison in the cross-time and cross-level dimensions. As all comparisons are cross-national and cross-time, both types of comparison apply in this case (numbers 7 and 8 in Figure 1). Taking into account that single-method and single-perspective research approaches in PA do not deliver sufficient and scientifically valid results due to the interdisciplinary nature of contemporary PA, the comparison is done from five different perspectives. As seen in Figure 1, legal, managerial, organisational, societal, and political perspectives were chosen for this paper.

Figure 1

Types and perspectives of comparison



Source: adapted from Raadschelders and Vigoda-Gadot, 2015, 463.

Considering the research question, data gathering and analysis focused on two main types of sources addressing administrative reforms in the selected countries – policy documents and evaluation reports, the latter in the form of individual documents or as parts of scientific articles. Content analysis of selected materials was

applied in this regard. Qualitative content analysis, sometimes referred to as latent content analysis, analytically reduces data and makes sense and connections between them. It is carried out by categorising qualitative data into conceptual categories to identify consistent patterns and relationships between themes. Being an analytic tool, content analysis is very flexible, providing a systematic way of synthesising a wide range of data (Given, ed. 2008, 120–121). In this particular case, content analysis enabled outlining important characteristics in reform practices of selected countries regarding the declared goals of administrative reforms and their implementation and outcomes. Table 1 shows specific policy documents and evaluation reports with literature that were included in the analysis.

Table 1
Policy documents and evaluation reports with literature analysed in this paper

	Policy documents	Evaluation reports with literature
Slovenia	<i>Resolution on the National Social Assistance Programme 2013–2020</i> <i>Coalition Agreement on Cooperation in the Government of the Republic of Slovenia in 2014–2018</i> <i>Coalition Agreement on Cooperation in the Government of the Republic of Slovenia in 2018–2022</i> <i>Act Amending the Social Assistance Act, 2017⁵</i>	<i>Public administration characteristics and performance in EU: Slovenia. 2018</i> <i>Monitoring the implementation and achievement of the objectives of the Resolution on the National Social Assistance Programme 2013–2020. Report for the period 2018–2019, 2019</i> <i>Rape Žiberna et al., 2019; Rape Žiberna et al., 2020; Žnidar et al., 2020</i>
Croatia	<i>Strategy of State Administration Reform, 2008–2011</i> <i>Strategic Plan of the Ministry of Administration 2014–2016</i> <i>Public Administration Development Strategy 2015–2020</i> <i>National Reform Programme 2020</i>	<i>Control of implementation of State Reform Strategy 2008–2011</i> <i>Public administration characteristics and performance in EU: Croatia. 2018</i> <i>Koprić, 2011; Đulabić, 2013; Wollmann et al. (eds.), 2016; Koprić, 2019</i>
Austria	<i>Administrative Innovation Programme I, 1997</i> <i>Administrative Innovation Programme II, 2003</i> <i>Work programme of the Austrian Federal Government 2013–2017</i> <i>National Reform Programme 2020</i>	<i>COCOPS WP3 Cross-national Report, 2013</i> <i>Public administration characteristics and performance in EU: Austria. 2018</i> <i>Hammerschmid et al., 2013; Hammerschmid et al., 2016, Promberger et al., 2004</i>

Source: own

3. Results

This section presents the results of a comparison between the reorganisation of Slovenian SWC and the reforms of equivalent types of authorities in Austria and Croatia. For all three countries with the historical heritage of the traditional Weberian *Rechtsstaat*, the rule of law represents a fundamental standpoint and the institutional framework of all reforms. In this context, also the impacts of the New Public Governance (NPG) paradigm are

⁵ The Act Amending the Social Assistance Act (Official Gazette of the RS, No. 54/17) is one of the main policy documents on SWC reorganisation.

notable, resulting in reform goals aiming to redefine the role of the state in PA. Thus, for example, New Public Management (NPM) impacts are heavily present in the Austrian administrative practice. In the otherwise legalistically in hierarchically determined PA, NPM strongly contributes to implementation performance orientation and quality measurement in this rigid structure. On the contrary, in the case of Slovenia and Croatia, despite some efforts of such kind on the level of declaring policy goals, the implementation of managerial aspects of reforms still lags behind. Moreover, while in Slovenia and Croatia stakeholders' participation in the reform processes has not yet reached the level of collaboration required for contemporary PA aiming to reach the salient goal of good governance, the Austrian case shows that stakeholder participation and state as a service provider are indeed the possible outcomes of administrative reforms. As far as the Austrian strategic and systemic reform's grand plans deliver sufficient and comprehensive results in administrative practice, a strong provincial impact influences reform planning and its outcomes. This influence is seen in legislation, financing, efforts of decentralisation and deregulation, etc. On the contrary, Slovenian and Croatian reforms lack strategic planning and structural cohesion, "umbrella" solutions, whereby in the Croatian case the lack of local involvement and unclear division between political and professional criteria for implementation can also be observed. There is a need for a more in-depth analysis of hitherto reforms and cross-sectoral solutions.

Table 2

Results by country and perspective of comparison

<i>Perspective</i>	Slovenia	Croatia	Austria
<i>Legal</i>	Rule of law Changed role of the state (NPG) Red tape reduction	Rule of law Changed role of the state (NPG) Parallel solutions on local level Red tape reduction	Rule of law Changed role of the state (NPG) Standardisation of tasks state vs. provinces Subsidiarity Strong democratic tradition (NPM impact)
<i>Managerial</i>	Some NPM elements Problems of implementation	Some NPM elements Problems of implementation	NPM paradigm as a reform basis Performance management and measurement; quality orientation
<i>Organisational</i>	Organisational changes vs. declared goals (discrepancy)	Organisational changes vs. wider reforms (discrepancy) Process of unification	Merging local and federal admin. bodies Administrative ZOO More procedural than organisational reform
<i>Societal</i>	Services closer to the needs of the people Accessibility Lack of stakeholders' participation	War impact Centralisation vs. decentralisation Lack of local involvement, state govern reforms	Strategic reform concepts differ from province to province State as a modern service provider Strong citizens' participation

Political	Need for in-depth analyses Lack of strategic, systemic approaches Lack of implementation of the declared goals	Lack of planning, systemic approaches Lack of implementation of the declared goals Unclear distinction between political and professional criteria for implementation	Strong provincial impact (legislation, financing) Decentralisation Subsidiarity Systemic, structural approaches Deregulation
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Source: own analysis.

4. Discussion

The common denominator determining reforms in all three countries is a traditional legalistic culture of Weberian bureaucracy with hierarchy, structure, formality, and predetermined procedures as the prevailing aspects. Reform strategies therefore focus on centrally directed formal processes, rules and directives, continuum, and indirect politicisation rather than managerial changes. However, redefining the role of the state is present in reform policies striving to follow the NPG model founded on the paradigm of good governance. From this perspective, a reformed PA is able to meet the changing requirements of the society, under the condition that PA complies with political rationality and efficiency. To do so, the reform goals set by the government differ and depend on the relevant political issues. Sometimes, there is a higher level of democracy and participation, sometimes the improvement of social performances, sometimes the reduction of state responsibility through deregulation and privatisation. These goals contradict each other as do public reforms themselves (Bundschuh-Rieseneder, 2008, 27). A constantly changing PA nowadays requires a set of doctrines and techniques of good governance that enables a most needed interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral approach to address societal changes and challenges (Kovač et al. 2016, 131). In other words, “in practice, good governance means favourable political framework conditions for social, ecological and market oriented development as well as responsible use of political power and public resources by the state” (Bundschuh-Rieseneder, 2008, 27). However, the analysis in this paper shows that reform policies addressing the changing role of the state, rather than reaching the NPG ideal of collaborative PA that strategically develops partnerships for co-decision making with the parties, results in the Neo-Weberian state. The role of the state in this context is diminished, but not removed, effectiveness and efficiency are present but are governed by law, while the state retains its functions of controller and coordinator.

The over-regulated and formal PA in Croatia and Slovenia lacks the courage to make substantial reform decisions. These issues have been regularly addressed by governments through various reform programmes and initiatives, but nevertheless remain a problem.⁶ Historically, contemporary PA in Croatia developed in three main phases – establishment (1990–1993), consolidation (1993–2001), Europeanisation (after 2001) – and is now in the fourth phase of modernisation (Koprić, 2011, 1; cf. Koprić, 2019). The Croatian PA is known for its intensive compartmentalisation and fragmentation with a lack of coordination between various administrative bodies. By operating within their legally defined scope, low level of information sharing, and poor coordination between ministries, strategic documents are sometimes poorly coordinated and unsuccessfully harmonised with

⁶ There are some good examples of user-oriented developments in PA, for instance, the Slovenian deconcentrating of administrative units and some other agencies. See Public administration characteristics and performance in EU: Slovenia. 2018.

other documents provided by different authorities (Đulabić, 2013, 149). Analyses show that PA reform strategies in Croatia often address administration only at a central level, disregarding local authorities or services of public interest.⁷ Furthermore, despite a wide acceptance of decentralisation as a political goal, the public governance style is still highly centralised, keeping the status quo through the system of financing and division of tasks (Koprić, 2019, 23). The main problems of Croatian PA that disable reforms are problems of orientation, problems of motivation, and problems of implementation (Koprić, 2011, 14). For instance, the efforts for more systematic reforms initiated by the Strategy of State Administration Reform of 2008 had little success and only some of the measures were implemented (Koprić, 2019, 17). Similarly, the institutional capacity in Slovenia is relatively weak as well. There is no central unit in government for policy planning and the capacity of planning between ministries is weak (Haček et al., 2016, cited in Public administration characteristics and performance in EU: Slovenia, 2018). Anyway, it should be mentioned at this point that the factor that heavily influenced the reform process in Croatia, and Austria and Slovenia alike, was the war of 1991–1995 that largely prevented political democratisation as one of the main transitional processes (Koprić, 2011, 30).

On the contrary, in Austria, the thoughtful implementation of NPM novelties into formally structured procedures and hierarchical governmental structures at all tiers led to the redefinition of PA from a *hierarchical* to a *performance-oriented* system, and to the transformation from the World War II welfare state to the *lean state* (Wimmer, 2007, 652; cf. Bundschuh-Rieseneder, 2008, Wollmann, Koprić, and Marcou, ed., 2016). So far, Austria can look back to a successful reform history. It had long been in the group of European countries that maintained the status quo in their PA, leaning on their traditional systems and processes that were changing slowly. However, starting in the 1990s, reforms became an important part of political agendas and modernisations are nowadays widely implemented. At that time, Administrative Innovation Programme⁸ I and II – a large-scale performance-oriented reform that introduced efficiency measurement and performance responsibility – were launched (Strehl and Uhl, 1997), resulting in a citizen- and business-friendly and efficient PA (Wimmer, 2007, 641). Although the strong legacy of the traditional Weberian state remains a primary orientation of Austrian PA, NPM elements can easily be detected. Wimmer (ibid.) points out the following reform activities that resulted in Austrian reform success story: (i) legal reforms, (ii) reform of public tasks and services, (iii) organisational reforms, (iv) technical reform: e-government, and (v) New Public Management. Although the NPM reform was not enthusiastically welcomed, the gradual implementation of reforms brings beneficial results. Reforms were systematically integrated into federal legislation and seemed to solve the problems of the time (Promberger, Rauskala, and Cecon, 2004, 84). For the future, ongoing reforms in Austria should not only be seen as a success but more as a promise for the future (Wimmer, 2007, 636).

In a PA founded on the rule of law, human rights are highly respected, substantially and procedurally, as is social welfare. State monopoly in providing social services in the socialistic era in Croatia and Slovenia transformed into government's cooperation with civil society and private contractors, parallel with the process of democratisation once these countries gained independence. The tradition of strong social care and some other public services is complemented by high taxes and reliance on the government. Social welfare in Austria is, unlike in Slovenia and Croatia, organised provincially and social services are delivered by the municipalities.

⁷ See Đulabić, 2013 for further detail.

⁸ *Verwaltungsinnovationsprogramm*, see also term *Verwaltungsmanagement*. See Strehl and Uhl, 1997 and Wimmer, 2007 for more detail.

Therefore, there are nine different laws (in all nine provinces), meaning that service users can be better off living in one province than in another (Austrian Association of Social Workers, 2011, 10–11). Following the constitutional principle of subsidiarity, public services have to be provided locally as far as possible and centrally as far as necessary (Wimmer, 2007, 641). In recent years, reforms addressing social services in Austria were prevalent in the manner of changing the laws of a welfare state that influenced decision-making processes rather than organisational changes. However, professionals aim to enact a federal law on social matters that will encode the same rules and standards all over the country (Austrian Association of Social Workers, 2011).

For Slovenian SWC as primary social care and welfare institutions that deal with demanding problems of the people in need, differing in their social class and power, nationality, cultural background and other personal characteristics, the respect of specific combinations of values is needed in all phases of PA reforms. Namely, those values define which functions of PA are and should or should not be in the public interest and therefore provided as services of general interest. At the same time, the values provide the basis for further analysis (Koprić, 2011, 5). Therefore, taking those values into consideration, the SWC reform should be very carefully thought out and very well planned, considering current and long-term interests, expectations, and needs of all relevant stakeholders. All the above is possible only after a good preliminary analysis of the current state of affairs. Afterwards, the implementation of reform strategies has to be well-governed and monitored. In the case of SWC reorganisation, Rape Žiberna et al. (2020, 23) argue that social work professionals in SWC participating in their focus groups did not find any improvements that were a result of SWC reorganisation. They conclude that the only positive outcome of the observed reform could be the effect of mobilising and unifying the profession of social work that was triggered by the reform, and the opportunity of rethinking the fundamental concepts and work methods of social work. The goal of unification of SWC in their structure seems not to be reached as the differences in organisational structure even increased (Žnidar et al. 2020, 158). As positive outcomes of the reform, some organisational changes were pointed out, such as the establishment of a specific unit within each SWC dealing with the simplest administrative procedures and deciding on financing from public funds (child benefits, kindergarten payments subsidies, etc.) (ibid. 153). Such specific units could certainly contribute to faster, more efficient procedures and red tape reduction. Although small, this could be an important contribution to the good governance paradigm in the case of SWC. From this perspective, the society and the expectations of PA service users stimulate responsiveness and participation of public sector organisations, whereas service-minded civil servants solve life situations of the parties by balancing private and public interests (Kovač et al., 2016, 142).

As already mentioned, considering the values and expectations of the users and other stakeholders is crucial for social services given the vulnerable nature of the tasks they perform. The analysis of reform goals set in the policies and their implementation shows that stakeholder involvement in SWC reorganisation was not sufficient and was often only declarative.⁹ Consequently, the reorganisation was implemented without an *ex ante* analysis of the current state of SWC, in the absence of a vision, and without the estimated envisaged impacts it would bring (Rape Žiberna et al., 2020, 13–14). It was estimated on the policy level, for no logical explanation whatsoever, that the changes in the *form* would enable further substantive changes and improvements, while proper stakeholder involvement would help overcome this key shortcoming in the reform

⁹ It is a general problem in Slovenia that the public is not sufficiently involved in the drafting of laws and regulations. There is no tradition of a participatory political culture in Slovenia and this culture is at too low a level (Public administration characteristics and performance in EU: Slovenia. 2018).

process. On the contrary, Austria is known for its long tradition of consensus building through the involvement of a large number of (potential) interest groups. In fact, stakeholder participation – as a core component of the Austrian political system – influenced the depth and scope of PA reforms.¹⁰ Bearing that in mind, as Rape Žiberna et al. emphasise (2020, 9), SWC reorganisation should be founded on the following five factors: (i) interdisciplinarity of the organisation (reforms should be analysed from multiple interdisciplinary aspects), (ii) efficiency increase, (iii) improvement of managerial and organisational skills, (iv) deinstitutionalisation, and (v) development of supplemental programmes in nongovernmental organisations.

The outcomes of SWC reorganisation revealed some structural reform problems in Slovenia that have actually been known for long. There is poor cross-sectoral collaboration, only partial strategic planning, lack of analysis of the current state of the reformed-to-be area, poor analysis, coordination and monitoring in all stages of the reform process, insignificant, if any, stakeholder participation, political discourse not in accordance with the actual state, etc. Croatian researchers report similar findings. According to Đulabić (2013, 158), the policy and the institutional system of a strategic approach towards PA reforms in Croatia have gradually developed since its independence. However, as Koprić emphasises (2019, 18), reforms are approached top-down, oriented towards prevention, while reform means are selected based on political rather than professional or academic criteria. The whole implementation process remains poorly monitored and evaluated, coordination among various administrative bodies should be strengthened and more transparent, and foremost, for reforms to be successful, it is crucial that clear ownership and leadership of the reform process are kept high on the political agenda (Đulabić, 2013, 158–159; cf. Koprić, 2019, 17 ff.). A PA where over-politicisation co-exists with legalism, formalism and red tape, the level of reform, innovation, and initiative is low (Koprić, 2019, 23; cf. Kovač et al., 2016, Wimmer, 2007).

According to Kovač et al. (2016, 142), among the elements of good governance, the Slovenian PA most successfully implements the principles of lawfulness, equality, and legal protection. Even so, the principles of proactive satisfaction of the parties, such as participation, speedy solutions, etc. are still in development and not (fully) implemented (yet). The reason for this is to be found, as already mentioned, in the predominantly legal and formalistic neo-Weberian oriented Slovenian PA. This strongly reflects in the reorganisation of Slovenian SWC, too. While the legal basis for authoritative decision-making, neither in procedural nor in substantive terms, was not a part of the reform, organisational and user-oriented aspects were high on the reform agenda. However, despite the ambitious intentions, the implementation of the good governance principles and user-oriented declared goals was lacking. In this regard, difficulties of PA development are similar in Slovenia and Croatia and reflect the heritage of the former socialist regime (Kuhlmann, and Wollmann, 2019, 115 ff.; cf. Hammerschmid et al., 2016; Koprić, 2019). Thus, for service-oriented parts of PA – such as SWC as representatives of “street-level bureaucracy” – in addition to compliance with regulations, developing partnership with the parties in terms of openness and higher ultimate performance is of the most importance (Kovač et al., 2016, 141).

Thus, the initial hypothesis set in the introductory chapter of this paper can only be partially confirmed. The Slovenian SWC reorganisation is comparable to the reforms in Austria and Croatia in terms of the goals set. However, the reform results vary significantly. While the Austrian reforms result in proper and sufficient outcomes regarding prior goals, in the case of Croatia and Slovenia the implementation of reforms is much less

¹⁰ See Public administration characteristics and performance in EU: Austria. 2018, 24.

successful. Reform goals are reached only partially, if at all. Strategic and cross-sectoral aspects of strategies and implementation plans are poor and stakeholder participation is insufficient. To overcome this gap, strategic planning and long-term public policies, strengthening orientation towards citizens, and designing a modern civil servants system should be the top priority of the Slovenian reform agenda. The main future orientation of Slovenian PA should therefore be a “sustainable and participatory development of administrative relations as only a systematic and comprehensive approach brings more than just short time and partial solutions” (Kovač et al., 2016, 144).

5. Conclusion

The long-awaited reorganisation of SWC in Slovenia was expected to bring about a radical and structural reform that would forever transform the part of the administrative system at the intersection with the social welfare system. However, despite the otherwise ambitious goals of red tape reduction and implementation of citizen-oriented principles of good governance in PA, the results of the reform disappointed all the relevant stakeholders. This specific reform (once again) revealed all the problems of the Slovenian strategy-lacking and cross-sectoral almost non-existing reform practice. Moreover, decision-makers are to be reproached more than just the lack of comprehensive approaches and systemic umbrella solutions; it seems that the most fundamental tasks of initial analysis and stakeholder involvement in the reform process were not properly carried out. Consequently, the politically pleasing goals set in the policy documents of the relevant ministry make it impossible to truly know the current state of SWC. In this case, administrative reform discourse (*talk*), reform programme (*decision*) and reform realisation (*action*) were loosely coupled (Kuhlmann, and Wollmann, 2019, 55). Since no evaluation of this reform has been carried out in Slovenia yet, the frameless conceptual stage of the “administrative free run” of SWC continues. From the systemic perspective of PA, if possible, the overall aim of administrative reform should be the transformation of PA into a system that by itself reacts to the changing tasks and therefore automatically modifies the framework of its decision-making (Bundschuh-Rieseneder, 2008, 49). As far as the reorganised Slovenian SWCs are concerned, that is most certainly not the case.

The case of Austria shows that systematic, well-planned and cross-sectoral coordination of the introduction of new concepts in an at first glance immutable strictly formalistic Weberian bureaucracy is possible. In this regard, it is necessary to take into account historical, cultural and societal factors of each administrative system. While the Croatian reform processes reflect difficulties similar to Slovenian ones, the Austrian example offers some good practices for future reforming of SWC as prototypical representatives of formal authoritative bodies in the sense of users-directed and quality-oriented practice. It is fair to say that this paper tries to fill the gap of so far non-existent evaluations on Slovenian SWC reorganisation by providing an only introductory and explorative comparative evaluation to get a basic insight into the phenomenon of SWC reorganisation. Thus, a lot more research focusing on specific issues of this reform will be necessary in the future. Regardless, despite the disappointing outcomes of the observed reform, examples from abroad show that a comprehensive and wholesome reform of authoritative bodies, intertwining legality, structure, and user-oriented practice according to Neo-Weberian and New Public Governance models, are possible.

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