

Rationalities for governance reforms. Theoretical and practical insights.

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Abstract

Renewing governance in its different aspects has been an important challenge for decades already with growing number of case studies from all over Europe (Pollitt; Bouckaert, 2017) and policy reports by international organisations (OECD; UNDP; European Commission) addressing the challenge. Although the context for governance differs state by state there are also converging focal questions such as growing demand for public services and institutional adaptability in designing and providing them. Many CEE states have been and currently are in the process of wide-scale public sector institutional and administrative reforms (Pollitt; Bouckaert 2017; Junjan 2012; Mazur 2020) aiming at resilience. The justifications for choosing types of measures and tools for reforms run deep at the level of rationalities. C. Hood and M. Jackson argued in their seminal Administrative Argument (1991) that “doctrines”, acknowledged or not, have immense effect on the role of governance. The article builds upon doctrinal rationality level and applies the model of Mirko Noordegraaf (2015) for the analysis of recent governance reform justifications in EU member states. Noordegraaf has developed a theoretical triangle of performance-based, professionalism-driven and political public management that each has its own set of values and goals. He argues that it is highly necessary to acknowledge the differences of the approaches but also to promote interplay between those three ways of doing public management. That way the weaknesses of limited doctrinal views can be overcome. Written interviews with 12 EU member states (belonging to the European Commission’s Expert Group of DG Reform) and in-depth focus group interviews with all the ministries in Estonia (Heads of Strategy Department and Deputy Secretary General level represented) provide the data for the analysis. It is found that performance-based approach is still prevalent (visibly from the 1980s wave of reforms) but other approaches are becoming increasingly important beside it. Seeking efficiency and reducing government costs is still relevant goal but (especially in the Northern European countries) does not rank always first in the reform priorities any more. The responsiveness to the public needs and expectations has become growingly important. The tendency of positioning citizen as a “client” has not changed much on most of the European states. Here the Scandinavian states can be seen as the role-models attributing citizens a more meaningful role in policy design. Also, considering the link between funding and perceived governance challenges, the study confirmed the high influence of EU-driven reforms on the reform content and doctrines (Ongaro; Kickert, 2019). States relying mostly on the EU funding in their governance reforms tend to remain less diverse in their approaches to social issues (compared to states that fund their reforms from the state budget). The capacity to identify and implement different approaches is yet to be improved.

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