Institutionalisation of Project-Based Governance in European Public Administration: Organisational Consolidation, Europeanisation and State Capacity

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Abstract

Project-based governance has become a central organisational form in European public administration, structuring how policies are implemented and reforms operationalised, particularly in contexts shaped by digital transformation and supranational funding frameworks. Despite its widespread diffusion, existing research remains largely normative and offers limited explanations of the institutional mechanisms that shape its adoption and consolidation.

This paper analyses project-based governance in the Portuguese public administration from an organisational institutionalist perspective, conceptualising it as a dimension of administrative capacity. The study draws on an exploratory analysis of quantitative data collected through a survey of professionals involved in public-sector ICT projects (n = 200). The analysis focuses on patterns of formal adoption, practical use and institutional consolidation, with particular attention to the PM² methodology as an instrument of administrative Europeanisation.

The findings reveal a stratified configuration characterised by high levels of formal adoption, significant methodological hybridisation and limited organisational consolidation. Formal adoption is associated with institutional legitimation mechanisms, while practical use reflects processes of organisational translation. The limited consolidation of these practices suggests that the diffusion of formal instruments does not ensure their stabilisation within organisational routines.

This article contributes to public administration research by demonstrating that administrative capacity depends not only on the adoption of formal instruments but on their institutional consolidation within organisational practice, thereby reframing how reform outcomes are assessed in public administration.