



Public administration reform in Macedonia[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The Western Balkan countries have made important steps in the advancement of democracy. However, public administration remains a field where reforms progress very slowly, due to a combination of reasons, ranging from economic and political to cultural ones. Macedonia is not an exception. This paper analyzes the main reasons for the slow pace of reforms in Macedonia's public administration sector. The focus on public administration and the state contributes to understanding the priority of establishing a professional, efficient and transparent public administration system in a country in the process of European accession. The main research question is why reforms in Macedonia's public administration sector have been so difficult to implement.

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1. Introduction

Public administration, as the apparatus through which decisions are executed, has long been considered a constituent part of government activity. It consists of the civil service, the public finance department, security, the judiciary, local government, and many other elements. This descriptive definition allows us to understand how large the scope of the analysis can be when embarking upon public administration studies.

Interest in the politics-administration dichotomy reached South-Eastern Europe only after the fall of the socialist regimes; yet ever since, politics and politicians have continued to define the organization and function of the administration in the region. Politicization of public administration derives from the visible and automatic synthesis of the ruling party with the state in post-communist countries. After the fall of the socialist regime in Macedonia, as in the whole region, the reform of public administration became an essential feature in regard to the consolidation of democracy and the market economy. Nevertheless, changes have been moderate, especially in practice. Reformed public administration is also one of the criteria of the European Partnership, which defines short-term and long-term priorities in preparation for integration into the European Union (EU).

This paper analyzes the reasons for the slow pace of reforms in Macedonia's public administration sector. It is organised as follows. The first part analyzes the importance of a transparent and credible public administration sector in the process of democratic consolidation in Western Balkan countries. The second part of the paper focuses on the historical background of Macedonia's administrative development since 2001. The discussion then moves on to explore several inter-related facets of governance in Macedonia, including the weak professionalization of the civil service sector, the persistent politicization of bureaucratic agencies, the inequitable ethnic representation and power-sharing in the public sector, and lastly the extensive corruption. The final part of the paper questions the slow pace of reforms regarding Macedonia's public administration, and analyzes the interaction between persistent characteristics of weakness in administrative development on the one hand, and the prospects of democratic consolidation and European Union (EU) access on the other. We then conclude that deficiencies in

[☆] All interviews were conducted in confidence, and the names of interviewees were withheld by mutual agreement.

governance, especially regarding the implementation of reforms in the public administration sector, obstruct Macedonia's overall democratic consolidation and complicate its prospects for a speedy and successful process towards EU accession.

2. Public administration and state

The transformation of post-communist countries in the Western Balkan region has turned out to be much more difficult than was first presumed. One of the primary reasons why reforms failed or why their results were not sustainable was the magnitude of the constraints these countries faced. In order to implement any sustainable national reform, there should be: a) reasonable consensus in the society about the goals of the reform; b) reform needs strong political commitment; c) different stakeholders and institutions should be willing to co-operate while respecting different needs and priorities; d) any reform process should be long-term; e) in the expectation of long-term gains, people should be willing to tolerate the short-term losses that inevitably arise from reform; f) there should be flexible institutional arrangements for facilitating reform and managing resources; and finally, g) sufficient social capital. Not surprisingly, social capital that relates to such aspects of social life as trust, partnership and cohesiveness that enable people to work, live and create synergies together, is the condition which is most often missing in post-communist countries.¹ Nevertheless, there is sufficient human capital, which is traditionally defined as knowledge, abilities and competencies of individuals to carry out the reforms. Without sufficient social capital implementation of any reform is impossible. This constraint is particularly pertinent to the Western Balkans where the potential of ethnic conflict is high, for example in Kosovo and Macedonia.

Of course it takes long time to change individual and social attitudes and behavioural patterns. For such profound changes to take place it may be necessary to wait for the emergence of a new generation unaffected by life under the former regime. That notwithstanding, it is now that the reformers have to tackle the 'old generation', who remain in charge of public institutions and must be replaced. They still dominate the key positions in universities and ministries, and maintain former attitudes that are sometimes hostile to modernization of the public service.

Another possible pitfall in public administration reform is the misconception of the nature of state and public administration. Public administration, according to European tradition, is rooted in the requirement for a strong state. It is a widely shared opinion that the public administration system has to keep the state going and exercise its public authority. That is why the literature argues that the fundamental challenge to post-communist countries is still a (re)creation of the positive concept of the state. A lack of any positive concept of what is meant by "the state" and insufficient state identification on the part of citizens lead to serious problems, which include distrust in the state, lack of loyalty of the citizens to the government and respect for legal and/or administrative decisions. Moreover, with regard to the administrative culture, the attitudes of bureaucrats are also highly dependent on this tradition.

Public administration in the former communist countries was monolithic, since it was characterized by high politicisation and a lack of positive relations with citizens. One important actor in governance, namely civil society, was missing, and in some of these countries it is still weak.

The commitment and loyalty of public servants cannot be taken for granted, especially in countries with a brief experience of democratic governance. This is mainly because in the past neither civil service recruitment nor career progression applied competitive or meritocratic models. Criteria that were used in the civil service did not meet any of the requirements of a transparent system. For example, the appropriate mechanisms for protecting civil servants from political interventions were lacking, which in turn created a distrust and even hostility on the part of the population towards the state apparatus.

Although the new constitutions and laws are substantial, legal texts alone are unable to resolve all these social and behavioural issues. Public administration in post-communist countries, such as Macedonia, still suffers from the bad reputation of the state, and the future development of the role of the state will also determine possible solutions to many other problems. The impact of state tradition and the development of solid legal principles of public administration, now known as the European Principles of Public Administration (EAS), are firmly established in Western Europe as a result of a long political and social evolution.

3. The role of public administration reform in EU accession

The EU has neither treaty provisions nor agreed common institutional templates regulating the public administration sphere of its member countries (Olsen, 2003: 513–514). However, from the early stages of its process of eastward enlargement the Union realized that public administration capacities were critical for dealing with the transposition and especially effective implementation of the growing body of *acquis*. Moreover, the Union's experience with generally weak capacities in post-communist candidate countries has pushed it to outline the administrative criteria.

The initial Copenhagen criteria included merely implicit references to these administrative criteria, but the Union has been careful to define these further throughout the process of enlargement. Agenda 2000, which elaborated the commission's opinion on each country's capacity to assume membership obligations, included administrative capacity as a criterion in its

¹ Social capital is defined by Robert Putnam in his study *Making Democracy Work* (1993), as: "[...] features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions" (Putman, 1993: 167).

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