STOP BUREAUCRACY REFORMS — CASE STUDY IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN SLOVAKIA

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ABSTRACT
The subject of the research is the possibility of implications of project management tools within the possibility of implementing reforms in public administration in the conditions of the Slovak Republic. For this purpose, the Stop bureaucracy strategy and its two reforms in the field of informatization with the objective - to allow technically and legislatively the replacement of paper confirmations requested by public authorities in accordance with the “once and only principle” in the Slovak Republic - were selected. The results point to the fact that in addition to the need to involve relevant actors to ensure the effectiveness and democratic aspect of policy making in multi-level governance, the duration of the relevant parliamentary term also has a direct impact on the possibilities of implementing reforms and their projects in public administration. The review of two reforms in the recent two parliamentary terms provides an insight into other attributes that, in synergy, affect the possibility of implementing changes in the public administration of the Slovak Republic during one parliamentary term.

KEYWORDS
Multi-level governance, Policymaking, Project management, Public administration, Reform
1. INTRODUCTION

Several possible reasons are presented why projects in public administration are described as unsuccessful, inefficient or disproportionately long-lasting. “We have been following reform efforts for several years, with one wave of measures being replaced by another. Following the political will, it is necessary to apply modern management tools so that the whole process really works” [10]. According to Masárová et al [11] “public administration in organizational terms of administrative structure can be understood as a set of public institutions. In terms of the definition of the competencies of public institutions, it can be understood as a set of processes that these public organizations carry out. If the public administration is to function effectively, then both organizational and procedural aspects of public administration must be in line.

Compared to the commercial environment, the project environment in public administration is more complex and demanding, at least in the area of communication with the public and the extent of impacts - on the entire Slovak Republic. “The public sector, like the business sector, must look for ways to increase efficiency” [3]. But for many politicians and bureaucrats public administration reforms and public services innovation improving efficiency and quality means a burden, especially if it reveals some existing flaws in the system in which governments function and in the ways they are organized. This seems to be the most important barrier, accounting for the failed public administration reforms processes at all government levels in Slovakia [11]. However, public administration performs functions and tasks that are less interdependent or, in some specific cases, more interdependent. From this point of view, they have clear addressees and are compatible with maintaining the political system, combining individual and group interests. Therefore, if the state listens to the demands of citizens and other stakeholders through public administration, this mutual relationship can be assessed positively. In this case, the citizen becomes a full partner of the state, which is represented by public administration bodies [9]. For public administration reform to be successful, it is necessary to formulate the conditions that affect the course and results of the reform. These conditions are partly due to the specific situation and partly because of the deliberate actions of the reformers. In our understanding, the addressability of the reform is conditioned by the involvement of the stakeholders in its preparation and implementation.

This article aims to highlight the importance of project management in the implementation of public administration reforms in examining the impact of the length of the parliamentary term on the possibility of implementing reforms through public administration projects and verify the project management impact on the more targeted adjustment towards the needs of actors / stakeholders in public administration reforms in the conditions of the Slovak Republic. “Public administration is a deliberate activity that pursues a specific goal, namely the regulation of conditions and methods of government implementation” [9]. Due to this, we assume that the relevance of the topic is high not only due to the scope of the prepared reforms in either departmental or interdepartmental scope (which are the subject of research) but also in the context of possible impacts on the prepared extensive Recovery Plan for the Slovak Republic.

The article offers insights through the duration of the parliamentary terms as well as through the reform life cycle processes through the use and similarity with the project life cycle process. It brings examples from the current period, which also supports the unique personal experience of the author’s implementation practice. It uses a combination of basic scientific methods (comparisons and analyzes) and project management methods. An interview was also used to verify and obtain current data.
2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Tkach et al. [16] point out that “the transition to the concept of customer-oriented management requires a transition to a service approach in public administration. Clients of government agencies, citizens and legal entities need fast, affordable and quality services. Such service criteria fully meet the requirements for the implementation of the project approach in the public sector”. The project approach is seen as a management methodology, highlighting its advantages in ensuring the achievement of the ultimate goal of the project [2]. Tkach et al. [16] add that the implementation of the project approach in the field of public administration requires a radical restructuring of the entire management system, the transition from a process approach to results-oriented activities.

If our goal is to investigate project management as a specific form of a strategic choice when selecting policy tools, we must take into account framework of policy implementation as is illustrated e.g. with two welfare reforms in the Swedish public sector, which were organized and implemented as project organizations described in the study of Jensen et al. [7] or challenges facing the implementation of strategic management in Turkey’s public sector reforms according to [1] as well as authors [5] dealing in their studies with the issue of innovation in public administration and the importance of government reforms. According to them innovations can either emanate from a managerial choice to find a solution to an internal inefficiency or are stimulated by external conditions. The case studies and the analysis show that it is crucial that a project organization fits into the overall governance structure when used as a policy tool.

Of course, in the case of research in the field of public administration reforms, especially in areas such as the creation / re-creation of democratic public-administration systems, building democracies, organizing transitions mainly in the field of methods and tools, authors such as [15, 14, 8] cannot be neglected. Authors Mihalik et al. [13], in turn, point to the fact the current period is characterized by new systems of governance strengthening the role of sub-national levels of public policymaking as well as the relationship of representation and collective self-determination. In this regard, the effectiveness and democratic aspect of policy making in multi-level governance have attained specific and very important status in the political arrangements of most European countries and have led into deep restructurialization of the regional and local governments. Such trends may be observed across multiple European countries and the decentralization and regionalization tendencies are present in all European countries during the last decades. Deriving from this, it is evident that this process is currently not only from the Slovak perspective but is more of a global and standard feature.

The common idea of research dealing with this issue is the fact that the implication of this is that project management as a policy tool is a matter that deserves more attention in the strategic discussion on implementing public policies and the suitability of using certain policy tools.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Data

For the purpose of this research realization we collected data from representatives of the department of the investigation during the months of November 2021 and April 2022. The figures refer to two successive reforms between 2016 and 2022. Due to the area of the reforms under examination, the data were provided by the Ministry of Investments, Regional Development and Informatization of the Slovak Republic (hereinafter MIRRI). At the same time, they also provided us with data from the predecessor of this Ministry - from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister for Informatization and Investments of the Slovak Republic.
3.2 Methods

Due to the nature of the research carried out, we have selected the following scientific methods to process the data obtained and draw relevant conclusions:

A) comparison method - comparison of the attributes of the change of three initiatives/ two reforms (see Table 1) that will allow research questions to be examined and answered

B) method of analysis - we analyze secondary data from the investigated departments of state administration

C) case study method using the evaluation of project management tools (project phases and milestones, project triangle – scope, time, resources)

D) we used the interview method to verify secondary data - the answers were provided to us by a representative of the MIRRI department (Ministry of Investments, Regional Development and Informatization of the Slovak Republic).

3.3 Parliamentary terms

Due to the nature of the research carried out, we used data for the 7th parliamentary term (2016 – 2020) and the 8th parliamentary term (2020 – current). The periods in question were selected because of the possibility of using current data and at the same time the possibility of comparing them with the last completed parliamentary term.

3.4 Objective of research and research questions

Based on the use of project management tools in the implementation of reforms in public administration in the conditions of the Slovak Republic, the aim of the carried-out research was the impact of the use of project management in the implementation of public administration reforms on the more targeted adjustment of these reforms towards the needs of stakeholders and to highlight the impact of the duration of the parliamentary term in this process. To this end, we have identified two important reforms related to the Stop bureaucracy strategy, the implementation of which we are examining:

1. QW2, i.e the second wave of de-bureaucratization, the so-called Quick Win 2 (hereinafter referred to as QW2) from the areas of informatization from the agenda of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister for Informatization and Investments of the Slovak Republic.
2. QW3, i.e. the third wave of de-bureaucratization, the so-called Quick Win 3 (hereinafter referred to as QW3), from the areas of informatization in two versions/ initiatives, namely
   i. QW3.1 from the agenda of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister for Informatization and Investments of the Slovak Republic and subsequently
   ii. QW3.2 from the ministry of investment, regional development and informatization of the Slovak Republic.

This study seeks to answer the following three research questions:

RQ1: Does the duration of the parliamentary term have an impact on the possibilities of implementing reforms through projects in public administration under the conditions of the Slovak Republic?

RQ2: Does the complexity of change/reform have a direct impact on the possibilities of its introduction within a single parliamentary term?

RQ3: Does the use of project management in the implementation of public administration reforms have an impact on the more targeted adjustment of these reforms towards the needs of stakeholders?
Data on reforms were obtained
— from the author’s own knowledge and experience during external support for the preparation of both legislative standards as well as from the implementation of the changes in question in the departments,
— data provided by specialists in the department concerned (MIRRI).

So far, these two reforms have brought three initiatives (in QW2 one, in QW3 two – see Fig. 2) for public administration, which were under examination when the comment procedure was launched (preliminary, interdepartmental) and thus required extensive human efforts and resources, at least in the preparation phase.

In view of the fact that both reforms and their three initiatives are based on the need for legislative adjustment at least to the extent of the amendment of the existing law, the so-called project phases - in line with world project management standards - have been used for our examination purposes, and to compare the reforms in question as follows:

1. **Preparation phase**: start of the initiative (reform) from the first draft proposal to the government approval (including)

2. **Initiation phase**: negotiations in parliament, after approval and signature of the President of the Slovak Republic (including)

3. **Realization phase**: as of the effectiveness date of the legislative change - implementation project/program – implementation of the subject matter of the change, training of affected employees and stakeholders up to the handover into operation

4. **Closing phase**: several months of post-deployment support (in case of deployment of a new information system, or its modifications by the so-called hyper care phase), elimination of deficiencies and reservations, external communication, takeover into full operation by the change owner/ sponsor.

The data collected in different detail should be decomposed by the smallest squares method so that their tell-tale value is relevant, and the attributes are comparable. The missing values will be supplemented by means of a survey by means of a prepared questionnaire of employees of the sectors concerned in the form of an interview. The data will be analyzed, and the results verified using the regression analysis method.

### 4. RESULTS

In terms of the data obtained, we have reached the following conclusions by analyzing and comparing the data.

In Figure 1 on the timeline, we describe the progress of reforms during each parliamentary term. The parliamentary term 3 in the Figure 1 does not contain any reform we study and describe in this paper; it is added only for the reason of the sequential logic.
Figure 1. Two reforms over two parliamentary terms

Source: author’s self-processing, 2022

Figure 2 shows the division of the two reforms examined into three initiatives within four phases of the life cycle and their fundamental differences. We are pointing to the level of completion of the project in a particular parliamentary term. We use and illustrate here the division of individual initiatives into phases using project management methods.

Figure 2. Life cycle of three initiatives/two reforms

Source: author’s self-processing, 2022

The data characterizing the parameters of the three initiatives/two reforms are organized for comparison options in Table 1. The first column lists the attributes of the change being studied. The first row in the second to fourth columns bears the title according to the designation of the specific initiative that has been the subject of our examination. In the row with the attribute Difference from V.1 there is only one relevant subject for the answer – in the last column where the second version QW3.2 is described. The same rule is applied also in the next row the attribute V.2 took advantage of V.1 results as there was also the only one relevant answer in the last column found. There are several
abbreviations used in Table 1 - IT for information technology, IS for the information system, SR for the Slovak Republic. Project or Program Manager just for the purpose of this study are considered equal. The planned time for implementation of changes (including IT changes/ digitization) in the second version of the initiative named QW3.2 is reported to be two and half years, which represents the longest implementation time among all three initiatives. This parameter is accompanied with the scope extension as well as the increase of the involved entities - all related to the second version of the initiative QW3.

Table 1. Comparison of attributes of change to three initiatives/ two reforms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute of the change/ Name of the initiative</th>
<th>1 QW2</th>
<th>2 QW3.1</th>
<th>3 QW3.2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New law needed/ number</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amendment of the existing law/ number</td>
<td>Yes// 1</td>
<td>Yes// 1</td>
<td>Yes// 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation up to implementation (until project closing) in 1 parliamentary term</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planned time for implementation of changes (including IT changes/ digitization)</td>
<td>1.5 year</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>2.5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypercare support after implementation and deployment of IS</td>
<td>2 months</td>
<td>2 months</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human resources available</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>partially</td>
<td>partially</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial resources available</td>
<td>yes (has not passed the approval)</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference from V.1: content, scope</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>yes, extension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference from V.1: time of realization</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>yes, shift of effectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V.2 took advantage of V.1 results</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of entities involved</td>
<td>Up to 10</td>
<td>Up to 10</td>
<td>More than 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parallel running of the initiation and realiza- tion phase/ if so since</td>
<td>Yes. After the 1st reading in the National Council of the SR.</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>Yes. Since government approval.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project or Program Manager assigned</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular reporting about the progress</td>
<td>yes (weekly)</td>
<td>yes (weekly)</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: author's self-processing, 2022

On the basis of the results of the investigation defined by us, we can conclude that:

Research question 1 (Does the duration of the parliamentary term have an impact on the possibilities of implementing reforms through projects in public administration under the conditions of the Slovak Republic?)

is confirmed by the examples of both reforms examined, as:
— only one reform (QW2) was implemented through a single initiative and completed the project with closing during one parliamentary term
— the second reform (QW3), which failed to implement its initial phase during one parliamentary term in the initiative initially launched, did not continue, but started with a new initiative from the next parliamentary term, i.e. from the very beginning, i.e. from the preparation phase.

For research question 2 (Does the complexity of change/ reform have a direct impact on the possibilities of its introduction within one parliamentary term?) we have defined the parameters of "Complexity" with its rates (low/ medium/ high) as follows:
— Law or amendment: no law/amendment (1-low); amendment (2-medium); new law (3-high),
— Number of laws and amendments in total: no law or amendment (1-low); 1-2 (2-medium); 3 and more (3-high),
— Number of entities involved: up to 5 (1-low); up to 10 (2-medium); above 10 (3-high).

The results of the comparison based on complexity attribute of all three evaluated initiatives are recorded in Table 2 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute of complexity/ initiative</th>
<th>QW2</th>
<th>QW3.1</th>
<th>QW3.2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Law or amendment</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nr of Law and Amendments in total</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nr of entities involved</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: author’s self-processing, 2021

**Research Question 2** is confirmed by only 50% of the examples of reforms examined, which means that
— 50% of the reform cases (QW2) of the middle complexity have achieved targets within a single parliamentary term,
— 50% of the reform cases (QW3) of the middle complexity have failed to achieve targets within a single parliamentary term,

which we consider research question 2 to be unconfirmed.

However, in terms of the available data, in 50% of reform cases (QW3), the reason for the non-continuation was not the higher complexity. The reform of QW3 in version 1 did not proceed with the path of the original initiative, mainly due to the change of stakeholders (representatives of the government) and the associated time clash - in the preparation phase - with the next parliamentary term – which relates to our research question nr. 1.

The reform in the second version, i.e. initiative QW3.2, has been postponed to the next parliamentary term. At the same time, its complexity was increased.

Conclusion: complexity as the only (lonely) element of reform may not be the reason for its infeasibility in one parliamentary term.

For the **research question 3** (Does the use of project management in the implementation of public administration reforms have an impact on the more targeted adjustment of these reforms towards the needs of stakeholders?) we have used several attributes from the Table 1, Table 2 and enriched them by data in the QW2 Program organization chart - see Fig. 3 below, where the major program team members with their relations and roles are reflected including both - the project management direction (see the top-down arrow on the right side of the chart) as well as the escalation and reporting paths (see the bottom-up arrow on the left side of the chart). For Fig. 3 we used the original organizational chart of the program, but for the public usage of the article there were names of persons excluded by the authors. The numbered charts of six different business owners are characterizing six different projects, with the different scope defined by different paragraph articles in law amendment, defined by different data sets, by eight different sets of legal documents (e.g., Data provision agreement, Agreement on the integration intention), by three different dates of the reform effectiveness, different information systems etc. The last column under the Business owner marked
with the number six shows three subprojects (three project managers with three suppliers and three internal teams) - this refers to three different Health Insurance companies that are active in service provisioning for citizens as well as for entrepreneurs (both: for individuals and for companies) on the Slovak market. Each of them provided the program (reform) with a team of dedicated experts during the whole project duration.

The research question 3 is confirmed by the examples of both reforms examined, as:
— All initiatives were planned as projects defined by
  • Scope (Law or amendment, see Table 2),
  • Time (see Table 1 - Planned time for implementation) and
  • Resources (see Table 1 - Human resources and financial resources)
— Both reforms used Parallel running of the initiation and realization phase to be able to achieve the objectives – the needs of players (at least from the milestone of the governmental approval and later),
— Only one (out of three) initiative (QW3.1) was stopped by end of parliamentary term,
— All involved parties / resorts/ ministries nominated their representatives to the program roles (see the Figure 3) to participate in the reform progress respectively and continuously.
— Each resort nominated its Project Manager and dedicated the whole Project team for the specific change realization and additional value co-creation in line with the strategic goal of any QWx program.
— The representatives of authorities used repeatedly and by purpose the “project management” as the tool for the reform implementation and value co-creation when involving more parties / resorts/ ministries.
— Although citizens and entrepreneurs – in their role of main actors or end users/ customers of the results of this reform – are not mentioned on the organizational chart of the program (Figure 3), they are the one, who benefit the most from results and values that have been generated by the reform. The citizen and entrepreneur became a full partner of the state from the very beginning of the reform formation and value co-creation, including their active participation on the formal commenting procedures, on the use cases and life events definition, on the testing and feed-back giving. They made calls or sent emails related to the claim or complaint sending in case the service did not fulfill their expectations or the promised quality level of the specific service.
It would be difficult and would not be very precise to name and list all the enablers and moments, those we could consider relevant and those that have provided the support via direct or indirect ways to the real value co-creation in the project society. We can name at least several of them, like introduction of the specific program management tools for the implementation of the reform – we consider this decision the key success factor for the achieved reform results delivery as well as the end users’ satisfaction and not only service availability, but mainly active and regular usage of the service. Strong and dedicated person in the Sponsor role, regular weekly reporting, cross-sectors all-PMs meetings, Steering committee roles, decent behaviour and modus operandi, effective communication channels incl. external communication via TV and Radio broadcasting, press reports, press conferences, monitoring of the real service usage with the users from the relevant public sector areas in the regions, etc.

The selection and the composition of the core project team we can count to the key enablers and among happy moments as well. The team members were selected from every relevant area, sector and also from many levels of the management within Public Administration. The onboarding process was a bit easier on the one hand due to a very "sexy" topic (STOP BUREAUCRACY) and on the other hand it was related to very complex anti bureaucracy legislation changes linked with the broad business processes and standards impact and in IT implementation scope. We need to mention one more aspect – the support of the members of the parliament. Majority of members of the parliament supported the reform via constructive proposals and with their supportive voting. Without any of the mentioned above actors and their active or passive support, shared knowhow and energy spent, the program - reform would not deliver all planned benefits in set time and scope.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Public administration, its structure, model, basic principles and tasks, is significantly determined by the dynamic development of society in a modern and democratic state, which is perceived primarily as a tool of service, the outputs of which are directed to the final addressee - the citizen. At the same time, it is necessary to realize that one of the prerequisites of a modern democratic political system is the existence of effective participation, which is subsequently reflected in increased participation of citizens and other stakeholders in the decision-making process, on the other hand. Participation represents a long-standing interest on the part of the professional and lay public as one of the basic pillars of a democratic establishment, not only in the form of one-off participation in elections, usually over a period of four years, but especially stronger activation and engagement in governance on a regular basis. P. Iosifidis and M. Wheeler [6] state that only adequately informed citizens are able to participate effectively in political and public affairs. However, the public itself is at a certain information disadvantage in this respect, because it does not always have information in adequate quality, quantity or in good time. It is therefore necessary to assume that only an informed public can effectively participate and engage in the management of public affairs that affect them, while the principles of transparency and openness must be applied across public administration.

How has it been possible that all actors among public authorities were able and willing to establish project teams? We can guess that either they all are mature organizations in project management, or the leader of the change, that time the Prime Minister of Slovakia led by example and “sold" the strategic direction, the Stop bureaucracy idea with its objectives to respective partners very successfully. These questions could also be further elaborated.

If we replace the “fulfilment” by “efficiency of the money spent in implementing reforms and their impacts”, then we can be fully agree with the statement “quantifying the fulfilment is possible not by private economic operators, financial institutions, health facilities, business establishments, but also by public sector bodies, including public administration entities" [3]. Therefore, one of the
other directions of research could be the above-mentioned effectiveness of the resources spent (human, financial, others) in implementing reforms and their impacts in cases where the reform fails to take place in the chosen parliamentary term but is seized by the new government and starts the initiation phase almost all over again.

If we were to consider reforms and instruments in the context of Central and Eastern Europe, the conclusions of our research support the assertion of another study from 2014 and that political and administrative instability is another, often mentioned contextual factor, hampering long-term systemic reform [4].

Verheijen and Dobrolyubova [17] stated that, despite initial skepticism, performance management has proved its worth in the context of Central and Eastern Europe and that an incremental = gradual approach to reform facilitated its implementation. Here we would like to place the first emphasis on ‘gradual’, i.e. that the competent representatives in the public administration consider the complexity of the changes/reforms, so as not to increase the complexity of the already extensive and complex reforms, and to opt for the approach to implementation by smaller iterations instead. The second emphasis is attached to the aforementioned ‘performance management’, which can be applied very effectively precisely by the methods of project or program (for more extensive reforms/changes) of management. However, the truth remains that performance management itself and sufficient and up-to-date information on it do not guarantee the success of the reform. Last but not least, and perhaps as an essential part and condition for the successful implementation of reform (not only) in public administration – is the availability of quality human resources in key line (table) positions as well as roles in the project team - in the preparation and implementation of the reform. For a similar approach, the authors [17] also make a recommendation to move to NPM ideas - such as position-based human resource management and performance-related pay remuneration [12]. These options were also not examined, i.e., they are not considered in the article, but they could, as well as other attributes of successfully implemented change, have an impact on the implementation of reforms via projects in public administration in the conditions of the Slovak Republic. Based on the findings above, we may recommend what other directions further research could take. One of them is the possibility of examining further attributes and greater details of the reforms examined and the reasons for their success or failure to implement, or to conduct several interviews through a so-called 360-degree analysis of several representatives of several stakeholders. Another option is to choose further reform in the conditions of the Slovak Republic, which is carried out by another resort. Another option is also to compare with the V4 countries based on common historical characteristics.
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