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## The role of EU funding in EU member states: building administrative capacity to advance administrative reforms

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## **The role of EU funding in EU Member States: building administrative capacity to advance administrative reforms**

### **Abstract**

#### *Purpose*

Despite the growing volume of EU investments into reforms and public administration, it is still unclear how EU support contributes to administrative reform and capacity building at domestic level. The article explains the EU's influence, domestic politicisation and previous administrative capacity on organisational change while implementing ESF-financed projects during the programming period 2014-2020.

#### *Design/methodology/approach*

By going beyond the EU-centred approach and based on different strands of the new institutionalism we offer three explanations on the influence of EU support. We performed the qualitative content analysis of 29 case studies and matched the implementation of the projects with our explanations.

#### *Findings*

Our research results indicate that progress in the implementation of the projects was determined by domestic factors rather than EU conditionalities. The influence of domestic politicisation was found to be mixed, but higher levels of initial administrative capacity proved to be most important to achieving organisational change.

#### *Research limitations/implications*

Our judgement of the project implementation and their success was based on the information provided in the case studies at the time of implementation.

#### *Practical implications*

Our research points to the essential need for the initial and gradual development of administrative capacity to achieve good reform results.

#### *Originality/value*

Based on the different logics of the new institutionalism, we developed specific mechanisms for organisational change. Our research results deepen the understanding of how politicisation positively or negatively shapes reform implementation, as well as how pre-existing administrative capacity and its further development dynamically occurs through a process of socialisation and learning.

## Introduction

European public administrations are facing a number of profound challenges, including fast technological change, demographic changes and skills shortages, an increasing complexity of policy issues, the green transition, and increasing pressures on public finances (European Commission, 2021). Some of those issues could be addressed by investing EU or national money to improve the performance of public administration.

EU institutions have provided support to administrative reforms, administrative capacity building and improving the management of EU funds through different funds of EU Cohesion policy and sectoral programmes (European Commission, 2021, p. 19). For instance, in 2014-2020, a total of 17 beneficiary countries received about EUR 4.2 billion from the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) under their thematic objective 11 ‘enhancing institutional capacity of public authorities and stakeholders and efficient public administration’. In a new programming period unprecedented resources will be allocated to EU Member States under the ‘NextGenerationEU’ package that will, among other things, support investments into reforms and public administration.

There is a growing body of empirical evidence and case examples on the use of EU support in EU Member States. For instance, the European Commission publishes various reports and studies on progress in the implementation of various programmes and initiatives (e.g. European Commission, 2021a). However, there is still little knowledge on the implementation of EU interventions in the field of public administration and governance.

Also, there are mixed academic findings on the results of external support. Some previous Europeanisation research has identified significant effects of EU funding on national policies (Bachtler *et al.*, 2014; Van Gerven *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, EU conditionality was found to provide a window of opportunity and legitimacy for furthering national administrative reform (MacCarthaigh and Hardiman, 2020). At the same time, it was recognised that the EU’s influence can result in unintended consequences that go against its original intent (Török, 2020). However, other studies have revealed only weak links or even no links at all between a significant amount of EU support used for upgrading the governance capacity of individual countries, on the one hand, and the performance of their public administrations, on the other hand (Chardas, 2012; Featherstone, 2015; Hajnal *et al.*, 2018).

Furthermore, the existing studies remain under-theorised on the causal mechanisms of EU support on organisational change, with the association among different drivers of EU support and the results of these interventions not clearly understood. To assess organisational change, it is necessary to go beyond programme theories or intervention logics (Nakrošis, 2014) because such approaches usually focus on the central role of EU institutions, the technical aspects of implementation and external pressures of normative nature. Therefore, they sometimes neglect the important characteristics of national political and administrative contexts, as well as the interests, preferences and beliefs of domestic actors (Mastenbroek and Kaeding, 2006; Surubaru, 2017). Since public management reforms depend on various contextual features and the degree of politicisation at national level (Common and Gheorghe, 2019; Hagemann, 2019; Pollitt and Dan, 2011), it is important to understand their influence on the implementation of EU interventions in public administration and governance. Such causal mechanisms can be captured by the logic of consequentiality from the rational choice strand of the new institutionalism (Hall and Taylor, 1996).

Government effectiveness and administrative capacity building are increasingly recognised as an important condition for the successful absorption of EU funds, especially in Central and Eastern

European (CEE) countries (Incaltarau *et al.*, 2020; OECD, 2020). For the study of EU interventions aimed at capacity building and administrative efficiency this raises an interesting causality dilemma of ‘the chicken or the egg’. This is because a certain level of administrative capacity should be put in place first to ensure the effective implementation of reform and capacity-building projects. Therefore, it is necessary to explore how the pre-existence of administrative capacity can shape the subsequent implementation of EU interventions. Such an analysis could benefit from the historical strand of the new institutionalism and its logic of path dependency (Pierson, 2004).

The purpose of this article is to explain the EU’s influence, domestic politicisation and previous administrative capacity on organisational change while implementing the ESF-funded administrative reform and capacity-building projects during the programming period 2014-2020. More specifically, the article seeks to reveal the relationship between the pre-existing levels of administrative capacity as a condition for the successful implementation of these projects and higher administrative capacities as one of the main results of such projects. If previous research has analysed political and administrative drivers behind the financial absorption of EU funds in different EU countries (Incaltarau *et al.*, 2020; Surubaru, 2017), it is important to assess the influence of these domestic factors on the non-financial performance of EU support. Therefore, based on the different strands of the new institutionalism (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991), we formulate three sets of explanations to investigate the delivery and programmatic success of the projects.

If a few previous studies considered the relation between administrative capacity and the absorption of EU funds by carrying out a quantitative analysis (Asatryan *et al.*, 2017; Bachtler *et al.*, 2014), our research was based on a qualitative content analysis. We relied on the results of the study ‘Progress Assessment of ESF Support to Public Administration’ (PAPA). This project was implemented by PPMI<sup>1</sup> in cooperation with a number of country experts for DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion of the European Commission from December 2019 to February 2020. The purpose of this study was to present specific cases of ESF-funded public administration reform and capacity-building initiatives in the 17 beneficiary countries of ESF thematic objective 11, as well as to show the role of ESF financial support to public administration (European Commission, 2020).

Overall, although we find that the different logics of action influenced the dynamics of implementing the ESF-funded projects in the field of public administration and governance, our research results mostly confirm the explanations related to the importance of domestic factors. The implementation of the projects that were linked with the political agendas of administrative reform or pursued more ambitious organisational change became politicised at domestic level, but the influence of politicisation on delivery and programmatic success was mixed. Higher levels of administrative capacity in the beneficiary organisations and the administrative systems proved to be most associated with organisational change within the public sector. This provides supporting evidence on the importance of the pre-existing administrative capacity: it is difficult to have a good egg without a decent chicken.

This article includes the following sections. After the introduction, sections 1 and 2 outline our framework for analysis and describe our methodology. The results of our empirical analysis are presented in section 3. Finally, the last section concludes and discusses the theoretical contribution of this article in view of existing research.

## 1. Framework for analysis

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<sup>1</sup> A European research and policy analysis centre based in Vilnius, Lithuania ([www.ppmi.lt](http://www.ppmi.lt)).

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4 This section sets out the framework for analysis by briefly presenting the EU intervention and  
5 outlining our main explanations on the possible contribution of EU support to organisational change  
6 in individual EU Member States.  
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#### 8 9 *The logic of EU intervention on administrative reform and capacity building*

10  
11 The overall objective of the EU-supported intervention is to enhance the institutional capacity of  
12 public authorities and stakeholders and to increase the efficiency of public administration. The  
13 implementation of thematic objective 11 was intended to focus on reform and systemic change to  
14 improve the performance of national public administrations.  
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16  
17 Out of the 18 EU Member States who were eligible to receive financial support, 17 countries  
18 programmed interventions to address challenges under this thematic objective with a total budget of  
19 around EUR 4.2 billion. France programmed only technical assistance interventions in its outermost  
20 regions. The majority of this funding – EUR 3.6 billion – was provided by the ESF. During the period  
21 2014-2019, a total of 2,331 projects targeting national, regional or local administrations or public  
22 services, as well as 487,782 participants were supported by the ESF under thematic objective 11  
23 (European Commission, 2021b).  
24

25  
26 A set of formal conditionalities should be met by EU Member States before investments could be  
27 allocated to individual projects. These conditionalities included the existence of an overall strategic  
28 framework guiding investments in institutional capacity building and public administration reform  
29 over the course of the 2014-2020 programming period. They also requested that these frameworks  
30 contain an analysis of the existing situation and strategic planning of legal, organisational and/or  
31 procedural reform actions in different areas (European Commission, 2020).  
32

33  
34 Within overall strategic frameworks national administrations implemented different reform and  
35 capacity-building activities to achieve the expected outputs (such as studies, digital solutions,  
36 simplification and improved service delivery, training and skills development, systems, guidelines  
37 and tools). These outputs should translate into immediate and intermediate outcomes, bringing  
38 benefits to businesses or citizens in terms of improved functioning of state institutions and public  
39 sector organisations; improved skills and competences of individuals; improved policymaking;  
40 improved service delivery; or improved transparency and better fight against corruption (European  
41 Commission, 2020).  
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#### 44 45 *Our explanations on the contribution of EU support*

46  
47 Taking into account these specific features of the EU intervention and the value of the new  
48 institutionalism to the study of Europeanisation processes in terms of mechanisms of influence  
49 (Mastenbroek and Kaeding, 2006; Graziano and Vink, 2008), we identify a set of three alternative  
50 explanations about the possible contribution of EU support to administrative reform and capacity  
51 building. To do so, we employ the three different streams of the new institutionalism, i.e. sociological  
52 institutionalism, rational choice institutionalism and historical institutionalism, and their specific  
53 logics of action, i.e. the logic of appropriateness, the logic of consequentiality and the logic of path  
54 dependency, respectively, to structure our alternative explanations (Hall and Taylor, 1996; March and  
55 Olsen, 2013).  
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57  
58 The logic of appropriateness, derived from the sociological strand of the new institutionalism, posits  
59 that organisations adopt a new institutional practice not to maximise results, but to increase the social  
60 legitimacy of an organisation and its members (Hall and Taylor, 1996). This logic of action is based

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4 on normative and mimetic pressures of socially appropriate behaviour that conforms to socialised  
5 values, explicit regulations, typical procedures or professional standards (March and Olsen, 2013).  
6 The logic of appropriateness can mediate organisational change, but this mechanism needs to account  
7 for the influence of domestic factors and constraints over EU requirements (Chardas, 2012; Common  
8 and Gheorghe, 2019; Dimitrova, 2010; Epstein and Jacoby, 2014; Featherstone, 2015).  
9

10  
11 In view of this logic of action, EU conditionalities on the use of financial support are expected to  
12 exert significant pressure over organisational behaviour at national level by directing the processes  
13 of adaptation and mimicking according to the intent of the specific conditionalities. These  
14 conditionalities can be divided into 'hard' conditionalities that include the required fulfilment criteria  
15 and certain EU sectoral legislation, as well as 'soft' conditionalities related to country-specific  
16 recommendations issued to Member States and other EU support tools (such as scoreboards and  
17 evidence-based tools, capacity-building instruments, peer-based guidance and knowledge  
18 platforms/networks, see European Commission, 2021a). If the logic of appropriateness prevails  
19 during the execution of EU-funded projects, it is likely to lead to the professionalisation of national  
20 and sub-national administrations through a process of adaptation to the EU requirements and  
21 guidelines.  
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24  
25 Rational choice institutionalism follows the logic of consequentiality according to which action and  
26 behaviour are based on instrumental reasons and strategic calculation (Hall and Taylor, 1996). It  
27 posits that actors have fixed preferences and seek to maximise the attainment of those preferences.  
28 According to it, action is not driven by the interest in gaining social legitimacy or past decisions and  
29 capacities, but by the interest in maximising strategic preferences (Peters, 1999). Behaviour, however,  
30 is not necessarily isolated, but part of dynamic strategic interactions that include other actors' interests  
31 and preferences (Hall and Taylor, 1996, p. 945).  
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34  
35 This logic of action can offer a useful lens to understand how national actors implementing EU-  
36 funded projects determine, express and achieve their preferences and goals in an interactive  
37 environment that includes actors operating at the EU, national and sub-national levels. Some actors  
38 can exploit EU funding as leverage to achieve their objectives by initiating reform initiatives and  
39 projects (Hagemann, 2019; van Gerven *et al.*, 2014). However, most reforms, even those that are well  
40 designed and executed, often face resistance because organisational change usually produces short-  
41 term adjustment pressures on societal groups and institutions that are concentrated and felt  
42 immediately and directly (OECD, 2009). If the logic of consequentiality dominates the use of EU  
43 funds, the politicisation of national and sub-national administrations is likely to emerge during the  
44 implementation process.  
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48 A third explanation is derived from the historical stream of the new institutionalism (Thelen, 1999).  
49 The basic tenet of this alternative view to sociological and rational choice institutionalisms is that  
50 history matters (Pollitt, 2008). Its logic of action is based on path dependency that facilitates or  
51 constrains the current capacities of actors (Pierson, 2004). Both institutions and legacies inherited  
52 from the past and initial reform choices affect the subsequent evolution of governmental capabilities  
53 (Pontusson, 1995, pp. 118-119).  
54

55  
56 Understanding the path dependency of current action challenges a snapshot view of reality and  
57 replaces it with a temporally dynamic understanding as it unfolds over time. In applying the historical  
58 institutionalist logic to the provision of EU support to administrative reform and capacity building in  
59 EU Member States, our premise is that the capacities of national and sub-national actors to use EU  
60 funding and to advance administrative reform depend on past institutional arrangements (i.e.

framework conditions, individual capacities or inter-institutional relationships) and initial reform decisions.

Previous research on administrative reform and the use of EU funding supports this premise. Building adequate levels of administrative capacity and sustaining reform efforts over a longer period was found necessary to improve the success of implementing NPM instruments in CEE countries (Dan and Pollitt, 2015, see also Asatryan *et al.*, 2017; Common and Gheorghe, 2019; Török, 2020). For instance, a combination of the limited capacity of private sector organisations and insufficient organisational maturity in the beneficiary organisations constrained the effective implementation of EU-funded capacity-building interventions (especially the development of IT-based management systems) in Lithuania (Nakrošis, 2014). Similarly, other research found that embedded administrative traditions and legacies, characterised by clientelism, corruption and low levels of social capital, coupled with insufficient administrative capacity within public administration, significantly hindered the impact of the third Community Support Programme for Greece (Chardas, 2012, see also Featherstone, 2015). If this premise holds for the implementation of EU interventions during the programming period 2014-2020, it is likely that the pre-existence of administrative capacity and specific administrative practices will shape organisational change.

## 2. Methodology and data

The article relies on the data collected during the PAPA study. The implementation of this study was based on a total of 30 case studies focusing on one ESF-funded project each (except for one case study on the justice system in Greece). The final selection of 30 projects followed the principles of geographical coverage (making sure that all 17 countries were represented in the study), relevance to the EU and national reform agenda, maturity of the projects for documentation and a fair distribution of the projects among the topical areas of public administration and target groups. It is important to note that the ESF-supported projects selected for the PAPA study did not necessarily represent 'good practice' examples. Instead, they captured efforts that ultimately did or did not succeed, illustrating challenges to the effective implementation of ESF-supported reforms and capacity-building initiatives on the ground (European Commission, 2020).

The PAPA study covered all EU Member States that were the beneficiaries of ESF thematic objective 11 during the programming period 2014-2020. Since under thematic objective 11 France only programmed technical assistance interventions in four overseas regions and departments, the project implemented in this country was removed from the scope of our follow-up research. Therefore, we selected a total of 29 projects in 16 countries for the preparation of this article (for the list of projects, see Annex 1 to this article).

The case studies were delivered by individual country experts who carried out desk research in relation to a given project, conducted 196 interviews with beneficiary organisations and other stakeholders, and organised field visits. The final case studies were published on the Commission's website together with the summary report summarising the results of individual case studies.<sup>2</sup>

During our follow-up research, we carried out an in-depth quantitative content analysis based on the case studies of the 29 projects. We first developed a coding framework based on the characteristics of the projects, as well as the external and internal factors affecting their implementation as described

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<sup>2</sup> Available at:

[https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?pager\\_offset=0&advSearchKey=PAPASTUDY&mode=advancedSubmit&catId=1307&doc\\_submit=&policyArea=0&policyAreaSub=0&country=0&year=0v](https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?pager_offset=0&advSearchKey=PAPASTUDY&mode=advancedSubmit&catId=1307&doc_submit=&policyArea=0&policyAreaSub=0&country=0&year=0v) (accessed: 07 January 2022).



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4 in the first section above. To conduct the qualitative analysis, we employed NVIVO<sup>3</sup> that helps  
5 arrange qualitative data in a structured manner. Finally, we applied flexible pattern-matching to  
6 compare the patterns of implementation revealed by our empirical cases with our theoretical  
7 explanations (Sinkovics, 2018). This allowed us to confirm or reject the relations between the  
8 different factors during the implementation process.  
9

10  
11 The main characteristics of each project (country, title of the project, level of government, size of the  
12 budget, and implementation status) and our variables relating to these projects are presented in Annex  
13 1 to this article. We operationalised the influence of the EU on the development of each project idea  
14 in terms of soft or hard conditionalities. We also assessed if the projects were aligned with national  
15 or sub-national reform commitments or not related to any ongoing reform. We then established if  
16 there was any previous EU support, e.g. the project was a follow-up project to previous EU-funded  
17 projects or funding was given to past projects in a related field. The adequacy of the initial design of  
18 each project was assessed using an appropriate scale (adequate, rather adequate, rather inadequate,  
19 inadequate).  
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23 Furthermore, we assessed organisational change (covering administrative reform, capacity building  
24 or a mix of these activities and outputs) according to two key dimensions: process success and  
25 programmatic success (Marsh and McConnell, 2010). Separating the assessment of the projects'  
26 success into these separate dimensions was appropriate for better capturing progress in the  
27 implementation of these projects because most of them were not completed at the time of finalising  
28 the PAPA case studies. On the one hand, the assessment of delivery success focused on the  
29 implementation process, the level of difficulties encountered, or delays faced during implementation  
30 using a specific scale (difficult delivery, rather difficult delivery, rather smooth delivery, smooth  
31 delivery). On the other hand, the criterion of programmatic success measured the successful  
32 production of the expected project outputs by the cut-off date of our analysis using another scale  
33 (none of the outputs were achieved, limited outputs achieved, most outputs achieved, all outputs  
34 achieved).  
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37  
38 Several limitations were faced while applying this framework for assessing the implementation of the  
39 ESF-supported projects. First, the case studies produced by the individual experts were used as  
40 secondary sources of information during our follow-up research. The fact that certain factors were  
41 not mentioned in some of the case studies does not allow us to fully claim that they were absent or  
42 did not have any influence. Second, most of the projects (23 out of 29) were still in implementation  
43 at the time of the PAPA study. Hence, the judgement of process and programmatic success is based  
44 on the information and data available at that time and does not reflect possible subsequent  
45 developments in individual countries.  
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### 48 **3. Empirical analysis**

#### 49 *Descriptive statistics of the ESF-funded projects*

50  
51 The projects covered several potential beneficiaries, ranging from local and regional to national  
52 public sector institutions (see Annex 1). Since the mandate for public administration reforms and  
53 system-wide capacity-building activities is usually located at the level of central government, it is not  
54 surprising that many of the projects were implemented by central government authorities (25  
55 projects). Most of the projects were multi-beneficiary projects (16) implemented with partners. In  
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3 QRS International, An overview of NVivo Software to support qualitative and mixed methods research. Available at: <  
<http://download.qrsinternational.com/Resource/NVivo10/nvivo10-overview.pdf>>.

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4 relation to target groups, the majority of the projects focused on decision-makers and institutions at  
5 national level (8 ESF projects); the general population/citizens (7 projects); regional and local-level  
6 institutions (5 projects); and public administration institutions at all levels (6 projects).  
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9 The ESF-funded projects ranged from small projects (with the smallest project being EUR 80,000)  
10 to large projects (with the largest project being EUR 68,510,183.72). We divided all 29 projects into  
11 large (16), medium-sized (10) and small (3) according to their budget (see Annex 1). Our analysis  
12 indicates that the large projects experienced more difficulties during delivery (10 out of 16 such  
13 projects). This is because large projects frequently address challenges that are more complex and  
14 more difficult to implement.  
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17 Our descriptive analysis of the projects provides a diverse picture in terms of project delivery and  
18 achievement of outputs. Based on our methodology outlined in section 2, we assigned 13 projects to  
19 the categories of difficult or rather difficult delivery and 16 projects to the categories of rather smooth  
20 or smooth delivery. In addition, we attributed 19 projects to the category of achieving the outputs  
21 planned at the particular stage of project execution. The projects characterised by smoother delivery  
22 achieved all or most of the outputs during the projects' implementation, and the projects facing  
23 difficult or rather difficult delivery achieved none of the outputs or limited outputs.  
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### 26 *The influence of the EU*

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29 We start the analysis of our empirical evidence based on the first explanation on the EU's influence.  
30 To fulfil the EU requirements under thematic objective 11, some beneficiary countries needed to  
31 develop new strategic documents or make modifications to their existing policy frameworks.  
32 However, since EU funding is often used in an activity-based way in supporting public sector reforms  
33 in the beneficiary countries (European Parliament, 2018), the development of the strategic policy  
34 frameworks often did not translate into a strategic management of administrative reforms at domestic  
35 level. Also, during the programming of EU-funded interventions it became necessary to establish  
36 linkages to the European Semester CSRs in the programming documents (the Partnership Agreements  
37 and Operational Programmes). However, these linkages were found to be 'broad and general',  
38 containing no explanations on how the funds will actually support the implementation of specific  
39 CSRs (European Court of Auditors, 2020, p. 26). Therefore, the fulfilment of the EU criteria did not  
40 produce strong pressures for domestic adaptation during the programming period 2014-2020.  
41  
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43 During this period, ESF support was perceived as an important instrument for investments in reforms  
44 and administrative capacity building in the beneficiary countries, especially in CEE countries whose  
45 governments more frequently lacked financial resources for financing such interventions. External  
46 funding provided the beneficiary organisations an additional source of funding to implement their  
47 tasks, expand their scope or recruit more staff.  
48  
49

50 While EU funding was often an enabling factor for the projects to occur, it was rarely combined with  
51 the 'hard' measures of the EU's influence. The only exception was related to implementing the  
52 requirements of EU legislation at national level through the provision of ESF support. For instance,  
53 the project 'Integrating the Portuguese Registry of Transplantation with hospital computer systems'  
54 supported the implementation of the EU directive on the quality and safety of organs for  
55 transplantation whose implementation guidelines required the existence of a register of donors and a  
56 register of candidates for transplantation.  
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59 In some projects, ESF support was combined with 'soft' EU instruments that generated ideas and set  
60 directions for reform and capacity-building initiatives. For instance, the Czech project 'Support to

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4 professionalisation and quality of state civil service and state administration' (PROAK) supported the  
5 implementation of a new Act on State Civil Service adopted in 2014 to introduce a professional civil  
6 service, as defined in the 2014 CSR and the Partnership Agreement for the programming period 2014-  
7 2020. Also, the CSR concerning the continuation of investment to provide Greece's population with  
8 access to primary health units (TOMYs) was addressed by designing the project 'Operation of local  
9 health units (TOMYs) to restructure primary health care' in this country.  
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12  
13 Despite these examples, we found only a weak link between the EU's influence and process or  
14 programmatic success. Although the projects that were connected to various mechanisms of the EU's  
15 influence were mostly successful in terms of delivery and achievement of outputs, the projects that  
16 did not have such linkages similarly produced similar results. The PROAK project did not achieve  
17 good process and programmatic results, despite the fact that it was developed to meet different EU  
18 expectations. This indicates that the external conditions are neither a necessary nor a sufficient  
19 condition for organisational change due to a combination of the general and weak nature of external  
20 normative pressures and the limited scope of mimicking at domestic level through the application of  
21 EU tools during implementation.  
22  
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24 The presence of domestic factors and their level of influence are therefore likely to be crucial for  
25 organisational change (Graziano and Vink, 2008). We proceed to analysing what other mechanisms  
26 were at play during the execution of the ESF-funded projects, starting from the analysis of  
27 politicisation at domestic level.  
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### 30 *The influence of politicisation*

31  
32 Some ESF-funded projects were part of broader reforms or political initiatives pursued by the  
33 governments in the beneficiary countries. In such cases EU support was used instrumentally for  
34 achieving the strategic goals of administrative reforms. We found that the projects that were aligned  
35 with different reform commitments generally produced better process and programmatic  
36 achievements. This was achieved not only by securing political support to the projects'  
37 implementation, but also by using their outputs during the reform process. For instance, the  
38 Lithuanian project 'Improvement of the business supervisory system' supported the reform of  
39 business supervision in the country through different tasks (including the development of criteria for  
40 the scoreboard of business supervisory institutions).  
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43  
44 On the other hand, turnover of governments and changes to their political or policy priorities  
45 negatively affected the delivery of a few projects. For instance, it became necessary to remove some  
46 tasks of the project ('Methods and tools to support the public administration reform') in Italy because  
47 they did not align anymore with the priorities of a new government. A similar challenge was  
48 encountered in one Hungarian project ('Simplification of tax administration procedures and reduction  
49 of administrative burdens') where a substantial mismatch occurred between the original project  
50 design and its new environment due to changing policy priorities, the organisational restructuring of  
51 the Hungarian Tax Administration and changes to its task portfolio. These developments caused  
52 major delays in the launch and execution of this project by making it necessary to modify its scope  
53 in terms of tasks. Therefore, the politicisation of the projects can also disrupt the efforts of national  
54 administrations during delivery.  
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58 The implementation of more ambitious projects also provoked bureaucratic resistance in the public  
59 sector. For instance, significant resistance was faced on the part of the judges during the project on  
60 digitalising court procedures ('Actions to optimise the flow of criminal, political and administrative  
proceedings') in Greece. Likewise, cooperating with some sectoral ministries was a challenge to the

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4 project team in Slovakia working on expenditure reviews in several ministries (project ‘Efficiency of  
5 public expenditure – public expenditure reviews’). Although some ministries were cooperative, in  
6 other cases members of the project team were perceived as controllers/auditors of their work. Also,  
7 the project ‘Transformation of the Administrative Service Model’ in Bulgaria faced some resistance  
8 from some administrations that were unwilling to participate in the pilot implementation of the  
9 modules for requesting access to electronic certificates because this comprehensive reform required  
10 changes to the working principles of the participating organisations. These project examples  
11 demonstrate that coercive pressures stemming from a reform mandate of central authorities and the  
12 associated projects tend to produce political tensions or bureaucratic struggles within the  
13 administrative systems.  
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### 16 17 *The influence of the pre-existing capacity and initial choices* 18

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20 Our third explanation was related to the influence of institutions inherited from the past and initial  
21 reform choices on the implementation of the projects. We observed three main ways in which the pre-  
22 existing levels of administrative capacity matter for the subsequent ability of national and sub-  
23 national administrations to utilise EU funding.  
24

25 The first way is building upon the results of previous EU-financed projects in the design and execution  
26 of subsequent projects. Several projects analysed in this article were a direct continuation of the  
27 projects funded during earlier EU programming periods. The continued provision of EU support  
28 allowed the beneficiary organisations to gradually develop their internal capacities and to improve  
29 the competencies of their project teams. The examples that best illustrate the advantages of continued  
30 EU support include the iterative development of the Estonian top civil service financed by ESF during  
31 different programming periods (including the project ‘Top Civil Service development program’) and  
32 the implementation of government task forces (project ‘Government Task Forces for more holistic,  
33 inclusive and knowledge-based policies’) in the same country.  
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37 Second, the initial design of the projects and the associated reform initiatives affected their chances  
38 of implementation. Some projects suffered from deficiencies in their design related to including too  
39 many or very complex tasks, having a short duration, not leaving enough flexibility to project  
40 activities or involving multiple partners. Since the nature of some projects (especially those  
41 addressing IT issues) was rather complex, in several cases it was not possible to complete the tasks  
42 and activities within the initial timeframe, making it necessary to extend the project duration. For  
43 instance, the team of the Bulgarian project (‘Transformation of the Administrative Service Model’)  
44 asked for extending the project duration to 58 months when it became clear that the original timeframe  
45 (12 months) was unrealistic to implement all the foreseen activities of digitalisation.  
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48 The projects that planned the production of complex deliverables often encountered significant  
49 delivery difficulties. Although such projects needed to achieve system-wide changes or substantial  
50 modifications to the working methods, sometimes the project teams were not properly equipped with  
51 addressing such challenges. A lack of competent teams and insufficient internal administrative  
52 capacities made it initially difficult for some beneficiary organisations to find appropriate managerial  
53 solutions or to adapt to the changing environment. For instance, in the case of the TOMYs project in  
54 Greece, many civil servants were unaccustomed to managing a completely new decentralised health  
55 system across the country. In a few instances, the beneficiaries were not able to quickly recruit  
56 competent team members. For instance, different project teams noticed that it was particularly  
57 difficult to find IT or other type of high-quality experts willing to work in the public sector where  
58 salaries are generally low (e.g. project ‘Development of the horizontal and central eGovernment  
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4 systems in relation to the application of the Unified Model for Application, Payment and Provision  
5 of Electronic Administrative Services' in Bulgaria).  
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8 Third, some beneficiaries encountered the challenge of unfavourable framework conditions  
9 embedded in their national legal and administrative systems. These are budgetary, regulatory and  
10 other practices that are generally outside the direct control of responsible authorities, significantly  
11 affecting the implementation of EU policies by producing implementation delays, financial  
12 corrections or even disincentives among beneficiaries to use ESIF (OECD, 2020). Some beneficiaries  
13 often faced binding constraints stemming from the application of different legislation and practices,  
14 in particular in the case of 'heavy' public procurement procedures. The teams implementing the  
15 projects experienced difficulties with prolonged procurement processes and faced challenges in  
16 finding competent service providers, which often caused substantial delays during delivery. Some  
17 project teams were able to overcome these challenges by cooperating with relevant stakeholders and  
18 identifying innovative solutions. For instance, the team of the Italian project ('Resilience and  
19 development of the National Healthcare System') managed to effectively overcome regulatory issues  
20 regarding privacy and the interoperability of public information systems by launching an institutional  
21 dialogue with the Italian Data Protection Authority, which resulted in the modification of the privacy  
22 legislation in the country.  
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## 26 **Conclusions and discussion**

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28 Based on the different streams of the new institutionalism and their specific logics of action, we  
29 offered three sets of alternative theoretical explanations on the possible contribution of EU support  
30 to national administrative reform and capacity building. We then matched them with our empirical  
31 observations from the implementation of 29 ESF-supported projects in 16 different EU countries  
32 during the programming period 2014-2020.  
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35 Our analysis allowed us to determine the main mechanisms of the EU's influence to organisational  
36 change, as well as the main differences among the ESF-financed projects in terms of delivery and  
37 achievement of outputs. First, we found only a weak link between the EU external support and the  
38 process and programmatic success of the projects. This is associated with the general and weak nature  
39 of external normative pressures and the limited scope of mimicking at domestic level. The  
40 implementation of several projects matched the logic of appropriateness, but it was not dominant in  
41 our sample of 29 projects. The fact that organisational change was determined by national factors  
42 rather than by the EU's influence is in line with the previous findings of the Europeanisation literature  
43 that emphasised the weak influence of EU conditionality on different policy areas (Asatryan *et al.*,  
44 2017; Chardas, 2012; Dimitrova, 2010; Epstein and Jacoby, 2014).  
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48 Second, domestic politicisation proved to be an important factor explaining organisational change.  
49 The logic of consequentiality especially prevailed during the execution of the projects that were  
50 linked with the political agendas of national/sub-national administrative reform or pursued more  
51 ambitious organisational changes. The influence of politicisation on delivery and achievement of  
52 outputs was mixed, however. On the one hand, strong political direction from central authorities  
53 allowed to produce some reform outputs and even helped overcome bureaucratic resistance to  
54 organisational change during the reform process. On the other hand, changes of government and shifts  
55 in political and policy priorities disrupted the implementation process and added pressures on existing  
56 administrative capacities. This finding is in line with previous research that found that political factors  
57 weakened administrative capacities (Chardas, 2012; Hagemann, 2019) and acted as a barrier to  
58 organisational change, thus sometimes leading to the reversal of reform efforts, particularly in CEE  
59 countries (Common and Gheorghe, 2019; Török, 2020). However, our research added more empirical  
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4 support to the scarce evidence that political factors can both accelerate and slow down the  
5 management of external aid (Surubaru, 2017) by determining the key mechanisms behind this mixed  
6 influence.  
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9 Third, our explanation focusing on the logic of path dependency proved to be most powerful. Previous  
10 administrative capacity, initial decisions concerning administrative reform or project design and  
11 existing framework conditions account for the process and programmatic success of many ESF-  
12 financed projects. Although many projects encountered challenges during their implementation, some  
13 project beneficiaries were able to address implementation difficulties, while other project teams  
14 struggled to do so. This difference is often associated with previous administrative capacity and initial  
15 reform decisions, which clearly points to the importance of removing institutional deficiencies to  
16 achieve a more effective reform implementation (Chardas, 2012; Incaltarau *et al.*, 2020; Lacatus and  
17 Sedelmeier, 2020). This is particularly important for larger and more ambitious projects due to the  
18 political, technological and social complexities of their environments – their delivery requires more  
19 robust planning, building stronger project teams and effective collaborations with different  
20 stakeholders.  
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24 This finding also supports the results of previous research that found that EU support that properly  
25 targets capacity building could improve the effectiveness of public administration reform in EU  
26 Member States (Asatryan *et al.*, 2017). However, our research goes beyond this finding and  
27 contributes to the existing literature by distinguishing between initial, pre-existing administrative  
28 capacity and capacity that is built in the course of implementing EU-supported projects, pointing to  
29 the dynamic nature of administrative capacity building (Bachtler *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, in line with  
30 Bachtler *et al.* (2014), our research indicates that capacity building is not only a constraining structural  
31 factor, but also a process that leads to socialisation and learning that support reform implementation.  
32 The sample of the ESF-funded projects covered in our research showed variation in this regard with  
33 the examples of the project teams who lacked initial capacity that eventually hindered the project  
34 implementation, on the one hand, and the development of new or additional capacity during  
35 implementation, on the other hand. Thus, the extent to which existing administrative legacies can be  
36 overcome during the implementation of EU support depends on domestic contextual factors and  
37 varies across cases, which differs from Bachtler *et al.* (2014)'s positive findings of EU Cohesion  
38 policy in EU8.  
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43 Altogether, our research confirms that in order to explain the contribution of EU support, it is  
44 important to move beyond the EU-centred approach by exploring the influence of domestic factors  
45 within the specific political and administrative contexts. Europeanisation is not about an EU-induced  
46 'top-down' domestic adaptation, but rather a mix between different 'vertical' and 'horizontal'  
47 processes (Graziano and Vink, 2008, p. 44). Although we were able to match our empirical  
48 observations with the individual theoretical explanations, the different logics of action behind  
49 organisational change can co-exist and may compete with each other (Reay and Hinings, 2009),  
50 pointing to the complex and dynamic nature of project delivery at domestic level. Similarly, both  
51 'shallow' and 'deep' types of Europeanisation were found to work together during the implementation  
52 of EU Cohesion policy (Dabrowski, 2012).  
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56 A further fine-tuning of these individual mechanisms, elaborating their relationships and their  
57 empirical testing in other comparative contexts would be beneficial in the future. Future research  
58 could also observe project implementation and capacity building over a longer time period to  
59 determine the extent to which different beneficiaries are motivated by the selfish interest of  
60 appropriating EU funds, resulting only in a (short-term) rationalist adjustment of internal practices to  
align them with funding requirements based on the logic of consequentiality. Alternatively,

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4 beneficiaries may undergo a more prominent socialisation and progressive learning processes over  
5 the medium and long term to achieve organisational change following the logics of appropriateness  
6 and path dependency.  
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9 Finally, this contribution not only reconfirms the significance of administrative capacity for  
10 administrative reform, but also advances our understanding of this capacity by demonstrating the  
11 essential need for its initial and gradual development to achieve good results during the  
12 implementation of EU interventions. This could be achieved, for instance, through the provision of  
13 EU support through the ‘cascade’ approach or several project phases (as opposed to a large one-off  
14 project). Therefore, it is not surprising that the European Commission launched a number of capacity-  
15 building measures to ‘frontload’ administrative capacity in some beneficiary countries before the start  
16 of the post-2020 Cohesion policy interventions (OECD, 2020). Moreover, a greater coupling between  
17 EU funding and other EU tools (such as scoreboards, peer-based guidance or knowledge  
18 platforms/networks, see European Commission, 2021a) can advance administrative capacity building  
19 during the programming period 2021–2027 through a better diffusion of EU ideas and stronger  
20 normative and mimetic pressures on national administrations. These soft instruments can promote  
21 socialisation and learning across the EU and help break the vicious cycle of insufficient administrative  
22 capacity that constrains the implementation of administrative reforms.  
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28  
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31 European Commission.  
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## ANNEX 1. THE LIST OF THE ESF-FUNDED PROJECTS ANALYSED IN THE ARTICLE

| No. | Country | Project title  | Level of government (national /regional /local) | Budget size (small, medium, large)* | Implementation status (in progress, completed) | Instruments of the EU's influence (no, soft, hard) | Alignment with reform commitments (national/regional-level reform or not related to a reform) | Previous ESF support (yes or no)           | Initial design of the projects (adequate, rather adequate, rather inadequate, inadequate) | Project delivery (difficult delivery, rather difficult delivery, rather smooth delivery, smooth delivery) | Achievement of outputs (none of the outputs achieved, limited outputs achieved, most outputs achieved, all outputs achieved) |
|-----|---------|--|---|-------------------------------------|--|--|---|--|---|---|--|
| 1.  | BG      | Development of the horizontal and central eGovernment systems in relation to the application of the Unified Model for Application, Payment and Provision of Electronic Administrative Services | National  | Large                               | In progress                                    | No   | National-level reform   | Yes (past projects in a related field)     | Adequate  | Rather smooth delivery  | All outputs were achieved  |
| 2.  | BG      | Transformation of the Administrative Service Model   | National/local                                  | Large                               | In progress                                    | No   | National-level reform   | Yes (for past projects in a related field) | Inadequate  | Rather difficult delivery   | Most outputs were achieved   |
| 3.  | CY      | Establishment and operation of the Central Welfare Benefit Management Service (with the YDEP of the Ministry of Labor, Welfare and Social Insurance)   | National  | Large                               | In progress                                    | No   | National-level reform   | No   | Adequate  | Rather difficult delivery   | All outputs were achieved  |
| 4.  | CZ      | Support to professionalisation and quality of state civil service and state administration (PROAK project)   | National  | Large                               | In progress                                    | Soft   | National-level reform   | No   | Rather inadequate   | Rather difficult delivery   | Limited outputs were achieved  |
| 5.  | CZ      | Improvement of administrative capacities of municipalities on the basis of municipal collaboration   | Local/regional                                  | Large                               | In progress                                    | Soft   | Regional-level reform   | Yes (a follow-up project)                  | Rather adequate   | Rather smooth delivery  | Most outputs were achieved   |
| 6.  | EE      | Government Task Forces for more holistic, inclusive and knowledge-based policies   | National  | Medium                              | In progress                                    | No   | National-level reform   | Yes (a follow-up project)                  | Adequate  | Rather smooth delivery  | All outputs were achieved  |
| 7.  | EE      | Top Civil Service development program  | National  | Large                               | In progress                                    | No   | National-level reform   | Yes (a follow-up project)                  | Adequate  | Rather smooth delivery  | All outputs were achieved  |
| 8.  | EL      | Actions to optimise the flow of criminal, political and administrative proceedings   | National  | Medium                              | Completed                                      | Soft   | National-level reform   | Yes (past projects in a related field)     | Rather adequate   | Rather difficult delivery   | Most outputs were achieved   |
| 9.  | EL      | Operation of Local Health units (TOMYs) to restructure Primary Health Care   | National/local                                  | Large                               | In progress                                    | Soft   | National-level reform   | Yes (past projects in a related field)     | Rather adequate   | Rather difficult delivery   | Most outputs were achieved   |
| 10. | HU      | Simplification of tax administration procedures and  | National  | Large                               | In progress                                    | No   | Not related to a reform   | Yes (past projects in a related field)     | Rather adequate   | Difficult delivery  | None of the outputs were achieved  |

|     |    |  |          |        |             |      |                         |  |                   |                           |                               |
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|     |    | reduction of administrative burdens  |          |        |             |      |                         |  |                   |                           |                               |
| 11. | HU | Strategic support for the recruitment of competitive public service personnel  | National | Large  | In progress | No   | Not related to a reform | Yes (past projects in a related field) | Adequate          | Rather difficult delivery | Limited outputs were achieved |
| 12. | HR | Strengthening the Capacity of Public Authorities for the Implementation of the Act on the Right of Access to Information | National | Small  | Completed   | Soft | Not related to a reform | No                                     | Rather inadequate | Rather difficult delivery | All outputs were achieved     |
| 13. | IT | Methods and tools to support the public administration reform  | National | Large  | In progress | No   | National-level reform   | Yes (past projects in a related field) | Rather adequate   | Rather difficult delivery | Most outputs were achieved    |
| 14. | IT | Resilience and development of the National Healthcare System   | National | Large  | In progress | No   | Not related to a reform | No                                     | Rather adequate   | Rather difficult delivery | All outputs were achieved     |
| 15. | LV | Senior leadership training program in public administration  | National | Medium | In progress | Soft | National-level reform   | Yes (past projects in a related field) | Adequate          | Smooth delivery           | All outputs were achieved     |
| 16. | LV | Justice for growth   | National | Large  | In progress | Soft | National-level reform   | No                                     | Adequate          | Rather smooth delivery    | All outputs were achieved     |
| 17. | LT | Improvement of the business supervisory system   | National | Medium | In progress | Soft | National-level reform   | Yes (past projects in a related field) | Adequate          | Rather smooth delivery    | All outputs were achieved     |
| 18. | LT | Development of the mediation system  | National | Medium | In progress | No   | National-level reform   | No                                     | Adequate          | Rather smooth delivery    | All outputs were achieved     |
| 19. | MT | Mystery Shopper - Enhanced performance in the Public Administration leading to Service of Excellence                     | National | Medium | In progress | Soft | National-level reform   | No                                     | Adequate          | Smooth delivery           | All outputs were achieved     |
| 20. | PL | Customer Relationship Management in the National Revenue Administration  | National | Medium | In progress | No   | National-level reform   | Yes (past projects in a related field) | Adequate          | Rather smooth delivery    | All outputs were achieved     |
| 21. | PL | Investor Service Standards in Local Government   | Local    | Medium | Completed   | Soft | Not related to a reform | Yes (past projects in a related field) | Adequate          | Smooth delivery           | All outputs were achieved     |
| 22. | PT | LabX – Experimentation Lab for Public Administration   | National | Medium | In progress | No   | Not related to a reform | No                                     | Adequate          | Rather smooth delivery    | All outputs were achieved     |
| 23. | PT | Integrating the Portuguese Registry of Transplantation with hospital computer systems                                    | National | Small  | In progress | Hard | Not related to a reform | No                                     | Rather adequate   | Rather difficult delivery | Most outputs were achieved    |
| 24. | RO | Implementation of a system for public policy development in the area of social inclusion                                 | National | Large  | Completed   | No   | Not related to a reform | No                                     | Adequate          | Rather smooth delivery    | All outputs were achieved     |
| 25. | RO | State of the Nation: Building an innovative tool for the   | National | Large  | Completed   | Soft | National-level reform   | No                                     | Adequate          | Rather smooth delivery    | All outputs were achieved     |

|     |    |  |          |        |             |      |                       |                           |                 |                           |                            |
|-----|----|--|----------|--------|-------------|------|-----------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
|     |    | development of evidence-based policy making  |          |        |             |      |                       |                           |                 |                           |                            |
| 26. | SI | Establishment of a uniform model for civil service competency  | National | Small  | Completed   | Soft | National-level reform | No                        | Rather adequate | Rather smooth delivery    | All outputs were achieved  |
| 27. | SI | Stop the bureaucracy   | National | Medium | In progress | Soft | National-level reform | Yes (a follow-up project) | Rather adequate | Rather smooth delivery    | Most outputs were achieved |
| 28. | SK | Efficiency of public expenditure – public expenditure reviews  | National | Large  | In progress | No   | National-level reform | Yes (a follow-up project) | Adequate        | Rather difficult delivery | All outputs were achieved  |
| 29. | SK | Measuring the efficiency of public administration services, the institutional development of 'one-stop shops' and the integration of customer feedback | National | Large  | In progress | No   | National-level reform | Yes (a follow-up project) | Adequate        | Rather difficult delivery | All outputs were achieved  |

Source: the authors of the article based on the results of the PAPA study.

\* Sizes of the budget: small projects are EUR 0.5 million and below; medium-sized projects are in between EUR 0.5 million and EUR 2 million; large projects are EUR 2 million and above.