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Analyzing the motives of reforming
central government coordination
in Hungary:

A case study of one-stop-government reforms

ANALYZING THE MOTIVES OF REFORMING CENTRAL GOVERNMENT COORDINATION
IN HUNGARY: A CASE STUDY OF ONE-STOP-GOVERNMENT REFORMS

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The paper examines, on the basis of qualitative interview data and documentary analysis, the emerging patterns of central government policy coordination in Hungary. The focus of the paper is on a recent case of innovative policy coordination measure introduced in the Hungarian central government: the newly introduced “Government Windows” one-stop-government initiative. We investigate such questions as the extent of instrumental rationality, and the tension between „rational” and „latent” motives of introducing novel coordination instruments. The main conclusion of the paper is that in addition to, or rather instead of, instrumental-rational motives there are important organizational myths rooted in Hungary’s recent past explaining how the problem of coordination is perceived and how such “problems” are “solved”.

Introduction³

The introduction of one-stop-shops in public administration – often referred to as one-stop-government – is a frequent element of contemporary administrative development (or reform) activities. This trend has not avoided Hungary either: after having introduced, in the early 2000’s, the so-called General Registration Offices (service points offering a broad range of local and central governmental administrative services), one-stop-shopping became once again one of the *Leitmotivs* of Hungary’s second Orbán

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Cabinet elected in 2010. One of the (supposedly) most visible elements of Hungary's Public Administrative Reform Strategy (Ministry of Public Administration and Justice 2011 p. 40) is the creation – in the present, first phase – of 27 one-stop shops (“Government Windows”) across Hungary, the number of which is foreseen to rise to about 300 by 2014.

One-stop government practices can be analyzed from a number of perspectives (such as focusing on its effect on service parameters, policy content, organizational structure). An important one of such perspectives is the relationship of one-stop government with efforts to improve governmental coordination. The coordination perspective is particularly apt for analyzing and assessing Hungary's Government Window project because it is a component part of the government's “flagship” effort aimed at fundamentally altering the structural features of central government coordination and, indeed, the entire landscape of territorial (subnational) administration (Ministry of Public Administration and Justice 2011 pp. 25-26).

This paper uses this latter aspect; that is, we examine the Government Windows project as a newly introduced measure addressing coordination problems of Hungarian central government. It may, however, be not straightforward in what sense one-stop government can be understood as a mechanism which is expected to bring about better coordination. We agree with Askim et al. (2011 p. 1452) who argue that one-stop shops are not merely a physical (or, for that matter, virtual) place of co-located public services, but (i) that they are a new, particular organizational form too, (ii) a central aim of which is to improve coordination in central government.

Broadly speaking, our ambitions pursued here are threefold:

- (a) Firstly, to describe the changing landscape of central government coordination in Hungary;

- (b) Secondly, to describe, in a comparative perspective, the Government Windows initiative as one of the flagship projects of the ongoing public administration reforms; and
- (c) Finally, to contribute to a better understanding of the motives and driving forces underlying the Government Windows project in particular and, possibly more generally, present-time reform initiatives in Hungary.

These ambitions seem particularly justified because government coordination has rarely, if ever, been an emphatic analytical subject in scholarship dealing with Hungary's government system. To the contrary: as we will argue later on the very issue of governmental coordination has, throughout the past 22 years of the post-communist era, been almost entirely absent from Hungary's public as well as academic discourse. Or maybe better to say: coordination or similar, closely related concepts most of the time were, and still are, conceived of in a way which seems to be, compared with the international discourse, selective and biased, focusing exclusively on the "(central) control *versus* (regional/sectoral) autonomy" dimension, and disregarding any non-hierarchical – let alone market or cultural – mechanisms of coordination. The scarcity of scholarship on government coordination in general, and on one-stop government as a coordination mechanism in particular, is characteristic for the entire post-communist region; most of the existing work related to government coordination focus on the coordination of EU policies only (e.g. Zubek 2011, Dimitrova-Toshkov 2007), while one-stop government has rarely, if ever, been examined beyond a purely descriptive, "best practice" perspective.

Our ambitions outlined above are pursued in the following structure.

Firstly we outline the conceptual and theoretical framework of the study and specify our research questions and method.

In Section 3 an overview of the context, in which central government coordination takes place by (i) describing Hungary’s basic politico-administrative features, (ii) analyzing the (evolution of) the structural framework of central government coordination, and (iii) charting the political and administrative reform context, in which the 2011 introduction of the one-stop government reforms took place. In Section 4 the actual content of the Government Window reforms are presented and analyzed from the aspects defined earlier. Section 5 summarizes the key findings and discusses some of the possible conclusions. Finally in Section 6 we summarize our conclusions.

One-stop government as a means of coordination: A conceptual and theoretical framework.

The research questions and the research method

This section introduces the core concepts of the research – coordination and one-stop government – and places the current research in the context of existing scholarship. It then goes on to specify the theoretical framework used for the research. Our theoretical ambition is to contribute to a better understanding of Hungarian coordination practice; therefore two alternative explanatory frameworks – an instrumental-rational and a neo-institutional one – are briefly exposed and applied to the research problem in a “competing explanations” design. The third subsection outlines the operationalized research questions, the method, and the data.

Coordination and one-stop government: A conceptual overview

As a useful starting point coordination in government is often seen as an “end-state in which policies and programs of government are characterized by minimal redundancy, incoherence and lacunae” (Peters 1998 p. 296). Coordination however is also often seen as a process, rather than – or in addition to being – an end-state: “coordination occurs whenever two or more policy actors pursue a common outcome and work together to produce it” (Bevir 2009 p. 57). In the following we apply the latter, process perspective, but link it to the former, substantive conceptualization by Peters. Thus by coordination we refer to processes or activities among several policy actors, which lead to an end state characterized by less redundancy, incoherence or lacunae; and by coordination mechanisms we refer to any arrangement, consciously designed or having spontaneously emerged, which has a capacity to exert coordination functions in the sense used here. Coordination efforts (or measures) are a particular and, within this research, emphatic sub-concept within this latter concept, the term denoting conscious courses actions taken by policy actors in order to improve coordination.

Coordination mechanisms – whether conscious or unconscious – are often charted along several dimensions and/or clustered into various groups. Ouchi – building upon the neo-institutionalist framework of Coase and Williamson – introduced, for example the tripartite classification composed of markets, bureaucracies, and clans (Ouchi 1980); however other – frequently cited – authors such as Powell (1990) and Thompson et al. (1991 / 1998) proposed that the third mechanism in addition to markets and hierarchies should be networks rather than clans.

In terms of identifying plausible dimensions, along which coordination problems and mechanisms could be positioned it is worth mentioning Christensen and Laegreid’s (2008 pp. 101-102) framework. According to their proposition one should differentiate between an “internal versus external” and a “horizontal versus vertical” dimension of

coordination, the first one referring to whether coordination takes place within the central government only or extends beyond its scope to include local governmental or non-governmental entities, while the second dimension referring to whether coordination occurs within actors on the same level of hierarchy or between actors being in a hierarchical relationship (e.g. between a central agency and its field branches).

As we argued in the introductory section one-stop government can clearly be located on this conceptual map as a coordination measure. One-stop shops – where “all [or, at least, several – G.H. and E.K.] of a customer’s business can be completed in a single contact, be it face to face or via phone, fax, internet or other means” (Kubicek and Hagen 2001 p. 8 citing Federal Benchmarking Consortium 1997 p. 3) – may be expected to improve coordination in various respects. Their introduction may, for example,

- eliminate overlapping customer service capacities such as physical and ICT infrastructure, or (by capitalizing on economies of scale) redundant workforce, and thus realize savings on the “producer side”;
- eliminate unnecessary “hunting around” for services (and, thus, reducing costs/burden) on the part of the customers; and, generally
- improve the quality, coverage and/or accessibility of customer services across several service areas.

In addition to the above, process and output related effects introducing one-stop-government from a structural perspective almost always involves at least some extent of organizational horizontal coordination and integration on the part of the partner agencies or services involved (6, 2004). Thus one-stop government is, in the context of efforts to “join up” government, rightly seen as an important tool of horizontal coordination (Pollitt 2003).

In search of explanations: A theoretical framework for analysis

Governmental reorganizations are often seen as decision makers' purposeful, rational actions addressing specific, well-defined conditions, constraints, needs and/or problems. Further, it is assumed that (i) decision makers' personal goals/objectives – or, rather, those of “the” decision maker conceived of as a unitary and rational actor – coincide with the officially stated organizational goals and objectives; and (ii) that formal structures (flows of information, authority etc.) coincide with actual patterns of behavior (Allison 1971). This view – whether implicitly or explicitly – underlies not only the classics of administrative theory but, at least to some extent, much of the recent scholarship on coordination measures. For example, efforts at “joining up”, or integrating, government across is often seen (partly) as a functional response to changing external conditions (such as the proliferation of wicked problems) or problems following from internal changes (such as the increased fragmentation of organizations and policies brought about by NPM-style reforms; Halligan 2010; Pollitt 2003). Likewise, the intergovernmental relations framework exposed by Askim et al. (2011) conceptualizes one-stop government as a rational response to the particular – reciprocal – kind of interdependency having emerged in the welfare services studied.

This instrumental rational perspective, understandably, practically dominates practitioner accounts and, especially, official documents dealing with administrative restructuring. So is the case with Hungary's Government Windows initiative, about which to the official document titled “Magyary Program” summarizing the government's mid-term public administration reform program claims that

“the objective of the Magyary Program is to create a customer oriented [...] service, the simplification of administrative procedures, the reduction of administrative burdens and the creation of a uniformly high quality and generally accessible platform of administrative services. To this end we create a

multi-channel (personal, electronic and phone based) governmental customer service system capable of offering its clients one-stop services available at a single location” (Ministry of Public Administration and Justice 2011 p. 41).

In contrast to the above instrumental rational view of administrative policy making there is a long tradition of searching for less purposeful and less rational motives guiding administrative action. A particularly influential and frequently used alternative set of views is to be found under the banner of (various sorts of) neo-institutionalism. The essence of this alternative proposition is well grasped by the famous “logic of consequences *versus* logic of appropriateness” dichotomy (March and Olsen 2008). Actors and their actions, according to this view, are usually not guided by rationally calculated plans elaborated on the basis of their expected consequences and the resulting (personal or organizational) net payoffs. Rather, actors are guided by the normative and cognitive framework created and maintained by the institutional context in which they act. It is this framework through which institutions shape, constrain and orientate actors’ conception of what is and what is not (normatively) desirable, appropriate and legitimate as well as what is or is not (cognitively) conceivable, feasible and reasonable. The resulting “logic of appropriateness” often materializes in organizational myths – that is, rationalized institutional structures constantly reinforced by routinized organizational ceremonies, such as, for example, “rationalized rituals of inspection and evaluation” so frequently encountered in both the private and the public realm (Meyer and Rowan 1977 p. 359). It is frequently these myth-type constructs that underlie organizations’ isomorphism – that is, their tendency to become structurally similar to one another even if it is not productive or counter-productive from a point of view focusing purely productive consequences (Powell and DiMaggio 1991).

This neo-institutional, or “myths”, perspective and its confrontation with the more traditional instrumental rational one seems particularly justified in the research area of ever-newer waves of oftentimes highly convergent public sector restructurings (or

“reforms”) sweeping across countries with markedly different politico-administrative, economic and cultural characteristics. No wonder that a number of recent studies on government coordination re-visit this theoretical dichotomy (for a conceptual overview see Christensen and Laegreid 2007).

The present study intends, from a theoretical perspective, contribute to this line of inquiry. We wish to employ the two theoretical frameworks – the instrumental rational one and the “myths” perspective – in a competing hypotheses research design (Yin 2003) by examining which one of the two theories matches the empirical pattern found in Government Windows case to a larger extent.

The research questions and the method of the study

As mentioned in the introductory section the paper pursues descriptive as well as explanatory ambitions. The evolution of central government coordination in Hungary and the discursive environment (for example, reform ideas, plans, or academic and practitioner debates) surrounding it has rarely, if ever, been a subject of systematic study. Therefore our first – largely descriptive, explorative – research question is the following.

RQ (1): How can the evolution of Hungary central government coordination practices – and the efforts at improving them – be characterized? What were the main debates or discussion points (if any), and how were these related to actual changes of the coordination practice (if at all)?

The second research question – while still being predominantly of a descriptive ambition – intends to link the study to existing, more ambitious studies on one-stop government. Askim et al. (2011) examine and compare three countries’ one-stop government experience in the field of labor and welfare administration. The comparative analytical structure they propose consists of the following dimensions:

- Task portfolio (narrow vs. broad and shallow vs. deep);
- Participant structure (simple vs. complex);
- Level of participants' autonomy (low vs. high);
- Proximity to citizens (distant vs. close);
- Instruments used (low vs. high degree of integration).

These have proven to be useful analytical concepts for describing one-stop government experience; therefore we will utilize them, and – by doing so – it will be possible to compare the Hungarian one-stop government experience with that of some other countries. Our second research question is thus as follows.

RQ (2): What are the main features of the Hungarian government's recent Government Windows initiative, and how do these features relate to other countries' similar experience?

The final, third research question has a predominantly explanatory character. It intends to improve current understanding regarding the nature and the determinants / motivating factors of administrative reforms by examining the applicability of two influential (probably the two most influential), competing explanatory models to the Government Window initiative.

RQ (3): From among the two explanatory frameworks contrasted in this study – the instrumental rational model and the “myths” perspective of administrative action – which one matches the empirical pattern of the Government Windows experience better? Thus, which one of the two models seems to have larger explanatory power in the context of Hungary's recent one-stop-government reforms?

The data and the method by which the above research questions are answered are outlined below.

The coordination landscape of post-transition Hungary is examined on the basis of a review and secondary analysis of available (mostly Hungarian language) literature. In addition, two primary empirical sources are utilized. (i) Hajnal (2008) analyzed public management modernisation/reform initiatives of the government having appeared, throughout the 1992- 2005 period, announced in specific Government Resolutions on “Modernisation/Reform of Public Administration”. In order to identify recurring patterns these documents were analyzed through computer aided qualitative analysis. Elements of this research, supplemented with additional (partly unpublished) results of the same analysis, are relied on in the present study (see also Hajnal 2006). (ii) Depth interviews with two key informants were conducted. Both of them served for 15 or more years in a series of Hungary’s post-transition governments as senior civil servants (deputy state secretary level or above) in charge of coordination matters; one of them served from 1990 to 2006 continuously in the Prime Minister’s Office in the same position, as the highest ranking civil servant in charge of central government coordination.

The empirical basis of analyzing the Government Windows initiative is a qualitative case study conducted in the course of summer 2012. The case study uses published, unpublished and restricted government documents, and semi-structured interviews of senior civil servants (deputy state secretary or head of division level) affected by the initiative. Altogether 6 interviews were conducted.

The emerging empirical material was analyzed using computer aided qualitative analysis software.

Central government coordination in Hungary

The politico-administrative context

Hungary is a unitary, parliamentary republic. The executive branch is divided into three levels.

The Hungarian central government subsystem is divided into ministries, the number of which ranged between 12 and 18 between 1990 and 2010; at the core of which lied the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). Ministries are chiefly responsible for policy-making while most of the implementation tasks – especially those with a territorial dimension – are carried out by agencies.

At the second, sub-ministerial level one finds a number of agencies – public organizations with nation-wide competence supervised by a ministry or the Cabinet. Between 1990 and 2006 the proliferation of these agencies was a constant trend in Hungary. In this period there were various organizations possibly regarded as agencies, but there were no overarching legal framework for agency type organizations. In 2006 and as part of its attempts to (re)gain control over government apparatuses the second Gyurcsány cabinet initiated a law regulating the basic structural features of government organizations. This regulation included a clearly defined, closed agency typology, which all existing and new agencies had to comply with.

At the third level of administration one finds the local governments. The local government system is a two-tier one involving, at the upper tier, nineteen counties and the capital city Budapest, and, at the lower, municipal tier almost 3200 local governments governed by elected councils. Local governments are responsible for a broad set of public service provision tasks, including child care, education, health, and local physical infrastructure services.

Hungary's state structures as having existed in most of the post-1990 period can be assessed as a relatively unique one characterized by such elements as

- a strong legislature exercising numerous executive functions too (supervisor of public corporations, elector of key officials of other branches);
- a high proportion of laws requiring a qualified, (two-thirds) majority to be changed;
- a strong and dense system of checks and balances outside the executive branch, including the possibly strongest constitutional court in Europe, a public prosecution not controlled by the executive;
- an entirely autonomous administration of the judiciary; and
- an ever-expanding system of various ombudsmen.

These elements were mostly rooted in the political deals struck around the system change and were driven, among others, by such factors as (i) an intention to block any future attempts at reverting the liberal democratic political changes and (ii) the partly unfounded idealism – partly fed by a swing-of-the-pendulum-type reaction to the totalitarian past – of major political forces and their partly naive belief in the self-organizing and controlling capacity of politico-administrative systems. These building blocks, in sum, resulted in a governance system – sometimes referred to as “regulatory impotence” (Hajnal 2010; see also Sárközy 2011) – limiting policy makers capability to act to a dysfunctional extent.

From 2010 – the inauguration of the second Orbán Cabinet – a new administrative policy emerged. This spectacular change was driven a quest to further enhance the political control of administrative apparatuses – this time, unlike previous attempts, backed by a two-third majority enabling the Cabinet. It is important to note that similar attempts could already be observed in the previous years too. In particular, the second Gyurcsány Cabinet took a number of attempts at strengthening central political control over apparatuses and policies (Hajnal 2010, 2011). However these efforts, just like most of the

previous ones, were deemed to fail because of the lack of political strength necessary to break through the built-in barriers against major change.

The broad-scope structural changes having taken place in 2010-2011 can best be understood in a broader framework characterized by a decisive and successful attempt to get rid of the extremely status quo oriented system of checks and balances, and to strengthen hierarchical and political control in all spheres and segments of state organization. This quest for enlarging the “action radius” of the political executive was however motivated not only by power related motives. The extremely harsh external (macroeconomic, financial and social) conditions set, from 2008 onwards, by the economic crisis and the related requirements of the EU and IMF with regards to the containment of public deficit and debt posed a serious additional challenge.

Many of reform measures necessitated fundamental constitutional changes or, at least, involved the adoption by the governing parties with a two-third majority. This series of reforms resulted, in December 2011, in the adoption of an entirely new constitution. It involves a range of elements partly extending even beyond the executive branch, a non-exhaustive list of which is given below.

- The ministerial structures underwent far-reaching structural changes, as a result of which eight integrated ‘superministries’ emerged. At the same time the PMO was re-structured into a Ministry of Public Administration and Justice (MPAJ) with a broader task portfolio. to implement not only administrative reforms but even harsh and fundamental constitutional changes.
- The regional (middle-tier) branches of agencies have been integrated to the 20 county level (so-called) ‘Government Offices’ strictly controlled directed by the government and headed by political appointees (MPs, political state secretaries etc.).

- According to the new Local Government Act (in effect from 2013) local governments' scope of duties and competencies will be dramatically reduced (e.g. many important functions in the field of operating secondary education and health care facilities will be taken over by the central government).
- The new civil service legislation put recruitment and hiring of central state administrative apparatus under strict vertical (administrative and political) control. Recruitment is strictly controlled by the MPAJ, which is considered as a veto right enabling its holder to enforce political considerations against administrative/technical ones. It has been an unknown governmental vertical coordination measure in the practice up to now (Müller 2011; pp. 135). Moreover, although the newly introduced provision enabling the employer to dismiss the civil servants without any justification was invalidated by the Constitutional Court, the new regulation assesses the loyalty as an employment requirement for every civil servant. Being contravened of it might result in dismissal.
- According to the Law on the Hungarian National Bank (HNB, *Magyar Nemzeti Bank*) adopted by the parliament in December 2011 the Cabinet implemented changes in the composition of the HNB's governing board by increasing the number of members of the Monetary Council. Along with the possibility of increasing the number of deputy governors and other measures limiting the personal independence of the central bank's governor the HNB's autonomy is seen by many as seriously threatened.
- A new Media law was enacted with the aim of reforming Hungary's media regulation system. The National Media and Communications Authority (*Nemzeti Média és Hírközlési Hatóság*) was established in 2010 from the merger of three former autonomous organizations, the National Communications Authority, the Media Council and the National Radio and Television Commission.

- The National Judicial Council – enjoying considerable autonomy and responsible for the administration of Hungary's courts system – was replaced by the National Judicial Council (NJC, *Országos Bírói Hivatal*). This resulted in a “concentration of powers” in the hands of the president of NJC who has power to appoint all new judges and decide on the (strongly arbitrary) reassignment of cases. The judicial reform threatens courts' independence (Council's Venice Commission, 2012; Transparency International, 2012). In addition there are still no sufficient guarantees to elect the president of the NJC without political influence (the wife of ruling Fidesz party personage was appointed by the parliament for a nine-year term).

From the point of view of the current research the above swing-of-the-pendulum-like pattern – starting from a definitive lack of central control in 1990 and an, at least in its ambition, resulting, in 2010-2011, an extremely centralized and politicized system – is particularly important as it appears in the narrower field of central government coordination. This is briefly discussed in the next sub-section.

The coordination landscape of post-transition Hungary

Throughout the 1970's and 1980's the executive government mushroomed in a highly fragmented way lacking strong systemic coordination, the only exception being the central Party coordination/control which however ceased to exist in 1989 (Müller 2011 pp. 11-20, Sárközy 2011). Therefore from 1990 on – when all Communist party structures were eliminated – there were very few and weak elements acting towards central, hierarchical coordination in central government. The very few, weak and mostly unsuccessful attempts at improving coordination (whatever label was attached to them) mainly aimed at strengthening the centripetal forces and the systemic coherence by means of increasing the scope and effectiveness of central authority in the government

administration. On a general level, in the post-transition period three important milestones can be identified in relation to the structural features of central government coordination.

The first milestone is the creation of the Council of Permanent State Secretaries (CPSS; *KÁT*) in December 1990. PSS's were, from 1990 onwards, the highest ranking administrative officials in ministries. The CPSS met once a week – every Thursday – and discussed all and any items on the agenda of the next Cabinet Meeting (scheduled for Monday each week). That is, no issue could be put on the Cabinet Meeting's agenda without the prior consent of the CPSS. In case of disagreement the CPSS could either send back the proposal to a further round of administrative consultation/re-drafting or ask for a political decision of the Cabinet on the subject matter.

The second milestone is the first Orbán Cabinet's 1998 reform of the PMO involving a definitive strengthening of the PMO's role and position vis-a-vis the ministries (and, likewise, the role of the PM vis-a-vis his/her ministers). The core of this change was the creation of a structure mirroring the ministry structure (n=6, with profile of e.g. for economic and financial, agriculture, environment protection, foreign affairs) within the PMO, whereby each mirror department (*referatúra*) was entitled to examine/filter/reject initiatives coming from the respective ministry before it could get the Cabinet's agenda. The mirror departments were working as separate departments within the PMO until 2009 (although they were renamed in 2002) when the technocratic Bajnai-government has merged them with the legal department of PMO (Müller 2011 pp. 123-124).

The proliferation of functions of PMO contributed to reducing the PMO's coordination capacity between policy fields. Those policy domains that were considered as high political salience issues had been delegated to the PMO in order to guarantee the central direction of them.

The third milestone was a set of closely interrelated measures introduced in early 2006. By and large, these measures were labeled as the ‘strengthening of political governance’. They included, among others, the following elements. (i) The abolition of the position of PSS and the entire institution of CPSS, and replacing it with a similar but more political structure, the Committee of State Secretaries. This body was staffed by deputy state secretaries (*szakállamtitkár*) and played a similar – but less powerful and undisputed – role as the CPSS did. According to certain views its lack of performance and weight can be attributed to its more political nature leading to a sort of duplication of the Cabinet Meeting’s role. (ii) The introduction of a procedure called ‘policy consultation’ (*szakmapolitikai egyeztetés* – later renamed ‘preliminary judgement by the MPAJ’ / *KIM általi előzetes véleményezés*) required each ministry to have its proposition approved by the PMO prior to the administrative consultation process. This involves a review and approval by the relevant PMO/MPAJ staff. In 2010 the second Orbán Cabinet re-introduced the pre-2006 arrangements of PSS’s and the CPSS.

The possibly most important change in the field of central government coordination happened on the territorial, middle tier level of public administration. The reform of middle-tier administration involved the creation of new, general-scope county level Government Offices in each of the nineteen counties (plus the capital), and the partial integration of some 18 sectoral field administrations into the newly created organizations. The new structures were raised on the basis of the pre-existing County Public Administration Offices having exerted, since 1992, legal oversight over local governments and certain coordinative functions too. This restructuring meant a major shift of power from ministries and their agencies towards the political executive and its organizational representative, the MPAJ. Importantly, similar attempts were taken by previous cabinets too but these were wrecked by the resistance of the sectoral lobbies consisting of ministries and their agency *Hinterland* (cf. Hajnal 2009) . Although substantive policy matters and certain operational functions of the field services continue

to be controlled by the respective sectoral ministry/agency (provide technical guidelines and directives to facilitate the unified implementation of policy; influence the appointments of the heads of branches), the “core office” of the county level Government Offices – encompassing the Financial, HRM, ICT, facility management and financial/budget departments – provides the functional assistance to the branches. The core offices are directed by a director-general responsible for professional direction, and supervised, at the top of the hierarchy, by political appointees called governmental commissioners. For strengthening governmental / MPAJ control over the operation of Government Offices with regards to the regularity, legality, professionalism and efficiency of operations the National State Administration Centre (*Nemzeti Államigazgatási Központ*) was created as a central agency under the MPAJ.

This broad restructuring can be seen as an effort to improve both horizontal and vertical coordination on the territorial (county) level. Horizontally, it merged services (e.g. the health care, employment services, social care, pension services etc.) that previously operated separately under the direction of their respective (usually county level) directorate. Vertically, it created a new pattern of control and coordination relationships between the central government (responsible for directing the county government offices at large), the sectoral agencies (responsible for directing the absorbed sectoral offices in professional issues) and the county government offices (integrating the above mentioned 18 different services).

A case study of one-stop government: Government Windows

Background and initiation of the one-stop-shopping reform

As referred to earlier since 1990 almost all cabinets have attempted to restructure the middle tier of central state administration, but none of them had enough political strength to achieve substantial changes because this would have threatened the interests and influence of sectoral agencies (ministries). The second Orbán government (elected in 2010) was however politically strong enough to get through its ambitions and initiate a Structural Reform Program, an emphatic element of which being the establishment of county level Government Offices and the partial merging of central agencies' field services into the new structure as described in the previous paragraphs⁴.

The next step of the reform was the establishment of the one-stop shops called "Government Windows". These operate as the front-offices of the newly created County Government Offices. According to the official claims the newly established contact centers harmonized with the overall goals of the Hungarian program for development of public administration (the so-called Magyary Program) that is to make the public administration customer-oriented, transparent and accountable to the public.

According to views expressed by present-time officials and "owners" of the present administrative reforms client service at the middle tier of administration system has become unsustainable, operating in a fragmented and inefficient manner (Navracsics 2011). The chaotic nature of the system was supposedly caused by such elements as the disharmonious opening hours of front-offices, non-standardized service qualities and the dissimilar operating and management systems. The clients had difficulties with

⁴ The legal background of the creation of Government Offices involve (i) Act CXXVI of 2010 on Metropolitan and County-level Government Offices and Legislative Amendments Pertaining to the Establishment of Metropolitan and County-level Government Offices and to Territorial Integration; (ii) Government Decree 288/2010. (XII. 21.) on the operation of Metropolitan and County-level Government Offices; (iii) Government Resolution 1300/2011. (IX. 1.) on the establishment of one stop shops and guarantee their financial coverage.

orientating themselves in this diverse bureaucratic system. The citizens would expect to have all their needs for public administration services being met by a single service point operating in standardized quality. The newly established Government Windows wish to guarantee a standardized service level throughout the country with civil servants with the same qualification unified opening hours and service operations (Virágh 2012).

The creation of the Government Windows was not the first one-stop shopping arrangement in the Hungarian public administration. Since 2000 the General Register Offices (GRO/*Okmányiroda*) have been operating as general-scope one stop shop administrative service centers under the direction of Ministry of Interior, but organizationally as a part of local governments' offices. Initially there were 152 service points in the country. This number has, by 2012, almost doubled (to n=280). The scope of GRO's duties has gradually broadened too. Currently they are responsible for issuing citizen IDs and address cards, entrepreneur licences, driving licences, passports, and for registering vehicles. They also contribute to the technical management of the elections by compiling the list of the voters and candidates and participating in the process of counting/summarizing votes. GRO's were established in order to create a unified, interconnected register system and thereby to reduce the cost and the time for registration and issuing documents. Moreover, by creating an integrated back-office different types of records and databases can be linked promoting the prevention and investigation of crimes and enabling the introduction of new, safer document types (the latter was an EU requirement too) (Vér 2002). The prospective 300 Government Windows would operate on the basis of GROs' infrastructure (ICT system, buildings, most of the staff).

Interestingly enough, the new Government Windows were created as entirely separate from the GRO system, both from a legal-organizational and an infrastructural aspect (we will come back to this issue in the Discussion section).

The stated goals of the newly created Government Windows include the following:

- (i) Extended and standardized opening hours (from 8 am. to 8 pm.);
- (ii) Service delivery points within a short distance from where the clients live and work (the one stop shop services will be accessible not only in the government offices, but, later on, in other public places such as post offices);
- (iii) Cutting time and cost of providing administrative procedures is also an expected output of the reform.

The government would also cut the cost of services by improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the public services and the quality of the outputs (kormany.hu, December, 2011).

Ultimately, the establishment of county government offices and the establishment of their front-offices, the Government Windows largely represent policy design from the top. According to the Deputy State Secretary's point of view responsible for the middle tier reorganization, the reform has been a response to the crucial problems of the regional government system (un-transparent fiscal situation; chaotic fragmentation) but there is also a need to improve the quality of public services so that they are better suited to the needs of clients. Therefore the government eliminated the fragmented regional services, merged them into one county office and strengthened and doubled the existing lines of control over the services and integrated and unified the operations of front-offices onto the Government Windows (Virágh, 2012).

The structure, tasks and operation of the Government Windows

According to the Government Resolution 288/2010 (XII. 21.) on January 1, 2011 with the establishment of Government Offices – in Budapest and in the 19 counties – the integrated service contact centers (Government Windows) started to operate with authority in 30 types of public administrative procedures (some months later 31 other

types of administration procedures have enriched their profiles). At the first, pilot phase of a larger project 29 Government Windows were established (one to four per county).

The overall project aims at establishing about 330 one stop shops on county level and the lower district level by 2013. These future Government Windows would operate with wider scope of authority covering about 2500 types of administrative matters. These future functions can be divided three major groups. The Government Windows would have relatively narrow scope of authority of (i) already integrated sectoral branches' matters e.g. health and social insurance procedures, employment service and labor administration and inspection matters (ii) presently non-integrated sectoral branches' matters e.g. migration administration procedures, and (iii) all public administrative issues that are currently delegated from central government organizations to the local governments (especially to the notaries and the GROs) e.g. disaster recovery management, operating the personal data and address register (Act XCIII of 2012 on Establishment of Districts).

The officers of Government Windows have the responsibility to provide adequate information of the process and the deadlines of the administrative procedure, emphasize the rights and the duties of the clients and receive the documents of clients and forward them to the authorized back-office. In 2011 256 officers have been employed in the 29 Government Windows (plus 44 standby officers). Altogether 99 front-office points (desks) are operating currently (2-6 points in each Government Windows). From September 2012 professional development training will start where 6000 officers – who are currently performing front-office task in one of the sectoral branches – will be trained for the procedures belonging to the extent responsibilities of Government Windows.

The responsibilities and the activities of current Government Offices can be distinguished in three categories (according to the Government Decree 288/2010. (XII. 21.) specified in the following:

1. Providing access to the central e-government platform (*Ügyfélkapu*) and helping clients fill in electronic forms (such as the declaration of entrepreneurial activity).
2. Providing customers with information concerning the process and the deadlines of the administrative procedures in 8 types of procedure (mostly the social and healthcare matters), on the rights and the duties of the clients, and helping clients fill in the necessary forms (
3. The clients' requests and attached documents are received and forwarded by the Government Window officers (in 39 types of procedure, e.g. the authorization of construction activities). There are overlaps and parallelism between Government Windows and the authorized agencies' branch office, because clients can submit documents and requests to both. According to government plan these parallelism is a temporary stage for the transition-period until the 168 Government Offices will be developed and will be got into the habit of customers.

Findings and discussion

Below we briefly review the evidence available in relation to the research questions formulated at the outset of this study.

Central government coordination

We gave an overview of the history of central government coordination measures earlier. From the point of view of the current study the key conclusion to be reached on the basis of this analysis is that efforts at improving coordination were limited to an extremely narrow set of measures, restricted practically to the strengthening of the PMO's (after

2010, MPAJ's) role in, and bureaucratic-hierarchical, control over, the coordination process taking place between sectoral/ministerial apparatuses. Moreover – as we will argue below – not only governmental actions were limited to this narrow concept of coordination. Rather, the entire problem perception, or framework, in which policy makers, politicians and academics alike conceived the very problem of coordination was restricted to this “top-down” style conceptualization. Other approaches, understandings or instruments forming a standard element of the coordination discourse as well as the action repertoire in countries of Western/Northern Europe or North America – such as non-bureaucratic (network or market type) coordination mechanisms, “bottom-up” or horizontal coordination concepts or arrangements – were almost entirely absent. The above claim can be substantiated, among others, on the basis of a very apt characterization of the coordination discourse given by a top civil servant interviewee having been the key figure in governmental coordination for 16 years:

“Coordination has always been a central problem of government [...] It is about what nowadays is called political government – that everybody wants that things be decided at the top, not the other way around, so that ministries decide bottom up.”

The above claim – playing a key role in the chain of argument of the entire paper – can be substantiated by various, more tangible arguments. For example, Hajnal (2008, 2006) analyzed six “Government Resolutions on the Modernisation/Reform of Public Administration”. These government decisions appeared periodically from 1992 to 2005, having appeared in approximately every two years, and forming the most visible and coherent action plan the government of the day regarding public management modernisation/reform initiatives. These analyses involved, using computer aided qualitative analysis, (i) the creation of a typology of administrative reform measures, and (ii) identifying the frequency, with which these elements appeared in reform packages. From our current point of view the main finding reached is the following:

- Reform measures labeled as “strengthening bureaucratic control” appeared 13 times throughout the period under study; in contrast,
- Measures “introducing alternative / non-bureaucratic coordination mechanisms” appeared only 2 times (Hajnal 2006 pp. 8-10). It may be noted that measures aimed at “improving/changing culture” – possibly involving some element of cultural coordination (Ouchi 1980, Powell 1991) – in public administration appeared an additional three times; but a closer look at these measures suggests that coordination figured only marginally, if at all, in these measures.

The professional / scholarly discourse on coordination was possibly even more unequivocally “obsessed” with top-down bureaucratic coordination by the PMO. It is indicative that, for example, one of the most ambitious overviews of Hungarian government of the past decades discusses and conceives of coordination analogously with the (strength of) the role played by the PMO (Müller 2011 pp. 120-138, Sárközy 2012)

In thinking about the roots of this “obsession” of thinking as well as action on central coordination with command-and-control exerted by the PMO over ministries (the latter conceived of as political players, organized interests and bureaucratic apparatuses alike) the pre-history and genesis of the post-1990 politico-administrative framework appears as a key explanatory force. Before 1989 the Communist Party could – on the basis of various formal structural, informal (“nomenklatura”) and cultural-ideological instruments – exert a significant, nevertheless definitely far from being “total”, extent of coordinating influence over sectoral apparatuses. After the collapse of this steering and coordinating function no functionally equivalent system emerged. To the contrary: driven by various – political and ideological – considerations on the part of both the (then) pro-regime and opposition players as well as on the part of the key players of first democratically elected parliament a series of strong veto points and veto players were instituted in the liberal democratic, post-1990 system. Therefore the strong functional pressures acting towards the creation/strengthening of central oversight and control mechanisms were resisted

very effectively for 20 years, the landslide victory of the FIDESZ government. No wonder that the new government continued to think and act in the command-and-control-style conceptual framework of coordination having dominated the entire post-1990 period – this time, however, getting rid of the political and institutional checks and balances blocking any major changes throughout the previous two decades.

The Government Windows experience in a comparative perspective

As referred to earlier a useful comparative framework for analyzing one-stop-shops is offered by Askim et al. (2011). Below we examine and locate, using the evidence presented earlier, the Government Windows experience in most important analytical and comparative dimensions these authors offer.

- The width of Hungarian Government Windows' task portfolio is, compared to the three cases discussed by Askim et al. (2011), extremely broad. It covers dozens of very diverse case types ranging from citizen registration to matters related various social, health and family administrative affairs, construction affairs, and entrepreneurial licensing. This is in sharp contrast with the relatively narrow task portfolio of the Danish, Norwegian and UK one-stop-shops focused on labor and/or social affairs.
- The depth of the task portfolio, on the other hand, is quite shallow as – at least in most of the case types they serve – Government Windows can be considered as “first-stop-shops”; that is they receive requests and documents but operate only as front offices of the administrative apparatuses actually being in charge of handling and deciding the cases.
- The next analytical dimension is the participant structure of agencies. This concept denotes several sub-concepts a key one of which is the number and heterogeneity of agencies participating in the one-stop-shops. The Hungarian case represents an

extremity in this regard too as Government Windows integrate almost all – that is, about 30 different and very heterogeneous – agencies present in the middle tier of administration. This is in sharp contrast to the cases discussed by Askim et al. where the number of participants is in the range of 1 to 3. Not only the number of participants but also their structural relation to one another seems to be unique in the comparative perspective offered by Askim et al.: in this regard their analytical dimension ranges from single-agency framework from a multiple agency framework, in the latter case however the agencies preserving their structural distinctiveness and integrating only their client services. The Hungarian Government Windows are however on the verge of this spectrum as participating agencies are partially integrated in the Government Offices (note that technical and operational management functions are integrated into the Government Offices (and, on a national level, into the National State Administration Center supervised by the MPAJ) and only the policy related matters continue to be supervised by the respective national agency).

- The Government Windows case represents an outlier in respect to the autonomy of participants and the nature of management instruments involved, too. Participation is compulsory for the affected agencies, and much of the management systems – HRM, budgeting, ICT, facility management, supporting services – are centrally controlled, leaving agencies a minimal extent of autonomy.

On the basis of this brief comparative overview one may conclude that the Hungarian Government Windows, while technically satisfying the definitional criteria for being a one-stop-shop, stretches the concept in a number of key analytical dimensions. They appear as the result of an administrative policy that is exceptionally rough, broad-scope, uniform and top-down style. This important feature of the Government Windows case will be further elaborated in the next sub-section.

Motives of reform: Organizational myth versus instrumental rationality

In this sub-section we examine whether instrumental rationality or, rather, an organizational myth perspective offers large explanatory power in relation to the Government Windows case. Put with a somewhat greater precision the question is whether the Government Windows reform was initiated because

- the decision makers had hoped that doing so will be an effective means of reaching particular ends (such as efficiency of service provision, seamlessness of services, or service quality) or, alternatively,
- because of some – possibly unexamined, taken-for-granted, or even unconscious – assumptions operating in their (collective) minds regarding the “proper” or “desirable” way of public administration structure and functioning.

There are significant limitations in the extent, to which inferences can be made about the motives underlying any given policy (or policy change). From a practical perspective one faces great, oftentimes insurmountable, difficulties in trying to operationalize the above dichotomy. Official, public(ly available) sources such as statements of decision makers/politicians and policy documents, understandably, reflect attempts at “selling”, consciously or less consciously, the decision at hand by arguing that there is some sort of a straightforward and appealing rationale underlying it. Quite frequently so is the case even with less official, semi- or non-public situations such as internal meetings or depth interviews with key informants. On the other hand there may be informants or other sources of information formulating claims contradicting the official rationale; these claims may however be driven by political motives, lacking or distorted information, or personal bias.

In addition to these empirical difficulties there are some important conceptual ones too – most of in relation to the question of how and where to draw the line of conceptual demarcation between “apparent” and “real (but possibly unconscious)” motives.

Fortunately, in the present case this difficult situation can be substantially simplified and eased because possible rival explanations based on different hypotheses about motives and rationales can be boiled down to two major competing hypothetical explanations. These are as follows:

According to the official claims the rationale underlying the Government Windows reform is

- 1) to increase the efficiency of service provision by means of achieving economies of scale (the realization of which is possible by ever-larger organizational integration),
- 2) to ensure that service standards are uniform across service areas and geographical regions, and
- 3) to improve the client/customer oriented character of administrative services.

In the following we will refer to this set of interrelated claims as the Official Version. These elements appear as motives in several places in the evidence such as the preamble of the Government Resolution (1300/2011) establishing Government Windows and the interviews conducted with major “owners” of the Government Windows project. It is practically identical motives that appear in the rationale behind one-stop-shop reforms elsewhere (Askim et al. 2011).

Our major competing explanatory hypothesis can be deduced from the analysis of the context (in Section 3), in which the Government Windows reform took place. The main conclusion of this overview was the following:

- 1) Coordination in central government has been, throughout the entire post-1990 period, almost exclusively conceived of – both by practitioners (and their policies) and by academics (and their writings) – in terms strengthening the hierarchical control of the political executive (i.e., the PMO) vis-à-vis the ministries and their “realms”.
- 2) There were, throughout the entire historical epoch, constantly recurring attempts at strengthening the PMO’s power and control over ministries (a modest number of these efforts having been put through but a vast majority of them wrecked by the government’s institutionally/constitutionally extremely limited room of maneuver).
- 3) After the 2010 landslide (more than 2/3) victory of FIDESZ these institutional veto players and veto points could entirely be eliminated and a long series of sweeping, rough and deep administrative, political and even constitutional reforms – extending, far beyond administrative matters, to the entirety of basic institutions of the state – were implemented. Almost all of these reforms involved, or more often than not rather were even triggered by, the outright goal of strengthening the power and hierarchical control of the political executive over state institutions and policies.

On the basis of these observations it becomes possible to specify an alternative hypothesis to the instrumental rational null-hypothesis outlined earlier. Namely, there seems to be a well-delineated set of beliefs converging around the universal desirability and advantage of central hierarchical control over public apparatuses and policies as a general cure of all sorts of ills emanating from the lack of coordination. In the following we will refer to this set of beliefs as the Myth of Central Control.

By specifying two major alternative explanations of the Government Windows exercise it becomes possible to employ the method of pattern matching (Yin 2003, Hak and Dul 2009). More specifically, in the current case we talk about the so-called “non-equivalent

dependent variables design” version of pattern matching), whereby the initially predicted value must be found for each element of a pattern of dependent variables. The two patterns are deduced from two rival – that is, mutually exclusive – causal hypotheses.

The below table summarizes some important dimensions (variables) and the patterns expected to appear if the underlying explanation prevails. These dimensions, their operationalizations as well as the patterns emerging out of them are admittedly somewhat arbitrary (or at least selective) in the sense that they reflect the availability (or, rather, the lack) of evidence.

Table 1. Competing explanations and the respective hypothesized patterns of independent variables

<i>Variables (sub-variables)</i>	<i>Value if the</i>	
	<i>H0: “Official Version”</i>	<i>H1: “Myth of Central Control”</i>
	<i>is valid</i>	
<i>1. Type of service conforms to customers’ needs</i>	H0: There is a real need for the type of service offered by the Government Windows	H1: The service needs targeted are illusory or marginal
1/a) Proportion of clients utilizing extended opening hours	H0: Significant	H1: Insignificant
1/b) The extent, to which the seamlessness of services offered is important	H0: Large; therefore many (or mostly) closely related case types will be processed	H1: Small; therefore many (or mostly) unrelated case types will be processed
<i>2. The rational, evidence based nature of the decision making process</i>		
2/a) Existence of ex-ante policy/impact analyses, feasibility studies etc.	H0: Such analyses are extensively prepared and relied upon	H1: Such analyses are not used and relied upon
2/b) Existence of follow-up / monitoring regarding the achievement of objectives	H0: There are attempts to follow up on results	H1: There are no attempts to follow up on results
2/c) Role of affected parties (most of all: affected agencies) in the decision making process	H0: They tend to be involved, their arguments / problems / propositions are listened to	H1: They are not involved, their arguments / problems / propositions are not listened to

<i>3. Quest for achieving real economies of scale</i>		
3/a) Reliance on existing General Registration Offices' (GROs') infrastructure	H0: The Government Windows will operate on the basis of GROs' already ICT, physical and organizational infrastructure	H1: GRO structures – operating under the decisive influence of local governments – will not be utilized. Instead new, parallel (partly over-lapping) structures will be established
3/b) Elimination of redundancy between existing services	H0: The resulting new distribution of tasks decreases overlaps among services offered	H1: Redundancy is not decreased or even increased
<i>4. Similarity / dissimilarity across reform initiatives</i>		
4/a) Pursuit of central hierarchical control	H0: The strengthening of central hierarchical control characterizes different reform initiatives to a broadly varying extent	H1: Strengthening central hierarchical control is a standard, central feature of most reform initiatives of the current government

In the following we review the available evidence in relation to the above questions. To the extent deemed necessary short explanations / justifications are added too.

1. Type of service conforms to customers' needs

An instrumentally rational mode of administrative modernization implies that the customer needs to be satisfied by the Government Windows are real and significant.

1/a) Proportion of clients utilizing extended opening hours

An important element of justification for the new Government Windows arrangement is that they allow for extended opening hours and thus conform to customers' needs better.

“By using the Government Windows clients don't have to go after their administrative cases in work time because of the extended [8-20] opening

hours; this reduces the loss of work time and thus supports the economy”.

[Interview with key informant in charge of territorial reform].

According to the official statistics on clients' turnout at Government Windows only 6.6% appears after 17.00 and only 3.3% after 18.00. That is, only a marginal proportion of clients seem to actually need the extended opening hours.

1/b) The extent, to which the seamlessness of services offered is important

Offering seamless services is one of the main arguments supporting the claim that quality of / client satisfaction with administrative services would increase as a result of introducing one-stop-shopping. However the very concept of “seamlessness” presumes that the one-stop-shop offers services that are in some way related to one another. For example, all administrative matters related to unemployment or to launching a new business can be processes at a single location then there is a synergy indeed (other examples from Denmark, Norway and UK are presented by Askim et al. 2011 where closely related service such as unemployment and / or social services are offered by the one stop shops). If however entirely unrelated services (such as wedding and funeral administration) are offered then these synergies are not going to be present, clients don't spare any time or effort.

Government Windows, in contrast to other countries' one-stop-shops, offer a strikingly unrelated set of administrative services (see sub-section 4.2 for more details).

2. The rational, evidence based nature of the decision making process

If policy reform is driven by instrumental rationality then it may be assumed that at least some extent of preliminary analysis and planning, structured consideration of alternatives and consultation takes place as these elements are necessary for achieving even a second-best solution. It is important to mention however that the extent, to which evidence based policy / decision making is present in the Hungarian context is chronically minimal.

2/a) Existence of ex-ante policy/impact analyses, feasibility studies etc.

According to both our documentary analysis and interview sources absolutely no preliminary analysis took place.

[Question:] Was there any customer survey [in the planning phase in order to reveal customers' needs and the problems they have? [Answer:] "Specifically in relation to the decision on Government Windows there was no such survey. However in earlier years the county government offices conducted some client satisfaction survey and these problems had already been known from that."
[Interview with key informant in charge of territorial reform].

"In the Fall of 2010 [about 4 months after the inauguration of the new cabinet] there was a meeting led by the prime minister where a decision was made about the creation of the first 29 Government Windows." *[Interview with key informant in charge of territorial reform].*

2/b) Existence of follow-up / monitoring regarding the achievement of objectives

There are no attempts to follow up on results. This is confirmed by a key informant as follows.

[Question:] "Has there been any survey or analysis in relation to the results achieved by Government Windows, or to what advantage they bring to clients, the private sector or the state? [Answer:] "Since this is a pilot program only we are not measuring the performance. However there are indicators planned for the larger project [to be implemented later]" *[Interview with key informant in charge of territorial reform].*

It should be noted that the performance indicators planned for the larger project – referred to by the interviewee – are of a mostly symbolic character only.

2/c) Role of affected parties (most of all: affected agencies) in the decision making process

An instrumentally rational mode of decision making would imply that possible sources of problems and their remedies be identified in advance. In order to do so consulting stakeholders – most of all: the affected agencies and their field services – seems to be a must. This is especially so given the highly complex and heterogeneous nature of administrative matters at hand, ranging from civil protection to environment and food safety to family and social matters. According to our sources no consultation took place with most of the affected organizations. This is confirmed by no.1. officials of two agencies affected by the Government Windows / Government Offices reform.

“[Question:] What characterized the debates around the creation of the Government Windows? [Answer:] In the initial phase the NEFMI [the agency’s parent ministry] represented our agency. We got directly involved in the decision making process only after all decision had already been taken.”
[Head of Agency X]

“[Question:] What characterized the debates around the creation of Government Windows? [Answer:] There was no structured inclusion of the affected agencies. The heads of national agencies were convened in an ad hoc manner, and they were sent the materials [decisions] about the creation of the Government Windows. [Later on, in early 2012 / the implementation phase] ...the government was not open to the suggestions of agency heads, they declined taking the exposed problems into account.” *[Head of Agency Y]*

3. Quest for achieving real economies of scale

The key element of justification, at least on the “producer side” of administrative services, is that one-stop-shopping creates savings/efficiency gains on the basis of economies of scale. This element frequently appears in the official documents/claims regarding Government Windows too. On the basis of official statistics a certain extent of cutting

back budgets / workforce seems to have been achieved. It is however uncertain whether these savings represent efficiency gains too or, rather, are simply about “achieving less with less”.

3/a) Reliance on existing General Registration Offices’ (GROs’) infrastructure

Whatever the case is in relation to the above question an apparently straightforward opportunity to achieve economies of scale and thus efficiency gains would have been to build government windows on the existing infrastructure of General Registration Offices, the general-scope administrative one-stop-shops having existed since 2000, of which currently there are almost 300 service points equipped with ICT, physical and human infrastructure.

There are no official explanations why this major piece of organizational and technical infrastructure was not utilized in creating the Government Windows. Our – for the time being admittedly unconfirmed – hypothesis is that this is because doing so would have violated the Myth of Central Control as GROs operate under the decisive influence of local governments.

3/b) Elimination of redundancy between existing services

From an instrumental rational perspective a major added value of, and ground of justification for, one-stop-shopping is the elimination of redundancies across services; actually this is a key feature which enables one to conceive of one-stop-government as a solution to government coordination problems.

In the case of Government Windows overlaps and redundancy is not decreased but, rather, increased in several ways. Firstly, certain administrative services (e.g. those related to ensuring access to the central e-government platform) are offered by GROs and Government Windows alike. Secondly, a number of case types serviced by Government Windows continue to be offered by the respective specialized offices of the agencies.

4. Similarity / dissimilarity across reform initiatives

Problems – among them: coordination problems – faced by any government can safely assumed to be, at least in some important respects, different; so are the instrumentally rational solutions they require. In other words: if the same solution is applied to all situation no matter what the problem was then one may safely assume that the logic underlying the choice of solution was less than instrumentally rational. This consideration is applied here for the broad realm of the present, second Orbán Cabinet’s organizational-structural reforms.

4/a) Pursuit of central hierarchical control

An important conclusion to be drawn from the overview – given in Section 3 – of institutional reforms introduced by the present government is that strengthening central hierarchical control, oftentimes beyond reasonable limits and even despite fierce international and domestic opposition and high political price to be paid, is a core element of many reforms. Because of limitations in room and resources it is not possible at this point to formulate compelling arguments supporting this claim; it may however be said that there are important pieces of evidence supporting it.

* * *

On the above pages we formulated seven null hypotheses and eight, competing alternative hypotheses regarding the features expected to characterize the Government Windows reform. These hypotheses were derived on the basis of considering the – indeed limited – evidence available in relation to the reform at hand. With regards to each one of the eight dimensions the null hypothesis representing the instrumental rational view was rejected and the alternative hypothesis derived from the Myths of Central Control perspective was supported. This means that the empirical pattern we were able to observe corresponds to – or matches – the myths perspective and does not match the instrumental rational model of policy making.

Conclusions

The paper examined Hungarian central government coordination from three angles. Below we formulate some observations synthesizing the findings reached.

Firstly, the evolution of central government coordination practices as well as the related discourse is peculiarly characterized by an exclusive focus on top-down hierarchical coordination. It is conceived solely as a question of shifting power distribution towards the political executive (organizationally, the PMO/MPAJ) on the one hand, and away from the ministries and “their” sectors, on the other. Other perceptions of the very problem of coordination as well as other solutions to these problems have almost entirely absent from the practice and the discursive context of central government coordination.

Secondly, the Government Windows case as an instance of efforts to improve central government coordination exhibits peculiar features – one could possibly say: extremities – too, at least in comparison to one-stop-government experience of a limited number of other European countries. In the comparative analytical dimensions used here – involving such elements as task portfolio, participant structure and the autonomy of participants – the Government Windows initiative represents a sort of an outlier, in some respects being on the verge of the conceptual realm of one-stop-government. Put in a somewhat selective and simplifying manner one could say that the Government Windows seems to be unique in its ambition cover

- a very broad set of administrative fields/agencies;
- a comparatively exceptionally diverse and technically complex set of administrative tasks;
- but to do so in a technically superficial way, focusing on organizational and operational (possibly: power related) aspects only, and oftentimes disregarding real integration and the resulting gains.

Thirdly, the motives of the Government Windows reform were examined and placed in the “logic of appropriateness – logic of consequence” dimension. The main conclusion in this regard was that the Government Windows initiative seems to be much more the manifestation of a myth – the Myth of Central Control – exerting determining influence on the broadest fields of administrative and institutional policy – than that of a careful, instrumentally rational consideration of coordination problems and their possible solutions.

These findings seem to add up to (elements of) a larger picture displaying a context obsessed with power and influence and disregarding technical imperatives of policy coherence, coordination and quality of institutions.

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