NIKOS MICHALOPOULOS

Administrative Reform in Europe:
The Dialectical coexistence between Convergence and Diversity

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Administrative Reform in Europe

Nikos Michalopoulos
Scientific Advisor
Ministry of Interior
Public Administration and Decentralization.
Greece

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1. Introduction

Governments everywhere are engaged in self-conscious projects of administrative improvement. Governments in many parts of the world have seen efficiency of public services as an important element in creating national competitiveness in an increasingly competitive world. Since the late 1970s a remarkable revolution has swept public management around the world. Especially, governments adopted management reform to squeeze extra efficiency out of the public sector, that is, to produce more goods and services for lower taxes. It is important to note that across a variety of administrative regimes the emergence of public sector reform movements have in common belief that bureaucratic institutions and practices impede government performance. Taking into account local political forces, national conditions and administrative traditions and habits a rather remarkably common set of arguments is presented in order to justify decisions related to the restructure of the organizational basis of the bureaucratic state. Projects on administrative reform appear to have similar political motivations tending to establish a new administrative system, called managerialism or new public management or reinventing government.

Reform is considered as a fundamental part of a national effort to improve efficiency in places as diverse as France, Spain, UK, Greece, Denmark. This process is the one towards the “competitive state” (Palan-Abbott, 1996), or as it has been expressed through the National Performance Review Program towards “a government that works better and cost less”. In other words, reform and change are inspiring because they present the opportunity to make thinks better. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss in great details the extensive literature on this major issue. It is suffice to say, that, generally, government reform their civil service in order to become more responsive and accountable to citizens, increase managerial efficiency, make the system more flexible, broaden their legitimacy or even just for the sake of reform itself.

So, administrative reform has become one of the significant areas of employment and education during the 1980s and 1990s (Ferlie, et.al.1996). In a historical epoch characterized by a declining concern for the public sector administrative changes and reforms projects are considered as one of the few growth industries. As a result an
awareness of these changes among scholars and practitioners has grown rapidly leading to the creation of new journals and forum of discussions to record the developments and results. Hence, an interesting question among others is that related to the way analysts and experts comprehend these developments in public management. Relevant to this question is another one which is referred to the investigation of how they derive insights from these changes? Or the one that is has to do with the idea of administrative convergence or are we witnessing varieties in the public administrations of member states of the European Union.

From this point of view the paper attempts to overcome this dominant logic which rather divides the European administrative reality. The current situation is explained either from the convergence perspective or from the point of view of administrative diversity or the formula of explanations looks like a “neither-or” consideration of a historical reality which is complex, multidimensional and as such it is rather difficult to submit the administrative analysis in such explanations. So, the analysis considers that convergence and diversity work together in a dialectical way and in the historical period of single currency they co-exist.

2. Explaining administrative reform from the convergence perspective

Administrative reform, that is the induced systematic improvement of public operational performance comes of age in the 1980s. To meet the challenge of technology, globalization, competition, innovation, demographic trends and other forces governments around the world have designed and implemented reform projects in large scale since 1980 almost in every subsystem of the public sector (health, education, police, local government and central administration). Some years ago one of the main suggestions of World Bank was that the profound development of global economy urges us to reconsider some fundamental issues of government. What is the function of government, what it can do, what it cannot do and which is the best way to do there functions (World Bank, 1997).

A popular account suggests that beginning in the 1980s administrative states of every type were widely perceived to be insufficiently responsive to global changes in markets, fiscal capacity politics and public attitudes. In other words as professor G. Gaiden has underlined “…inherited administrative system were proving to be
sluggish, inflexible and insensitive to changing human needs and novel circumstances (Gaiden, 1990, p.1). Administrative systems are evaluated not so much by what they did well, but by what they did badly and their clients tend to be much more openly critical of their performance. As public criticism mounted administrative reform is all more compelling and what is amazing about the contemporary administrative reform is the similarity of changes that are implemented in public sector occurring in many of those settings (Peters, 1997, p.1, Holmes, 1992). Most reports of these changes have focused on the managerialisation process of the public sector especially in the Anglo-American industrialized democracies, but recently accounts of the reform experience of continental Europe countries have begun to appear. Cross-national comparisons of reform process in Europe have underlined some common components of the relevant policies which are the following according to OECD (OECD, 1995, p.25).

a. greater focus on results  
b. increase value for money  
c. devolution of authority and enhanced flexibility  
d. strengthened accountability and control  
e. client and service orientation  
f. strengthening capacity for developing strategy and policy  
g. introducing competition

These changes have been interpreted in terms of a distinctive shift from Weberian public administration as institutionalized in the bureau-professionalism of the past 1945 welfare state, to a new managerialism. This transformation is the only way to obtain better results from public organizations or as has been stated by Cutler-Waine “…was the systematic introduction of managerialism… In a general sense, public sector managerialism is characterized by the belief that the objective of social services…can be promoted at lower cost when the appropriate management techniques are applied (Cutler-Waine, 1998, p. xiv). The ideas of the New Public Management have become the gold standard for administrative reform around the world (Peters, 1997, p.71). The logic of managerialism is extremely known to anyone interested in the public sector and it constitutes a rather global and not only European trend toward a structural convergence.
In other words, the records of these changes account a strong suggestion of a convergence in the forms and aims of governance. The reinvention of government or the New Public Management is considered as an inevitable convergence, as the only one left option. The entrepreneurial government is an inevitable shift (Osborne-Caebler, 1993, p.331). From one point of view the above ideas sound to some extent akin to F. Fukuyama’s “the end of history” thesis (Fukuyama 1992) about the inevitability of liberal democracies. Analytically, this means that the commonalities are more interesting than the differences (Ingraham, 1996, p.4). Hence, because all governments face the same challenges they respond in a similar way and the consequence is the administrative isomorphism of governing relations. However, how the “internationalization of public management reform” (Metcalfe, 1994, p.272) could be explained? Which are the main possible explanations, or why should we be surprised at this particular trend? How do we account for the spread of the managerialization of civil service systems. Are we witnessing the Europeanization of managerialization or we simply debating an instance of policy convergence?

The analysis considers the answer could be approach taking into account the arguments coming out of the policy transfer literature. Especially, from this perspective the European or even the global forces in combination with the international organizations which act as forum of policy transmissions are the main but not the only reasons that have an impact on the wide spread of the managerialization. Analytically, the policy transfer explanation appears to account for the rapid increase of policy transfers in many policy areas and apparent contagiousness of managerialization of public administration. Over the past two decades as global forces impact on individual states and as technological advances virtually unified the world it is easier and faster for policy-makers to communicate with each other, to exchange ideas and experiences the occurrences of policy transfer have increased.

As globalization literature demonstrates no nation in the industrialized world can insulate its economy from global economic pressures. According to Parsons “as the world economy in particular is transnational corporations and institutions come to exercise more influence and power so the capacity of national policy-makers to frame their any agendas is diminished” (Parsons, 1996, p.234). Public policy now takes place in a world system as well as in national political system (Reinicke, 1998). In addition to the global features and particularly to the economic interdependencies
international organizations (OECD, EU, World Bank, IMF) advocate similar policies across diverse countries. The impact of international organizations on national public service systems is unmistakable. These organizations are increasingly playing a role in the spread of ideas, programs and institutions around the globe. The managerialization of civil service systems is strongly converted with the diffusion of the New Public Management doctrine. International organizations are powerful mechanisms of spread public policies and this is particularly apparent in the case of administrative reform that took place in the last two decades towards managerialization. Their role is similar to the facilitator role, or they are key sources of pressure on national governments to transform their civil services towards a model which works as a business. The OECD, for example facilitates policy learning among its members states through PUMA, or as R. Rose (1993, p.105) states the European Union promotes comparison where member states learn best practices from each other. One recent example relevant to Rose’s statement is the organization of ASKME learning lab which was set out to compare service accessibility in a number of “life situations” in various EU member states (ASKME, 2000). Although the process of policy comparisons and learning which is the “best practice” is rather voluntary the European Union acts as a policy pusher (Dolowitz-March, 1996, p. 348). Hence, could we speak for a policy convergence in relation to the policy of reform of civil service system promoting an administrative convergence? Are we witnessing a process of convergence among the public administration systems of the member states of the European Union?

Considering convergence as the idea that whatever their political economies, whatever their unique culture and histories the affluent societies become more alike in both social structure and ideology (Wilensky, 1975, p. xii) it appears that a transferability of public policy acts as a precondition towards administrative convergence. According to the convergence theory an increasing similarity in public services is the evolutionary path in which the forces at the global level are causing administrative systems or even nations to convergence to a common pattern (Hamm-Litsch, 1987). The convergence perspective identify greater commonalities of response and much more limited options for institutional patterning of common trends to produce highly differentiated outcomes. The idea of administrative convergence overestimates the role and the influence of international or European pressures and on the other hand underestimates the role of domestic institutions, the significance and
distinctiveness of established political administrative and professional institutions (March-Olsen, 1976). However, from the intuitional point of view the member states of the EU still act under a degree of “state autonomy” (Kassim-Menon, 1996). The member states of the EU has maintained certain capacities to transform each policy preferences into administrative actions.

Hence, it appears that administrative convergence is one but not the only explanatory trend and maybe it be considered as one that exaggerate the results of the managerialization of administrative reform process. So, the paper continues with the examination of the administrative reform from the diversity point of view underlying the leading role that is played by the national or regional forces in managing the public services.

3. Administrative reform: diversities and variations

Is there a European tendency towards a unified way of managing public services? This is a crucial one question not only for the organization theory of public administration but also for the administrative practice. A lot of discussions has been developed so far supporting ideas and expressing a positive answer or a “yes” one to the above mention question. But, is this the reality? Could we suggest and confirm with the necessary facts, documents and results collected from the daily function of administrative systems in Europe that a convergence in terms of managerialization exists at the European Union? Or, are there significant variations regarding e.g. the organizational design of civil service systems, the policy of recruitment or the public policy of introducing I.T. systems.

Recent analytical investigations without ignoring the role and the impact of the global forces has found proponents of (Bormann-Gragan-Shields, 1994) and detractors from convergence theory (Doremns, et. all, 1998). Analytically, based on the new-institutional school of thought many analysts have underlined that if there is a tendency towards to the establishment of a common administrative pattern this is still has a long history to go before there is uniformity (Flynn, 2000). Claims of administrative convergence through Europeanization are rather exaggerations at the moment as a descriptive perspective of the European administrative reality. The single currency doesn’t mean automatically and a convergence among member states on
how to organize public services. Managerialization and convergence are trends that both are interconnected in a dialectical way, but no one could consider that convergence in an administrative systems has produced similar results through Europe. Many countries have developed new approaches towards an enhancement of administrative efficiency, or to de-bureaucratize the civil service systems but they have followed different paths of change.

There is more than one route to achieve more or less common stated goals or the process of Europeanization of public administration doesn’t lead to uniform outcomes. Although different countries develop isomorphic features in reality there is relatively loose coupling between reforms and effects on behavior (Brunsson, 1989). The relationships between talking about administrative reforms and actual change in practice is tenuous at best (Premfors, 1998). As a UN report put it in 1988 there has been a remarkable commonality of nomenclatures and formal organizations among countries, even though the underlying national realities remains extremely divergent (UN, 1998, p.17).

From another perspective and in relation to remuneration systems a recent report/study conducted by EIPA concludes that “the reward systems for public servants are under continuous review. While there are evident similarities, the range of rewards and prerequisites that make up the total remuneration package differs substantially across member states of European Union (Fitzpatrick, 2001). Also, examining aspects of e-government changes in United Kingdom and comparing them with relevant policies in Australia and New Zealand, Professor P. Dunleavy and others conclude that “distinctive institutional influences and patterning remain important across countries and ties of government (Dunleavy-Margetts-Bastow-Tinkler-Yared, 2001, p.35).

In other words there is more than one national reform strategy or the styles of reform are vary among the member states of the European Union. Although, it appears a kind of convergence in terms of the goals of reform the means and the measures designed to achieve the stated goals are depending on the history, the political forces, the culture of administration the bureaucratic-political relations and of the constitutional-legal framework of the countries. The reform of administration is not just a technical matter. It is sounds as a paradox any attempt which “decontextualize” a deeply social issue such as the process of reform of the administrative state.
Convergence is maybe a myth and not a reality, is a story or a talk (Pollitt, 2002) which motivates policy-makers to talk about the reform and public organizations to appear as “modern” or “post-modern” configurations helping them to preserve their legitimacy, but this may have few consequences for performance or for the society. All this implies that administrative convergence belongs rather to the world of ideas than to the world of practice and as a consequence at the European level is maybe early to argue strongly for an institutional isomorphism. These are trends which have an impact on the image of public service but not on the public in general. So, in theory the reality of administration at the European level lies between a spectrum whose the one pole is the idea of convergence and the other one is described by the notion of administrative diversity. But, in practice the administrative reality lies between these rather extreme explanations. The perspective of convergence and the other one of divergence are interconnected dialectically. They work together both reinforcing each other and bringing qualitative transformations to European civil service systems.

Therefore, instead to attempt a further investigation and explanation of the modern administrative systems of the member states of the European Union using either the notion of administrative convergence or the opposite one of divergence it is rather useful for the development of our understanding to overcome this dichotomic logic. The paper at this point proposes a contingency consideration of the European administrative space taking into account not only the European forces and pressures and the national differences but also the interactions and interfaces between cultural-historical elements of national political-administrative systems and the European economic integration.
4. Conclusion: moderate diversities in the historical period of single currency and administrative convergence trends

In the theory of organizations, public bureaucracies are viewed as open systems that are affected by their environment and at the same time effects them (Rainey, 1998). So, public organizations are located within their environment which is consisted of the national economic, political, social and historical context (Scott, 1998).

However, rather recently public service systems are used to analyzed more from the point of global pressures (threats or opportunities) or at the European level from the European integration perspective. The European or the global forces that are beyond the control capacity of domestic institutions shape the national responses and then the major issue for research is the analysis of these “answers”. Which is the impact and in turn which is the response seems to formulate an interesting research agenda, which has been expressed mainly though the idea of administrative convergence. Under similar pressures the responses or the public policies are similar, or the perspectives of national political and administrative institutions are under the operations of Europeanization. From this point of view the role and importance of domestic environment are concealed or the policy makers are seen as passive recipients learning from the best practices which have been developed elsewhere.

Policy convergence appears as a trend which is defined by the systematic examination of how different countries deal with similar problems in different policy spaces (health, education, employment, IT systems). The justification of learning by others is very strong especially in cases where the solutions are labeled as “best practices”.

But this consideration rather ignores the two following issues: First, it gives to the process of learning a content similar to that of copy. However, learning has not to be confused with any kind of copy ready made solutions or remedies, because as R. Rose argues “remedies from last “war” will not win the new “war” (Rose, 2001, p.1). Learning from others implies improved understanding as reflected by an ability to draw lessons about policy problems, objectives or interventions (May, 1992, p.333). Second, the policy learning process doesn’t take place in a political and economic vacuum, but within a framework of contingencies which influence the political will, the administrative capacity of the system to work effectively. As has been said “imported practices may fail, or be ineffectively implemented, if they are inconsistent
with the core values of local settings (Lachman-Nedd-Hinings, 1994, p.53). This idea is quite closely to one of the main arguments coming from the comparative administrative studies which underlines “what has become more and more obvious is the extreme importance of variations among political regimes as a major explanatory factor for variations among public bureaucracies (Heady, 1996, p. 472).

Therefore, the trend towards administrative convergence through managerialization is not a neutral one or an apolitical process but is mediating by the influence of national historical and cultural features which could predict differentiated paths of change if not administrative diversities. Our history, at the beginning of the 21th century, is characterized as the period of “uniform pluriformism (Falkner, 2002, p. 114) or as the coexistence of administrative diversities with trends of administrative convergence. The West European civil service systems is composed by variations and similarities (Bekke-V. der Meer, 2000, p.275). From this perspective instead to continue any comparative analysis searching to identify spaces of diversities or similarities it is rather more efficient to design research structures which they do not underestimate the role of the historical contingencies and overestimate the significance of European pressures and vice versa.

Change encompasses the world. Change has become the identifying fact of our time. Change inspires and motivates. Without reforms and changes we would continue to witness ineffective and inefficient programs, policy failures or even deepening of the public’s disillusionment with governments in all their efforts. The message then is clear and it has to do with the necessity to rethink the conceptual model or paradigms upon which public bureaucracies have been built in the past. Generally, speaking the shift towards managerial forms of organizational coordination of scarce resources are an international and a European trend. Managerialization and change have become lingua franca among actors worldwide, often motivating mimetic policies or mimetic intentions for reform. But associated with the convergence is the increasing recognition that as is often the case empirical evidence can be found not only for the isomorphic perspective but also for the administrative differentiation or divergence. However, the most encouraging feature is that the debate is taking place indicating that change from a comparative perspective does not only the European or the national dimension, but also the perspective of interfaces or interactions among them. This implies that the power of national mainly bureaucratically organized administrative systems shifts into an international and borderless domain but at the
same time the European or even the global perspectives are mediating by the distinctive institutional influences that function at the national level.

If compare knowledge is a mandatory the structure of a such knowledge has to express a multidimensional concern combined European forces, threats, pressures and opportunities with the relevant that act at the regional or national level. A such comparative perspective allow to our thinking to overcome the parochialism which more or less dominates public administrative studies and become European or even universal.
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