PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION PERFORMANCE: NEW EUROPEAN UNION MEMBER STATES

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Abstract. Measuring the performance of public administration systems represents a typical "wicked problem", as it involves a number of complex implementation issues. However, even in the current period, when the ideology of New Public Management is dead for most experts, the European Union, international organizations and think tanks are trying to measure and compare the performance of public administration systems of countries. This paper summarizes the main initiatives of the European Union in this field and tries in its main part to review the situation of the new European Union member states from Central and Eastern Europe. Qualitative secondary analysis of data and simple statistics are the main methods of this paper, which is an original contribution to its general topic.

The findings show that the main tools used by the European Union to measure and manage the performance of public administration in the member and candidate countries are the European Semester, the recent EUPACK project, the standards developed by SIGMA OECD for the candidate countries and various statistical surveys. The data obtained show that the performance of public administrations in the new EU Member States from the CEE region varies widely, with most of them being "followers". The reasons for such large differences in performance should be the subject of further research.

Keywords: public administration; performance; performance measurement; performance management; European Union, new member states; Central and Eastern Europe; backsliding.

Introduction

Measuring (and managing) became an important part of administrative reforms motivated by the ideology of New Public Management (NPM). The idea that performance should be measured has not disappeared with the demise of NPM and performance measurement and management continue to be used at all levels of the public sector (Vries and Nemec, 2013).

However, measuring performance in a non-business environment presents a typical 'wicked problem' (Head and Alford, 2015; Peters, 2017). An inefficiently implemented system can have far-reaching effects and distort the behaviors of the actors (Van Dooren, Bouckaert, and Halligan, 2010).

Performance measurement is carried out at all levels – from the international to the intra-organizational level. All these levels have received much attention in the academic literature. Our plan is to add to the discussion on performance measurement (and management) at the international level, the area that needs much more attention from researchers, policy makers, decision makers and all other stakeholders. The goal of this paper is to provide a general overview of the most important tools used by the European Union to measure (and manage) the public administration (PA) performance of its member states and to evaluate the situation of the new EU members states, which come from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

The importance of this kind of research is obvious – the individual performance of member countries significantly determines the global EU performance, moreover, the EU spends large amount of resources to support national PA developments. The discussion on the validity, effectiveness and progress of the values of the indicators used, as well as on the tools to promote this progress, is of critical importance. Indicators should not only be available, but above all should be used to obtain a meaningful interpretation of progress towards goals: "Indicators indicate and are not an end but one of the means" (Jackson and Mueleman, 2022, p. 2).

There are relatively many published papers related to measuring performance in the CEE conditions (like Suleimenova at al., 2018; Dobrolyubova, 2017; Pisár and Šipikal, 2017; Plaček et al., 2017, Špalková, Špaček and Nemec, 2015, Seoh and Tobin, 2020; Lewandowski, 2019; Manojlović Toman and Lalić Novak, 2019; Jahoda, 2013). However, all of them focus on the institutional level and research related to the national and international level is rather scarce, if non-existent.

The goal of this paper is to summarize what the European Union (EU) does in the area of measuring and managing the performance of the national public administration systems and to document the position (and trends) of the new EU member states from the CEE region in the relevant evaluation systems. Qualitative research methods are used to achieve the planned results.

1. Measuring performance in the public sector

Performance measurement is a collection of deliberate activities which includes defining an object of measurement, formulating indicators, collecting data, analyzing data and reporting (Van Dooren, Bouckaert and Halligan, 2010).

Almost all authors agree that performance management under public sector (public administration) conditions is a typical "wicked problem". "Perfect" methods to measure performance are not available (Nyhan and Marlowe, 1995). Moreover, a poorly designed performance measurement and management system can produce a number of serious side effects (Adcroft and Willis, 2005).

Implementation problems connected with performance measurement immediately arise in the first step, when measurability is usually discussed as a crucial factor in determining the quality of performance data and performance measurement (Van Dooren, Bouckaert, and Halligan, 2010). This dimension of performance research copes with questions such as:

1. What should be measured, and how should it be measured?
2. How should the measurement criteria be made operational?
3. Does measurement measure what it intends to measure?

International literature clearly shows that performance measurement in the public sector is a complex and challenging issue, for many reasons (Andrews, Boyne, and Walker, 2006):

– in many cases social and non-financial costs and benefits are expected to be measured,
– it is a complex task because it usually combines objective and subjective measures,
– the measures often draw together data from a number of sources,
– it should combine qualitative and quantitative approaches, etc.

Performance has multiple and often ambiguous meanings and there are different opinions on how it should be defined and measured (Greiling, 2006). Typically, input indicators (to quantify the resources used), output, outcome and impact indicators (to quantify the achievements) and specifically quality indicators (such as fitness for purpose, quality standards, consistency and customer satisfaction) are used in different combinations to measure performance (Wright and Nemec, 2003; Cicea, 2020).

Performance measurement is really a "black box". Blalock (1999) points out that performance measurement systems tend to be so focused on the measurement of a limited set of outcomes that the true complexity of a program's design is frequently ignored in the information production process. Consequently, too little information may be collected about important elements of program implementation, of the interventions considered unique to a program, or of a richer array of outcomes that may be very significant.

The approach to the actual use of performance data is also a critical issue. Moynihan and Pandey (2010) argue that governments have devoted extraordinary effort to creating performance data, wagering that it will be used to improve governance, but much remains unknown about the factors associated with the use of that information. Van Dooren, Bouckaert and Halligan (2010) describe various distortions connected with the use of performance information and output as well as the performance target paradox. Boyne et al. (2006) addressed the question of which aspects of management influence the performance of public agencies, noting that empirical studies of the impact of management on the real performance of public organizations are scarce.

Performance measurement and management systems should measure as well as secure both the accomplishment of the right objectives and the utilization of the right ways leading to their achievement (Pilařová, 2008). However, there are critical flaws related to this type of evaluation. Performance evaluation often focuses on outcomes, but it is very difficult to identify effective measurable outcomes. Organizations and employees often concentrate only on those criteria on the basis of which they are evaluated, while neglecting the others (Kellough, 2012). Outcomes achieved by an individual player do not necessarily depend only on that player. When organizations focus only on evaluating the performance of their employees, they may fail to meet objectives that are difficult to measure, for example, customer assistance (Daley, 2005). The subject of an evaluation is often an employee's work and social behavior at an organization; in this case, the evaluation is often based on the conviction that desirable behaviors lead to efficient performances. In connection with this, 'behavior-based rating scales' based on required employee behavior have been developed (Kellough, 2012).

The problems of performance measurement exaggerate on the national and international levels. Most existing rankings/ ratings work with quantitative indicators, some of them based on "hard data", some of them on expert opinion. Even in the case of the use of "hard data", indicators may not be true – the history documents that many countries are "heroes" in manipulating official statistical data. For all other cases, "Rankings frequently influence how state behavior is perceived, how states react, and how they develop responsive strategies. However, rankings always contain value judgements, methodological choices, and also implicit political aims. Uncritical acceptance of rankings can therefore lead to unintended internalization of normative assumptions that could lead to poorer, not better, public policy outcomes" (Jackson and Meuhleman, 2022, p. 1).

2. EU "public administration performance management" instruments

The EU uses several mechanisms how to evaluate and indirectly manage the public administration performance of its members and candidate states. In the following text, we introduce three critically important mechanisms – the European Semester, the European Public Administration Country Knowledge (EUPACK) project, and the Support for Improvement in Governance and Management (SIGMA) activities.

2.1. European Semester
The European Semester is the European Union's framework for the coordination and surveillance of economic and social policies (https://commission.europa.eu/content/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester_en). It was established in 2010 as an annual cycle of economic and fiscal policy coordination.

The European Semester is a critical part of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) and it delivers different processes of control, surveillance, and coordination of budgetary, fiscal, economic and social policies of the EU member

countries – public administration (performance) is the inevitable part of this mechanisms. The European Semester has three main pillars which are a combination of hard and soft law, via a mix of surveillance mechanisms and possible sanctions. The main legislative pillar of the European Semester is the Regulation (EU) No 1175/2011 of the European Parliament. The socio-economic coordination, which includes also the public administration dimension is the youngest part (pillar) of the European semester and deals with soft law, however, also this part includes certain "enforcement" mechanisms.

From the point of the public administration performance, the most critical mechanism is the regular annual report and the set of Country-specific recommendations (CSRs), both documents normally published in May. The CSRs need to be followed and implemented by the Member States. The findings from the report and the set of CSRs are standardly used to formulate "ex-ante" conditionalities for the use of the EU funds by countries. Ex-ante conditionalities are used to ensure that countries implement the most critical European Semester recommendations – if not reflected, resources would not be provided. These instruments supported critical public administration changes in many countries – for example, the developments of the civil service mechanisms in many countries.

The specific instrument to cope with the COVID-19 crisis is the Recovery and Resilience Facility, which requires from the member states to draft and implement plans and strategies for reforms and public investment projects. The use of resources from this facility is directly connected with the fulfilment of concrete milestones defined by the national recovery and resilience plans (which normally include also public administration developments).

2.2. European Public Administration Country Knowledge project

The EUPACK is a multi-annual initiative of the European Commission. The goal of this project is to develop the knowledge of the EU Member State public administrations' functioning and reforms. This initiative was first time realised in 2018 and developed during the consequent years.

In 2018 the country comprehensive reports were prepared (app. 40 pages each) and later on published on the official EU website (https://commission. europa.eu/about-european-commission/departments-and-executive-agencies/ structural-reform-support/european-public-administration-country-reports_en) and the summary report was also drafted (Palaric, Thijs and Hammerschmidt, 2018). In 2019 the project used a different approach, and except for country reports and the summary report (not openly published) also the case studies of best practices were prepared.

From 2020 the project uses standardised methodological approach – the country reports are rather short and cover the following issues: overall performance and major reform initiatives, the institutional systems (structure and organisation), and the capacity, performance and management of public administrations in four defined areas (civil service systems and human resources management; policy-making, coordination, and implementation; transparency and accountability; service delivery and digitalisation). The collected data and information draw on existing, publicly available sources and statistics. The country reports

are the base for systematic and comparative synthesis, which was published in 2020, yet. The specific result from the project is the set of European public administration thematic studies, which already include ten very interesting publications on different topics (https://commission.europa.eu/about-european-commission/departments-and-executive-agencies/structural-reform-support/european-public-administration-thematic-studies_en).

2.3. SIGMA initiatives

SIGMA is a joint initiative of the OECD and the European Union, financed especially by the EU. "Its key objective is to strengthen the foundations for improved public governance, and hence support socio-economic development through building the capacities of the public sector, enhancing horizontal governance and improving the design and implementation of public administration reforms, including proper prioritisation, sequencing and budgeting" (https://www.sigmaweb.org/ourexpertise/#d.en.259002).

SIGMA was initiated very much as the reaction to the need to support public administration developments in post-Soviet countries and this initiative is working with its partners on strengthening public governance systems and public administration capacities since 1992. SIGMA really effectively supported the accession process of the first new EU member countries, which joined the EU in 2004 (in this period public administration was not the direct part of "Acquis Communautaire" and related required developments of the candidate countries).

Recently SIGMA in the partnership with the European Commission Directorate-General for Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement negotiations works with the EU candidate/ potential candidate countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, Serbia, and Turkey) and with the EU Neighbourhood countries (Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Egypt, Georgia, Jordan, Lebanon, Moldova, Morocco, Tunisia, and Ukraine) to help them to develop their public administration systems. Main SIGMA partners on the national level are the centre of government and key co-ordinating ministries, state agencies (e.g. public service, public procurement), independent oversight bodies (e.g. Supreme Audit Institutions, ombudsmen), and parliaments. SIGMA assists especially in the following areas (https://www.sigmaweb.org/ourexpertise/strategic-framework-public-administration-reform.htm):

– "Designing and implementing PAR policy and programmes, including setting priorities, involving key stakeholders, sequencing actions and costing reforms.
– Establishing the institutions and strengthening the capacities required to oversee, execute and monitor the progress of reforms.
– Reviewing existing strategic and management arrangements, diagnosing the main challenges, and providing guidance in scoping and prioritising PAR".

In 2014 SIGMA in close cooperation with the EU published the Principles of Public Administration (SIGMA, 2014) covering six core areas:
– the strategic framework for public administration reform;
– policy development and coordination;
– public service and human resource management;

–   accountability;
–   service delivery;
–   public financial management.

The Principles define detailed requirements for a well-functioning public administration in each of these core areas. Later SIGMA has developed more tailored Principles for EU candidate countries and potential candidates (SIGMA, 2017a) and more generic Principles suited for a wider range of countries, including those working with the EU under the European Neighbourhood Policy (SIGMA, 2017b).

3. Public administration performance of the new EU member states from the CEE region

This part tries to compare the public administration performance in CEE countries, which already joined the EU (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia). At the beginning the World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) data are used (Kaufmann, Kraay, and Mastruzzi, 2010). These aggregate indicators are based on hundreds of individual underlying variables and reflect survey respondents' as well as public, private, and NGO sector experts' views nationally. There are several limits, mentioned by experts related to how these data can be used for international comparisons, however, these indicators should be sufficiently reliable for the "informed comparisons of trends", moreover, there is no other effective database with a sufficiently long data set to be used instead of WGI. From the six indicators used by the World Bank, the article does not work with "Political Stability and Absence of Violence" indicator, because of too complicated relation between the conflict and the public administration performance (Nemec and Reddy, 2023).

3.1. Control of corruption

The development trends for this indicatorcapture "perceptions of the extent to which public power is exercised for private gain, including both petty and grand forms of corruption, as well as "capture" of the state by elites and private interests" (Kaufmann, Kraay, and Mastruzzi, 2010, p. 4) are provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Control of corruption – percentile rank

	1996	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2021
Bulgaria	44,623	51,063	56,585	51,904	47,115	45,673	48,557
Croatia	32,795	57,446	58,536	58,571	63,461	61,538	59,134
Czechia	74,731	60,638	68,780	69,047	68,269	70,673	72,596
Estonia	69,892	77,659	80,975	80,476	88,461	92,307	89,903

	1996	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2021
Hungary	74,193	75,531	72,195	65,714	62,019	60,576	56,25
Latvia	50	56,914	65,853	63,333	67,307	75,480	76,923
Lithuania	68,279	67,021	64,390	68,571	70,192	79,326	80,288
Poland	75,806	73,404	61,951	71,904	75,480	73,076	70,192
Romania	39,247	38,297	48,780	45,238	53,365	52,884	52,884
Slovenia	81,720	77,127	80	79,047	76,442	78,846	75,961
Slovakia	62,903	62,234	68,292	63,809	61,538	66,346	62,019

Source: Completed by the author, based on WGI (- hereinafter, unless otherwise noted).

The percentile rank data (relative country´s position) indicate significantly different current performance and significantly different trends. Three Baltic countries progress during the whole investigated period and today they seem to be leaders regarding the effectiveness of their anti-corruption policies. Other countries stagnate, or even show a recent degressive reversal. For example, despite the proclaimed "anti-corruption" character of the Slovak after the 2020 government (Prime Ministers Heger and Matovič), the WGI data suggest that the situation in Slovakia in 2021 is the same as in 1996, and far below an acceptable level. Several studies speak about "systemic corruption" in many CEE countries (see for example Langr, 2018 or Rodionova et al., 2022).

3.2. Government effectiveness

The WGI data related to this indicator, which captures "the perceptions of the quality of public services, the quality of the civil service and the degree of its independence from political pressures, the quality of policy formulation and implementation, and the credibility of the government's commitment to such policies" (Kaufmann, Kraay and Mastruzzi, 2010, p. 4) are provided in Table 2.

Table 2

Government effectiveness – percentile rank

	1996	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2021
Bulgaria	56,284	58,469	57,843	54,545	53,846	44,711	47,115
Croatia	58,469	63,934	67,156	69,377	70,673	68,75	70,192
Czechia	72,131	70,491	77,450	77,511	82,211	79,326	82,211
Estonia	71,584	75,956	78,431	82,296	82,692	88,461	89,423
Hungary	78,688	81,967	73,529	71,770	71,634	71,153	71,634

	1996	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2021
Latvia	67,759	60,655	69,117	73,205	83,173	76,923	77,403
Lithuania	68,306	59,562	75	73,684	85,096	82,211	81,730
Poland	75,409	69,398	66,666	71,291	75	65,384	63,461
Romania	45,901	46,994	46,078	51,196	58,173	42,307	47,596
Slovenia	79,234	75,409	76,470	80,861	78,365	85,576	84,615
Slovakia	66,120	74,863	75,980	75,119	74,519	69,711	69,230

The picture again reveals major differences between the countries. The only country with consistent progress is Estonia (possibly due to its extremely high maturity in e-government – see the later text). In contrast, the position of Bulgaria has actually worsened between 1996 and 2021 and, together with Romania, these two countries represent "negative" outliers.

3.3. Regulatory quality

Table 3 delivers the picture related to this indicator, which captures "perceptions of the ability of the government to formulate and implement sound policies and regulations that permit and promote private sector development" (Kaufmann, Kraay and Mastruzzi, 2010, p. 4).

Table 3

Regulatory quality – percentile rank

	1996	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2021
Bulgaria	47,282	60,326	69,607	73,684	70,673	66,826	67,788
Croatia	49,456	50,543	64,705	66,507	62,5	64,423	69,230
Czechia	82,065	74,456	80,392	86,124	81,730	86,538	87,5
Estonia	85,869	89,130	85,784	88,516	93,269	92,788	92,788
Hungary	75,543	82,065	78,921	80,382	74,519	67,788	68,75
Latvia	77,173	71,195	75,490	78,947	81,25	85,096	85,576
Lithuania	82,608	73,369	77,450	79,425	87,019	83,653	86,538
Poland	72,282	72,826	72,549	81,339	79,807	76,442	75,961
Romania	55,978	51,086	58,823	73,205	70,192	63,942	62,980
Slovenia	83,695	70,108	75,980	75,119	71,634	77,403	75,480
Slovakia	71,195	69,021	83,333	79,904	75,480	74,519	77,884

The Baltic countries also show positive development trends in this indicator, although not as visibly as, for example, in the area of fighting corruption. Estonia is relatively stagnant after reaching the global "frontrunner" position, but at a really high level where improvement is really difficult.

Latvia shows almost consistent progress, Lithuania some ups and downs. As for the other countries, the Czech Republic more or less maintains its position; however, several countries show degressive steps backwards, especially after 2010.

3.4. Rule of law

The data for this indicator, which captures "perceptions of the extent to which agents have confidence in and abide by the rules of society, and in particular the quality of contract enforcement, property rights, the police, and the courts, as well as the likelihood of crime and violence" (Kaufmann, Kraay and Mastruzzi, 2010, p. 4) are provided in Table 4.

Table 4

Rule of Law – percentile rank

	1996	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2021
Bulgaria	39,69849	48,25871	49,76077	51,65877	53,36538	50,48077	53,36538
Croatia	31,15578	50,74627	55,02392	56,87204	61,05769	60,57692	60,09615
Czechia	79,8995	68,65672	78,4689	79,62085	84,13461	83,65385	84,13461
Estonia	66,33166	68,1592	80,38277	85,30806	87,01923	89,42308	89,90385
Hungary	79,39699	73,13433	75,11961	72,03792	65,86539	67,78846	69,71154
Latvia	56,78392	56,21891	66,98565	71,09005	76,44231	80,76923	82,69231
Lithuania	63,31658	58,70647	67,94258	72,98578	81,25	81,73077	83,65385
Poland	70,85427	69,15423	62,67942	68,72038	77,40385	69,23077	65,38461
Romania	50,25126	45,77114	46,88995	58,29384	62,01923	64,42308	64,42308
Slovenia	84,92462	81,59204	79,9043	81,51659	80,76923	84,13461	83,17308
Slovakia	57,28643	60,69652	63,15789	66,35071	68,26923	73,07692	74,51923

Also, for these indicators, the trends are different. In this case, Slovenia and Czechia reached very good relative levels already in 1996 and somehow keep their positions. Estonia progressed from the low ranking to the leading position. As opposite, Hungary and Poland demonstrate degressive trends. Croatia shows significant progress between 1996 and 2005, however afterwards certain stagnation.

3.5. Voice and Accountability

This indicator captures "perceptions of the extent to which a country's citizens are able to participate in selecting their government, as well as freedom of expression, freedom of association, and a free media" (Kaufmann, Kraay and Mastruzzi, 2010, p. 4) and its values are shown in Table 5.

Table 5

Voice and Accountability – percentile rank

	1996	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2021
Bulgaria	63,5	62,189	66,346	64,454	61,083	56,038	56,521
Croatia	45	65,174	63,461	61,611	65,517	64,734	64,734
Czechia	78	71,144	75,961	78,672	82,266	79,227	81,159
Estonia	74,5	77,114	80,769	83,412	87,192	88,405	89,371
Hungary	77	85,074	86,538	73,459	66,502	58,937	58,937
Latvia	70	70,149	72,115	72,037	73,399	73,429	75,362
Lithuania	75,5	73,631	74,519	75,355	77,339	81,159	82,125
Poland	80	81,094	78,365	80,094	81,773	66,666	63,768
Romania	59,5	63,681	61,057	59,241	63,546	65,217	64,251
Slovenia	87,5	83,084	83,173	81,516	78,325	78,260	77,294
Slovakia	67	72,636	74,038	74,881	76,354	74,879	76,811

Again, trends are very different. The most interesting issue is the critical decline in the case of Poland and Hungary after the appointment of their current governments (Orbán government in Hungary appointed in 2010 and staying in power, with different majority in Parliament for the whole period and Morawiecki governments in Poland in power from 2017). Both these governments passed several legislative acts which seem to contradict the principle of "voice", and both of them have been investigated for undermining the independence of courts, media and non-governmental organisations by the EU. The best progress was again made by Estonia.

3.6. Positions of CEE countries for indicators used by the EUPACK

The EUPACK project mentioned above works with data from several databases. Table 6 summarises the absolute and relative values of selected indicators. It shows that the majority of the new EU member states are at the bottom of the "rankings" for most indicators. The best performer in our group is Estonia, which is the same as for the WGI indicators.

Table 6

Selected public administration performance data used by the EUPACK project: 2021 data

	Transparency of government		Maturity of open data		Trust to national government		Trust to regional and local authorities		Trust to public administration		Digital public services for citizens		Digital public services for business		E-government users interacting with public authorities		E-Government users submitting completed forms	
	Value	Rank	Value	Rank	Value	Rank	Value	Rank	Value	Rank	Value	Rank	Value	Rank	Value	Rank	Value	Rank
Bulgaria	51,2	18	78,0%	18	22%	24	44%	22	33%	23	0,0963	24	0,2254	13	19	26	15	26
Croatia	na	na	84,0%	15	22%	26	32%	27	33%	25	0,1111	23	0,1554	24	42	22	24	24
Czechia	54,3	16	74,0%	21	28%	18	62%	9	56%	12	0,1564	18	0,1702	23	58	12	52	12
Estonia	73,0	7	94,0%	5	49%	7	56%	14	63%	7	0,2477	2	0,2738	2	69	6	76	2
Hungary	41,6	23	58,0%	24	45%	11	63%	7	62%	8	0,085	25	0,1726	22	72	5	66	7
Latvia	77,9	4	77,0%	19	26%	22	53%	17	33%	26	0,2286	6	0,2142	18	68	7	65	9
Lithuania	90,0	2	89,0%	13	41%	14	43%	24	43%	19	0,1656	15	0,2663	4	57	13	52	13
Poland	40,3	25	95,0%	3	28%	19	54%	16	46%	18	0,1317	21	0,1264	25	29	24	40	18
Romania	41,4	24	76,0%	20	31%	17	45%	21	41%	20	0,0411	27	0,0442	27	11	27	9	27
Slovakia	38,4	26	50,0%	27	21%	27	46%	20	47%	17	0,1255	22	0,1876	20	52	17	25	23
Slovenia	58,9	15	92,0%	9	25%	23	48%	18	41%	21	0,1728	13	0,1815	21	61	10	38	19

Source: author, selection from EUPACK data.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Table 7 shows the evolution of the positions of the selected countries within their "internal ranking". The data show that the best position before accession belonged to Slovenia, which performed best in four out of five WGI indicators used. However, this country's position has deteriorated, so that in 2021, for example, Slovenia fell into the group of countries with the worst results in regulatory quality. The leader is Estonia, which today occupies all the first places (and as other indicators above show, Estonia is even among the best performing countries in the EU as a whole).

The clear "followers" are Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania, which were at the bottom of the rankings at the beginning and also today. Hungary and Poland show significant regression, falling from the group of best performing countries to the group with medium performing or under-performing countries. Taking into account the limits of the WGI indicators, the positions of the Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia remain stable.

Table 7

Country´s position 1996 and 2021: WGI data

	Control of corruption		Government effectiveness		Regulatory quality		Rule of law		Voice and accountability	
	1996	2021	1996	2021	1996	2021	1996	2021	1996	2021
Bulgaria	9	11	10	11	11	10	10	11	9	11
Croatia	11	8	9	7	10	8	11	10	11	7
Czechia	3	5	4	3	4	2	2	2	3	3
Estonia	5	1	5	1	1	1	5	1	6	1
Hungary	4	9	2	6	6	9	3	7	4	10
Latvia	8	3	7	5	5	4	8	5	7	6
Lithuania	6	2	6	4	3	3	6	4	5	2
Poland	2	6	3	9	7	6	4	8	2	9
Romania	10	10	11	10	9	11	9	9	10	8
Slovenia	1	4	1	2	2	7	1	3	1	4
Slovakia	7	7	8	8	8	5	7	6	8	5

Given the "great success" of Estonia, it is quite surprising that it is very difficult to find relevant and comprehensive academic studies explaining the phenomena of this country. Most sources try to argue that the combination

of neo-liberal policies, new young generation, strong national and cultural heritage, and high investments into the human capital are the main positive factors that allowed Estonia to shine nationally and internationally (see, for example, Laar-Kelam, 2017). More critical authors (especially from Estonia), do not forget to mention remaining or new challenges (for example, Kattel and Raudla, 2022). Much more on this issue should be done by academia.

The data in all provided tables, however, indicate the problem of stagnation to back-sliding situations, which have recently become evident for most countries from our sample. The problem of backsliding in the CEE area has already been described in the academic literature. Already in 2011, the article by Bouckaert, Nemec and Nakrosis (2011, p. 31) reported: "If public management reforms in the new EU member states were heavily influenced by the prospect of EU membership, it is no longer true in the post-accession period. Following their accession to the EU, the ex-ante control of the European Commission was replaced with much weaker instruments of the ex-post control in the case of non-implementation or delayed implementation. In combination with several deficiencies in the political and party systems, these factors possibly reduced the willingness of the new EU member states to engage in coherent public management reforms at the domestic level".

Excellent analyses of the purposes for backsliding have been delivered by Agh (2016, 2019), with a focus on Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, and Poland. He argues that some of these countries already shifted from chaotic democracy to authoritarian rule. He suggests that a purpose for such negative change might be the "problem of political participation". According to him, electoral and other participation has become socially asymmetrical, providing space for populism and authoritarianism.

There should be several factors, which catalyse serve as catalyst for backsliding, most of them seem to have a path-dependence background. As also the WGI data for "voice" propose, impacts by the citizenry and civil society on the policy-making and service delivery are very limited, due to the absence of a culture of co-operation between the decision-makers, public sector, and NGOs. NGOs are sometimes even seen as being under external influence and working against the interests of the state.

The state administrative system in most countries is fragmented and has "silos" character. Administrative practices are based on conformity, unwillingness to change, secrecy and the circumvention of responsibilities partly inherited from the socialist period.

The political situation (politics and politicians) seems to be the main barrier to public administration performance progress. The explanation exists and can be found, for example, in the public choice theory (Cullis and Jones, 2009). This theory argues that politicians serve their own interests and not those of their nations (and in many cases the main private interest of politicians is selfish personal gain). This kind of politicians (and seems that their proportion is at least not diminishing – look at control of corruption data) cannot be expected to promote participatory democracy that limits the possibility of advancing selfish personal interests.

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