

Public Administration Reforms during Fiscal Crisis in Lithuania: Perceptions of Senior Civil Servants

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Abstract. *The empirical results of executive survey on public administration reform are presented covering reform trends, reform results, results oriented culture and coordination in Lithuanian public administration during fiscal crisis since 2008. The survey acting as a tool to monitor the development of public administration reforms allows identifying important success and shortcomings that are otherwise difficult to measure employing other methods. The survey was carried out closely following the methodology of 3rd work package of “Coordinating for Cohesion in the Public Sector of the Future” (COCOPS)¹. It is shown that although the public administration is evaluated as functioning better than before, there are serious perceived shortcomings in general approach to reforms, missing components in fostering results oriented culture, lack of horizontal coordination and overall negative effects of public administration reforms on the society.*

Keywords: *public sector reform in Lithuania, perceptions of public senior executives, fiscal crisis*

Raktažodžiai: *viešojo sektoriaus reformos Lietuvoje, vadovaujančias pareigas užimančių valstybės tarnautojų požiūriai, finansų krizė*

Introduction

Public administration reform can be defined as a stable and autonomous public policy initiated to adapt the public administration system to the demands of a present day or to improve its management. Since the 1970's public administration reforms known as New Public Management (NPM) reforms were implemented in countries that

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had experienced fiscal crisis and needed to find the ways to increase efficiency and to cut the cost of delivering public services (Larbi, 1999). Although reduction of public budget deficits was the main goal of the governments there was an increasing focus on longer term solutions required reviewing and revising public administration.

Studies addressing the public management reforms in Lithuania (e.g., Bouckaert, Nakrošis, & Nemeč, 2011; Nakrošis & Martinaitis, 2012) rely on expertise and usually on “hard” data and concentrate on identification of reform trends, agentification or other important aspects of public administration system. However, the availability of systematically collected data via survey of public senior executives provides the opportunity to evaluate the functioning of public administration and reform trends directly from the “insider” point of view, using data on Lithuania from one of the largest comparative public management research projects in Europe - Coordinating for Cohesion in the Public Sector of the Future (COCOPS). The aim of this article is to provide the general assessment of public administration reforms since 2008 and to discuss some of the factors related the perceived success of functioning of the public administration. General assessment of the public administration (PA) reforms, perceptions of the results oriented culture and coordination during fiscal crisis are explored.

NPM-style reforms during the fiscal crisis: theoretical implications

The term “reform” is used to describe many changes from minor adjustments to management arrangements to fundamental changes in ownership, governance and management arrangements. Building capacity to deliver services and reduction in capacity to correct fiscal imbalances are both described as a “reform” (European Commission, 2009). Public administration system is under permanent reforms in recent decades as public administration reforms have been on the agenda of developed (as well as developing) countries since the 1970s.

So called NPM-style reforms had implications for economic management priorities, arguing for liberalization and deregulation. NPM may be characterized as an approach to public administration that utilizes market principles and business management techniques developed in private sector and applied to the public sector to improve efficiency, performance and effectiveness in the delivery of government services (Powell and De Vries, 2011). Key elements of NPM include various forms of decentralized management within public services (e.g., the creation of autonomous agencies and devolution of budgets and financial control), increasing use of markets and competition in the provision of public services (e.g., contracting out and other market-type mechanisms), and increasing emphasis on performance, outputs and customer orientation (Larbi, 1999; Dwivedi & William, 2011).

From 1980s NPM reforms addressed mainly vertical specialization (structural devolution and agencification) and horizontal specialization (single-purpose organizations), but had little to offer to solve the much bigger problem of horizontal coordination. The second wave of structural reforms in the late 1990s addressed central control and horizontal coordination issues and set about introducing more integration

into public sector organizations via various forms of mergers or cooperative arrangements (joined-up government, whole-of-government, holistic government, integrated governance, networked government, etc.) (Bezes, Fimreite, Le Lidec, & Læg Reid, 2013).

These two trends (the first corresponding the managerial innovations in public sector and the second corresponding new ideas about the role of government) have both resulted in a number of intended and unintended effects. Despite the positive effects of these shifts on short-term economy and efficiency, they produced tensions between NPM reforms and the democratic political process such as delegation vs. accountability, decentralization vs. coordination, devolution of financial autonomy vs. budgetary controls (Aucoin, 1990), NPM-style reforms have had negative effects on equity and social cohesion (Van de Walle & Hammerschmid, 2011). Thus governments that adopted NPM early had to pursue further reforms to correct the problems of fragmentation, poor policy coherence and lack of central direction (European Commission, 2009).

Economic and fiscal crises can create significant opportunities for development and reform (Gray, Broadbent & Michaela Lavender, 2009) both by demonstrating serious weaknesses in public management and regulatory structures and the unsustainability of the status quo and by disrupting the interest coalitions that have previously resisted reform (OECD, 2010, p. 31). However the fiscal crisis has added to the challenge, pressuring governments to act quickly in order to reduce the public debt with little deliberation (Posner & Blöndal, 2012), to identify very quickly cuts to the public sector and public services (both operational and programme expenditure) and relegating the long-term view to second place (OECD, 2012).

Research methodology of the COCOPS survey of senior executives

The survey of public senior executives was conducted under project “Monitoring of public sector reforms” (project no. PRO-10/2012) funded by Lithuanian Research council as one of the projects of “Breakthrough” programme and implemented by staff at Public Administration department (Kaunas University of Technology) in May and June, 2013. The 3rd work package of “Coordinating for Cohesion in the Public Sector of the Future” (COCOPS) project was the basis for the survey in terms of both the methodology and the questionnaire (Hammerschmid, Oprisor, & Štimac, 2013).

The full census type of sampling was employed (sampling universe of approx. 2450 executives), of which 450 respondents that hold executive positions (heads of organizations, departments, units) up to the third hierarchical level in organization in ministries and accountable agencies have filled the online questionnaires to an acceptable standard (i.e., at least 25% of questions answered). The response rate was approx. 18%.

Public administration reforms agenda and the assessment of its implementation

No doubt, serious steps in public management were taken during 2008-2012 by Lithuanian government to respond to fiscal crisis. Significant downsizing and optimization were implemented in public sector (Government and accountable agencies) since 2008: overall downsizing of public sector; optimization of institutional network, inner organizational structures, back-office functions (by contracting-out or centralizing) and state property/assets management; various other management improvement measures (reducing internal bureaucracy, introduction of quality and environmental management systems, broadening of ITC application, improving inter-institutional and inner coordination) (Sunset Commission, 2012).

Most prominent reform trends (see Figure 1) as perceived by public senior executives reflect the actual decisions made and subsequent results achieved. The downsizing of public sector, related to the execution of “The conception on the improvement of the system of executive power”² and reducing number of public sector organizations since 2007 is one of the main results achieved by the Sunset commission (Sunset commission, 2012).

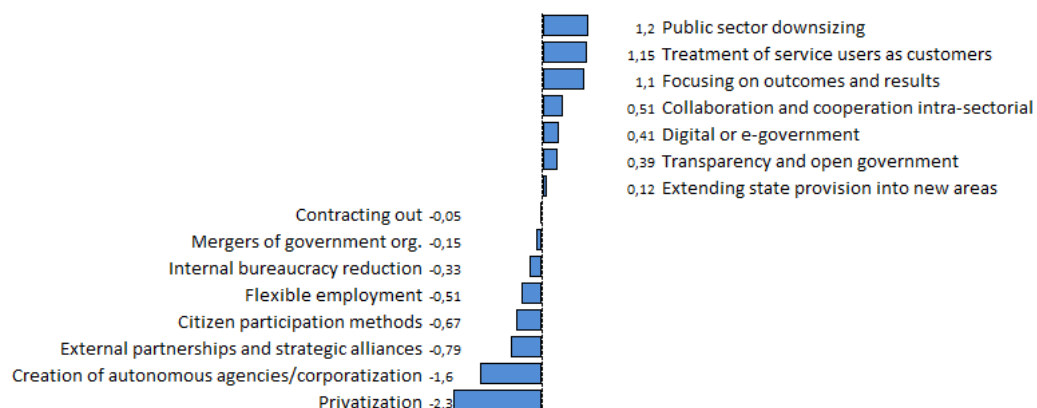


Figure 1. Perceived trends of public administration reforms in Lithuania (1-not at all, 7 - to a large extent)³

One of the main objectives for public management reform during 2009-2012 was enhancing the results based culture and the culture of cooperation (Government of the Republic of Lithuania, 2008; Šiugždinienė, Gaulė, & Rauleckas, 2013). A project implemented by Prime Minister’s office called “Improvement of results oriented management” (VORT) introduced the scrutinization of organizational functions methodology which became part of internal and governmental audit procedures. Outcomes and results were emphasized in improved strategic management methodology. Results of the survey confirms that as focusing on outcomes and results

² Decision no. 1511 of 11/11/2009 by the Government of Republic of Lithuania

³ Deviations of mean from scale mid-point (4) are presented for the sake of visual clarity

is among the top three reform trends in the senior executive's policy area (see Table 1). Presumably, such a focus should have increased policy effectiveness and resource usage efficiency, however, survey results show that policy effectiveness and cost and efficiency in a given policy area are reported to be of not much improvement over the last five years (see Table 6). Customer orientation goes closely with emphasis on outcomes and results and most probably this may be related to ideological position of government and commitment to NPM-style reforms. Less noticed by the respondents, but still highly extensive reform trends are intra-sectorial cooperation (as opposed to the use of external partnerships is below scale mid-point by 0,79), e-government and transparency/open government.

As for the least mentioned reform trends, the creation of autonomous agencies is the trend presumably opposing public sector downsizing and in Lithuania public sector downsizing was implemented mainly via concentration of smaller agencies (Sunset commission, 2012). In this context it is interesting that mergers of government organizations as a reform trend is not given that much attention (evaluated as being just below scale mid-point), although mergers were one of the measures taken to downsize. As well, no systematic or visible privatization was occurring during the period since 2007, therefore the lowest score for privatization score.

Table 1. The extent of the use of various instruments in senior executives' organisations (1- not at all, 7 - to a large extent)

Instruments	Not at all (1-2)	To some extent (3-5)	To a large extent (6-7)	Mean	N
Business/strategic planning	4,2%	24,5%	71,4%	5,87	433
Management by objectives and results	4,7%	24,4%	70,9%	5,82	426
Codes of conduct	4,0%	26,9%	69,0%	5,8	420
Performance appraisal	4,9%	27,7%	67,4%	5,71	426
Service points for customers	12,0%	27,6%	60,4%	5,38	417
Customer/user surveys	14,3%	38,0%	47,7%	4,96	426
Risk management	13,2%	41,7%	45,2%	4,91	403
Benchmarking	12,5%	43,1%	44,4%	4,83	401
Quality management systems	19,2%	35,3%	45,6%	4,78	417
Internal steering by contract	26,5%	36,4%	37,2%	4,3	393
Cost accounting systems	24,7%	48,9%	26,4%	4,07	348
Decentralization of staffing decisions	39,1%	44,6%	16,3%	3,38	363
Performance related pay	43,2%	41,5%	15,3%	3,2	405
Decentralisation of financial decisions	47,3%	40,3%	12,4%	3,08	347

Management by objectives and results is to a large extent employed in public organizations and is the second most extensively used instrument other top instruments being business/strategic planning, codes of conduct and performance appraisal, see Table 1. However, more detailed results show that although goals in public sector organizations are clearly stated and are well communicated to staff, outputs and outcomes measured to quite a large extent (Table 2), but there is high number of goals (and consequently – high number of priorities and performance indicators), there are no clear sanctions for not achieving goals and even worse – no

rewards for achieving goals! Relatedly, performance related pay is evaluated as one of the least used instruments in respondents' organizations (Table 1). This shows that proper incentives are the missing element in the process of creating results based culture.

Table 2. Components of performance management in senior executives' organisations (1- totally disagree, 7 - totally agree)

Descriptions of the organization	Disagree (1-2)	Neutral (3-5)	Agree (6-7)	Mean	N
Goals clearly stated	2,0%	19,0%	79,0%	6,21	453
Goals communicated to staff	1,6%	22,4%	76,0%	6,08	450
High number of goals	5,3%	40,3%	54,4%	5,36	432
Mainly measure outputs and outcomes	6,0%	41,8%	52,2%	5,31	435
Easy to observe and measure activities	8,7%	45,6%	45,8%	5,09	439
indicators for monitoring performance	19,6%	44,5%	35,8%	4,44	438
Mainly measure inputs and processes	13,1%	59,0%	27,9%	4,42	434
Clear sanctions for not achieving goals	23,2%	57,6%	19,3%	3,9	436
Rewarded for achieving goals	47,3%	43,9%	8,8%	2,99	442

At the individual level, achieving results is among top three roles (86,1% agree, mean score 6,42 in 1 to 7 scale, N=432) that public sector executives prescribe to themselves as public sector executives other two most important roles being impartial implementation of laws and rules (mean score 6,46) and providing expertise and technical knowledge (mean score 6,45). Quite extensive use of performance indicators at individual level is also a sign of emerging results based culture: performance indicators are mostly used by senior executives to identify problems that need attention, to assess whether they reach their targets and to monitor the performance of their subordinates (Table 3). Overall, senior executives tend to agree that the relevance of performance information has increased as a result of fiscal crisis (Table 4). There is one caveat, however: by a small margin, senior executives still tend to trade achieving of results for following the rules (Figure 3).

Table 3. The use of performance indicators by public senior executives (1-not at all, 7 - to a large extent)

Use of performance indicators	Not at all (1-2)	To some extent (3-5)	To a large extent (6-7)	Mean	N
Identify problems	3,8%	25,8%	70,4%	5,78	446
Assess whether I reach my targets	3,6%	31,7%	64,7%	5,68	448
Monitor subordinate performance	4,0%	33,5%	62,5%	5,58	448
Satisfy requirements of line manager	3,2%	39,8%	57,0%	5,49	437
Learning and improvement	5,4%	38,5%	56,2%	5,41	447
Manage image of org.	8,2%	33,0%	58,9%	5,35	440
Engage with external stakeholders	15,2%	41,4%	43,4%	4,77	435
Communicate org. contribution to users	15,5%	41,0%	43,5%	4,73	439

The survey reveals insufficient support for the reforms during last five years: many public senior executives described the reforms to be crisis and incident driven (but not planned), partial, inconsistent, unsuccessful and symbolic, too much, top down, partial, initiated by politicians, designed without public involvement and aimed at cutting costs, but not service improvement (Figure 2). This seems so characteristic of the reforms during fiscal crisis in general, not only Lithuania (Posner & Blöndal, 2012).

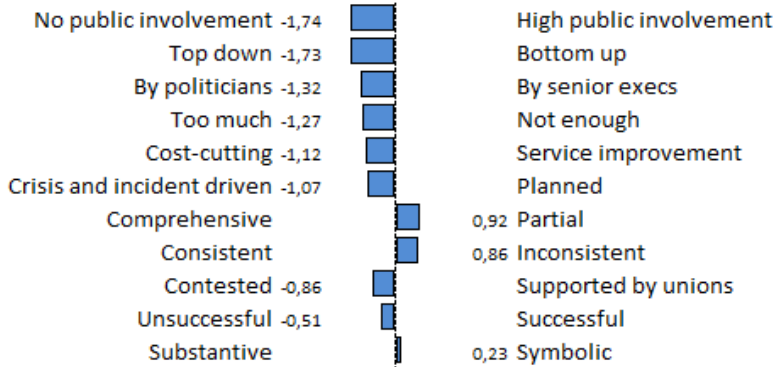


Figure 2. Views on public sector reform: description of public sector reforms in respondent's policy area (scale from 1 to 10)⁴

No doubt, the senior executives' perception of the reforms in general during fiscal crisis and just after it is negative, which is partly result of the mentality, reluctance to change and actual shortcomings in implementation or design of the reforms. It seems plausible, that the average mindset of civil servants even at senior executive positions is closer to leftist thinking and not right wing business or NPM style thinking as exemplified by senior executives' preferences for state provision, equity, quality, tax financed services, citizen orientation and following rules versus more business-like components of the mindset such as efficiency, achieving results, customer focus, market provision, user charges / fees (Figure 3).

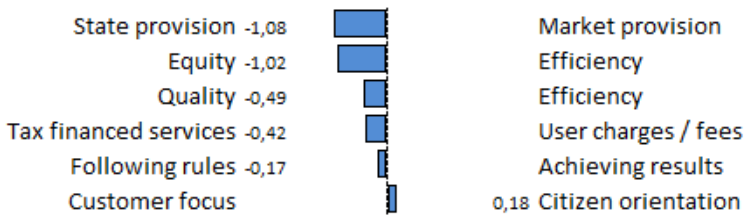


Figure 3. Senior executives' preferences when there is a need to balance different priorities in provision of public services⁵

⁴ Deviations of mean from scale mid-point (5,5) are presented for the sake of visual clarity

Summarizing, it can be claimed that during 2008-2012 strategic management was improved with more efficient priority setting, changes in budget process and civil service (Šiugždinienė, Gaulė, & Rauleckas, 2013), updated methodology of strategic planning at central government level, better control of inter-institutional programs, better orientation towards results and performance measurement (Sunset commission, 2012) etc. The results of the COCOPS survey confirm that management by objectives and results is widespread in public sector organizations, and performance indicators are extensively used at individual level, but proper incentives for achieving and sanctions for not achieving the results of the organization are missing⁶. As well, wider effects (such as improved policy effectiveness and cost and efficiency in a given policy area) is not acknowledged by senior civil servants.

To sum up, not only a general resistance to the changes and a fear of unknown, but also the general mind-set of senior civil servants is the source of certain incongruence with the NPM-style reforms. Senior civil service was expected to be the success factor of the public administration reform, but consequently appeared to be the missing part for the full scale success of the reform (Šiugždinienė, Gaulė, & Rauleckas, 2013).

Reform impact on public administration system

According to evaluations given by public senior executives, the general result of various changes implemented during fiscal crisis is the higher centralization of the decision making at the organizational level (ministry, agency) and the increased importance of performance information (Table 4). Although there is some agreement with the statement that the power of the Ministry of Finances has increased (mean score just above the midpoint of 4), however, there is no evidence supporting the increased decision making power of politicians and the power of budget planning unit, as well as no increase in the frequency of intra-organizational conflict.

Table 4. Consequences of the fiscal crisis (1- strongly disagree, 7- strongly agree)

Consequences of financial crisis	Disagree	Nor agree, nor disagree	Agree	Mean	Total N
Decision making in org. centralized	8,2%	54,9%	36,9%	4,85	317
Relevance of performance information increased	10,5%	52,9%	36,6%	4,78	314
Power of Min. of Finance increased	20,2%	54,5%	25,3%	4,17	312
Power of politicians in dec. making increased	24,1%	52,4%	23,5%	4	311
Budget planning unit gained power	36,0%	51,6%	12,3%	3,39	308
Conflict between departments in org. increased	41,2%	47,3%	11,5%	3,23	313

⁵ Deviations of mean from scale mid-point (4) are presented for the sake of visual clarity

⁶ Šiugždinienė et al. (2013) support this finding by concluding that without a remuneration system linked to performance results civil service reform has been implemented only to a very limited extent and the results based strategic management system is not fully functioning.

It is acknowledged by senior executives that in general, collaboration and cooperation among different public sector actors is among the most important reform trends (rated as the 4th most important trend, Figure 1). As it comes to the actual implementation and the results achieved, senior executives think that public administration during the last five years has performed on policy coherence and coordination dimension not so well (Table 6). Coordination among policy areas (or ministries) and coordination with supra-national bodies/international organisations are the worst evaluated dimensions of coordination compared to coordination within own policy area and compared with other actors (local, international, private etc.) (Table 5).

Table 5. Coordination among national government bodies from different policy areas (1 – very poor, 7 – very good)

Dimensions of coordination	Poor	Average	Good	Mean	Total N
Coordination among national government bodies within the same policy area	10,9%	61,3%	27,9%	4,56	359
Coordination with private sector stakeholders, interest organisations, user groups, and civil society organisations	17,6%	58,5%	23,9%	4,2	335
Coordination with local/regional government bodies	16,9%	61,2%	21,9%	4,19	343
Coordination among national government bodies from different policy areas	15,5%	70,8%	13,7%	3,95	343
Coordination with supra-national bodies/international organisations	23,4%	55,9%	20,7%	3,95	299

It was found that the higher the interaction frequency of senior executive with other government departments outside his/her own organisation, the less satisfaction there is with the way the public sector reforms in a senior executive's policy area tend to be: the reforms are more likely to be evaluated as top down (Spearman's ρ coeff. equals 0,122*), inconsistent (0,117*), driven by politicians (0,139**), crisis and incident driven (0,130*), symbolic (0,129*) and unsuccessful (0,122*). These relationships may be treated as a sign or measure of practitioners' latent dissatisfaction with certain aspects of the reforms.

Looking at substantial dimensions of the public administration reform senior executives notice (Table 6) improved public administration over the last five years mostly in areas related to values of fairness, equality, ethics, openness; public service quality and innovations; better motivated staff and increased attractiveness of public sector as employer. Policy effectiveness, cost and efficiency are in average evaluated as slightly improved or unchanged. Senior executives believe that citizen trust in government - one of the key elements for the support of the political regime – and more general property - social cohesion - have deteriorated most significantly; internal bureaucracy reduction instead of declared achievements hasn't been reduced at all; policy coherence and coordination somewhat deteriorated despite the measures taken

to strengthen policy coordination; citizen participation and involvement are thought to remain unchanged or even decreased.

Table 6. The way public administration has performed in senior executives' policy area over the last five years (1- deteriorated significantly, 7- improved significantly)

Performance of public administration in last 5 years	Deteriorated	Neutral	Improved	Mean	Total N
Fair treatment of citizens	7,2%	23,7%	69,1%	5,13	376
Equal access to services	9,1%	30,7%	60,3%	4,94	375
Ethical behaviour among public officials	11,4%	24,9%	63,7%	4,89	377
Service quality	13,5%	22,2%	64,3%	4,81	378
Innovation	15,1%	23,1%	61,8%	4,78	377
External transparency and openness	21,3%	29,9%	48,8%	4,46	375
Staff motivation and attitudes towards work	27,8%	29,1%	43,1%	4,29	378
Attractiveness of public sector as employer	31,4%	27,1%	41,5%	4,18	376
Policy effectiveness	26,0%	40,7%	33,3%	4,07	369
Cost and efficiency	29,4%	33,2%	37,4%	4,06	377
Citizen participation and involvement	32,9%	37,0%	30,2%	3,95	368
Policy coherence and coordination	35,8%	34,9%	29,3%	3,9	372
Social cohesion	34,2%	43,8%	21,9%	3,82	365
Internal bureaucracy reduction	43,1%	26,3%	30,6%	3,74	376
Citizen trust in government	45,3%	33,3%	21,3%	3,61	375

Thus, while the overall assessment of the way public administration runs in Lithuania compared with five years ago is highly positive (for 46,7% of respondents it runs better, and only for 11,2% it runs worse, mean value is 6,17 in 1 to 7 scale, N=392), there are visible shortcomings in functioning of the public administration at the society level and in coordination and bureaucracy reduction at the state management level. We would stipulate that the overall positive assessment is mostly attributed to the better functioning machine of public administration, which while being more rational cannot achieve the important societal level outcomes such as higher citizen trust and social cohesion.

Conclusions

1. Data of the COCOPS survey of senior public executives in Lithuania show that major reform trends as perceived by senior public executives were downsizing of public sector, orientation towards outcomes and results, and treatment of service users as customers. This focus presumably is closely tight to ideological positions of right and liberal government and its inherent commitment to NPM-style reforms. However, senior executives express quite clear dissatisfaction with the reforms initiated during fiscal crisis: there were too much top down ad-hoc partial reforms initiated by politicians, designed without public involvement and aimed at cutting costs, but not service improvement.

2. From 2008 the new rightist Government made efforts to strengthen the results oriented culture of civil service hoping for the sustainable result. The COCOPS survey results reveal that although the reform trend of focusing on outcomes and results is widely acknowledged and the management by objectives and results is widespread in public sector organizations, and performance indicators are extensively used at individual level, but proper incentives for achieving and sanctions for not achieving the results of the organization are missing. This single shortcoming may limit the effects achieved by strategic management and performance measurement systems in general.

3. Coordination among ministries is perceived as the worst of all types of coordination in Lithuanian public sector. Achievements with improving coordination are systematically evaluated as among the least satisfying features of public management by senior public executives. There are signs showing that practitioners most involved in coordination activities are disappointed with the effects of the reforms on coordination.

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Viešojo administravimo reformos Lietuvoje finansų krizės metu: vadovaujančias pareigas užimančių valstybės tarnautojų požiūriai ir patirtys

Anotacija

Straipsnyje pristatomi vadovaujančias pareigas užimančių valstybės tarnautojų požiūriai ir patirtys, susiję su viešojo administravimo reformų įgyvendinimu Lietuvoje finansų krizės metu. Remiamasi tyrimu atliktu vykdant Lietuvos mokslo tarybos finansuojamą projektą „Viešojo sektoriaus reformų stebėseną“ (sutarties nr. PRO-10/2012) pagal „Proveržio idėjų“ programą. Pateikiami pagrindiniai empiriniai aprašomieji tyrimo rezultatai šiais aspektais: taupymo strategijų ir priemonių paplitimas, reformų kryptys, tendencijos, pasitenkinimas reformomis, į rezultatus orientuotos kultūros paplitimas, reformų rezultatai, koordinavimas. Autoriai pažymi, kad yra rimtų trūkumų įgyvendinant viešojo administravimo reformas, formuojant į rezultatus orientuotą kultūrą, didinant koordinaciją tarp politikos sričių bei siekiant visuomenės sutelktumo.

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