

PhD research project (2016-2019)

“Government reorganization and policy change. A comparative analysis of fusions across government ministries”

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The literature on the coordination of policies increasingly identifies departmentalism and administrative fragmentation as problems when it comes to addressing complex policy challenges that cut across established areas of public policy. Combining responsibilities for several policy areas in the portfolio of one ministry is often claimed to help governments move away from “siloed” ministerial policy-making, towards increased coordination and integration of policy-making. Indeed, we know from organizational theory that organizational structure represents a cognitive pillar that structures interactions, interests and conflict within and between organizations, and that modifying organizational structure changes these established patterns. However these basic insights have so far only rarely been applied to the analysis of policy-making in ministerial bureaucracies.

My thesis asks how these organizational biases affect the coordination of policies within and between ministries. It argues that most of the public administration and public policy literature does not sufficiently take into account dynamics of cooperation and competition within and between government ministries. My thesis tries to avoid the image of “monolithic” government ministries. It assumes that we can further our understanding of why and how governments coordinate and integrate policies by paying attention to dynamics of cooperation, conflict, and competition within and between ministries.

Empirically, my thesis analyzes the organization of government ministries in two policy fields, unemployment and housing. Following a mixed-methods design, the thesis consists in two parts. The first part uses Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) methodology in order to analyze patterns of ministerial organization and policy integration in nine OECD countries over the past three decades. The second part of the thesis consists in case studies and process-tracing methodology. Building on field work on two cases of ministerial reorganization, I analyze the effects of these reorganizations along three dimensions. First, I ask how the redrawing of ministerial boundaries affects internal relationships between different units within the ministry. Second, I analyse the effects on external relationships of the ministry, with other actors of the policy sector, with other ministries and with “core” executive bodies (Prime Minister, Chancellery). Third, I ask how the redrawing of ministerial boundaries affects coordination between actors with regard to the policy challenge.

The thesis contributes to the growing literature on policy integration and coordination by analysing the effects of organizational change in governments on policy processes. It further adds to the public administration literature by applying an political science perspective to the analysis of organizational change in governments. It is part of the ongoing SNSF research project “When and why do governments integrate policy sectors? A comparative analysis of 13 countries and four policy sectors” (dir. prof. Martino Maggetti).