Public service reforms and clientelism: explaining variation of service delivery modes in Croatian social policy*

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ABSTRACT
This article seeks to explain the differences in outcomes of social services reform in Croatia during the previous two decades. While the service management reform was based on the principles of effectiveness, efficiency and participation in one segment of social services, in the other segment, reform was used for the development of partisan patronage networks. Using the comparable case strategy, the article focuses on six social services and relies on interviews with policy actors and official documents to map and explain different reform outcomes. The article identifies two factors that led to differences in provision of reformed social services and affected the capacity of the patronage-driven political executive to use reform as an instrument of politicized allocation of public jobs. A sufficiently institutionalized setting in which services were provided prior to the reform reduces the ability of political parties to integrate political patronage into service management. In the case of minimal or non-existent institutional setting, the presence of empowered or represented beneficiaries acts as the bulwark against political capture.

KEYWORDS
Public service reform; enforcement; performance; co-production; party patronage; sub-national comparison

Introduction
After the decade of war, cumbersome transition and slow consolidation of the 1990s, Croatian reform of social services provision – largely unchanged since communist times – started following a change of government in 2000 and the launch of the EU accession process that followed it. Reforms affected services targeting all major social groups including the elderly, persons with disability and children. The proclaimed objectives of the then incumbents were: greater effectiveness; greater efficiency; and, to an extent, inclusivity as well. While numerous international assistance programs emerged, there was general agreement on the need for reform and the importance of decentralization, diversification of providers and of community-based services (Stubbs & Maglajlić, 2012). In a sense, this approach combined an emphasis on the introduction of competition in service provision with a focus on the design of more humane, people-centered services, at least at the discourse level.

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Although the proclaimed goals and the reformist mechanisms introduced were similar for all services undergoing reform, the results proved to be rather uneven. Reform generated some unintended and unexpected consequences catalyzed by the clientelistic nature of Croatian political parties, or – to be more precise – of the party that has thus far governed Croatia for 20 out of 27 years of the country’s independence. Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) was formed and gained power in 1990s, in a setting in which everything was pointing to the likelihood of the process of resolution of the Yugoslav crisis turning into a long one, very likely ending in conflict. This resulted in the formation of a party which established a strong hierarchical organization with a wide network of territorial organizations covering every municipality and possibly every settlement. After such a strong party organization was established, it needed to be maintained. The only way this could be done was through the usage of partisan patronage at the national and local level (Henjak, Zakošek, & Čular, 2013).

The aspiration to preserve and spread politicized allocation of public appointments and jobs during the 1990s resulted in a strong centralization of the system of governance which disrupted the legacy of local self-governance inherited from socialism. In the 2000s same aspiration of the ruling party induced the emergence of the mechanism of ‘double talk’ whereby reforms of many public services were rarely implemented as formally announced (Koprić, 2011; Petak, 2006). Preliminary research which mapped the results of reform in Croatian social policy (Kekez, 2014) even indicated that while in one segment of services the result was consistent adoption of different reform principles, in others the ruling party used reform for the distortion of service delivery in line with patronage practices.

This article is an attempt to characterize and explain empirical variations in service delivery modes within the described policy-making context. Given the initially documented differences in reformed management of Croatian social services, the following questions are posed:

Research Question 1: What kinds of service delivery modes were produced by the reform of social services in Croatia?

Research Question 2: Which factors can account for the variation in the service delivery modes that the reform resulted in, and, more specifically, for the presence or absence of clientelistic capture of the reformed service management?

In seeking answers to these questions, the article firstly gives a brief overview of ideas, results and drivers behind public service reforms and then offers the model of social service reform in clientelistic policy-making context. To validate and modify the explanation proposed by the model, the article focuses on six social services in its main section as it presents the findings of a comparative case study analyzing the results and conditions of the social service reform in Croatia. The last two sections discuss the implications of findings and provide readers with some concluding thoughts.

Public service reforms: influential factors and ideal-type results

Public service reforms originated in the 1980s, as a reaction to the diagnoses of governments lacking flexibility in tackling the growing complexity of social problems in modern societies. New Public Management (NPM) placed focus on performance and competition by importing managerial techniques into public bureaucracy, while steering the provision of a large portion of services toward private, non-governmental actors and quasi-autonomous public agencies (Hood, 1991; Lane, 2000). New Public Governance (NPG), a younger
reform strategy, emerged in 1990s and proposed a path toward improved effectiveness and democratic quality of public policies by stressing the participation of citizens and communities in the design and delivery of public services (Osborne, 2010; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). Nevertheless, as governments often demonstrated reluctance to release control over policies, in some cases, public sector reform implied the strategy of modernizing the state and re-affirming its leading role in facing collective problems. Recently labeled as the Neo-Weberian State (NWS), this reform path offers solutions to citizen's needs by occasionally relying on market-based tools, but its core focus in on enhanced quality and efficiency of services provided by the state (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011).

These three strategies did inspire announcements of reforms in many countries, but their materialization into the reality of public polices and the administrative apparatus was shaped by numerous sources of pressures for or against change. A systematic overview of these forces was provided by Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011), who offered a conceptualization of the reform process in which both political and administrative leaders hold a central role, but their decision-making about the initiation and execution of management change is influenced by three large groups of factors. The first group of factors involves diverse socioeconomic forces such as the economic crisis or the aging populations, which over the past decades induced many governments to seek reform strategies so as enable them to ease the strains on the state apparatus. The scope, actual content and the fate of these strategies, nevertheless, are to a large extent shaped by the interplay between second and third cluster of influential factors: features of political and administrative systems (Christensen & Lægreid, 2012; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011).

In this interplay, the boundaries for feasible management change are set by administrative tradition, personnel regulation, patterns of relationships between politics and administration, state structure and the nature of executive government. It is not unusual that these factors often jointly determine the ability of political and administrative leaders for swift or decisive adoption of reforms. However, when affecting elite decision-making, these more structural or cultural features of the politico-administrative system act in combination with their more dynamic counterparts: the influx of new management ideas, pressure from citizens and party-political ideas (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). For this article, the most noteworthy among them are party-political ideas to a large extend defined by strategic linkages which politicians develop with citizens. By ranging from programmatic to clientelistic modes, with the latter involving the practice of such party patronage in which the party in power uses public appointments or jobs as rewards for loyalty or payments for previous support, these linkages have the potential to either significantly boost or to undermine the process and the effects of policy and management reforms (Cruz & Keefer, 2015; Kopecký et al., 2016).

Despite all sorts of costs they might involve, and despite ‘potentially formidable obstacles to radical or rapid changes, reform processes are launched, and frequently do make an impact’ (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011, p. 43). Those effects of reforms can be traced in a wide range of contemporary public management practices, but are most clearly visible in the implementation of public policies and the delivery of public services, nowadays marked by the existence of multiple managerial arrangements and techniques. In order to demonstrate this, Hill and Hupe (2014) conceptualized ‘enforcement’, ‘performance’ and ‘co-production’ as modes of implementation which might be found to co-exist in many countries and policy areas, and which can be aligned with the aforesaid three reform strategies.
In the enforcement mode which corresponds with the NWS strategy, public sector organizations and their employees still act as key managers and providers of public goods and services. Nevertheless, in the NWS-inspired modernization, traditional reliance of street-level workers on rule-following is to a limited extent complemented by the focus on achievement of results and on meeting citizens’ needs (Hill & Hupe, 2014; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). The NPM strategy, on the other hand, gives to implementation management the performance perspective in which service delivery is organized through competition between private, public or non-profit organizations, and relations with the selected providers are defined though contracts specifying costs and performance targets. Within this setting, the management of street-level work implies the insurance of target compliance and service orientation (Hill & Hupe, 2014; Lane, 2000).

Lastly, the NPG strategy is operationalized through a co-production mode placing focus on collectively defined outcomes whose achievement relies on synergy between different levels of government, as well as between public and civil society actors (Alford, 1998; Hill & Hupe, 2014; Poocharoen & Ting, 2015). Achieving synergy rather than competitiveness among participating actors in this service delivery mode is fostered by the use of trust and shared values as the principal management mechanisms. The same mechanisms are also employed at the street-level in which NPG-inspired management goals are materialized through user empowerment and a holistic approach in addressing their needs (Hill & Hupe, 2014; Osborne, 2010; Howlett, Kekez, & Poocharoen, 2017). The latter implies that citizens are enabled to provide inputs for decisions made by employees of organizations mandated with service delivery and that they are actively contributing to the production of services they personally receive (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2016; Brandsen & Pestoff, 2006; Voorberg, Bekkers, & Tummers, 2015).

The characterization of implementation modes offered by Hill and Hupe (2014) provides a basis for theory-driven and yet contextualized understanding of those reform effects in which implementation management is conceived as the dependent variable in the public management reform process. In this respect, this article treats the described three modes of service delivery as the ideal-type forms of results of management reform. In the empirical part of the paper, they are used as a heuristic device and thus form a grid with the purpose to detect and characterize a variation of outcomes in the reform of social service delivery in Croatia. In order to account for that variation, this article uses Pollitt and Bouckaert’s (2011) conceptualization of public management reform and in what follows offers the causal model hypothesizing specific factors enabling or constraining patronage-driven political executives in carrying out their version of the reform.

**The model of social service reform in a clientelistic context**

The model of service management reform in a clientelistic policy-making context (see Figure 1) adopts the actor-centered institutional approach which seeks to explain governing choices and outcomes by focusing on policy-making institutions, but treats the effects of institutional conditions as contingent upon actors and their interaction, as well as upon socioeconomic structures and policy legacies (Scharpf, 2000). In line with that, the elements subsumed under Pollitt and Bouckaert’s (2011) group of socioeconomic factors and the influx of new management ideas promoted by various international actors are considered as relevant forces at work in initiating the change, but not as influential factors in selecting the direction of the actual transformation of service management.
Features of the political and administrative system are, on the other hand, treated as factors that generated variation in service delivery modes that the reform resulted in. Nonetheless, among all of these factors, the model pinpoints the key features of the national politico-administrative regime from the relevant institutional and dynamic features of the specific policy setting in which services were delivered prior to the reform and in which management reform actually took place. While the former are treated as scope conditions, the latter ones are considered accountable for the variation in the reform outcomes.

In this model, state-domination by a single party whose wide territorial organization needed to be maintained through patronage is conceived as the condition not merely
discouraging political leaders from investments in systematic management change, but also incentivizing them to engage in clientelistic capture of the reform process. The legacy of civil sector politicization, the persistence of administrative ‘double talk’ and the long-term rule of one party are also considered as conditions that have, along with the centralized state structure, provided the political executive with considerable latitude for the adoption, dismissal or misuse of particular reform paths. It is further assumed that the given latitude was enhanced by the decentralized job placement system which, as previous research showed, restrained the capacity of the national legal framework to prevent the integration of patronage practices into services undergoing management change (Meyer-Sahling & Mikkelsen, 2016). Nevertheless, while allowing the plurality of institutionally permissible recruitment options, the same system created the space for variation in the reform results across different institutional settings for service provision.

As the body of civil sector politicization studies shows, civil service systems in which recruitment function is performed by ministries or sub-national bodies provide politicians with more opportunities for the employment of partisans than the systems in which centralized personnel organizations are in charge of hiring public servants (Meyer-Sahling, 2006; Peters, 2010). Nonetheless, the degree of political discretion provided by the national civil service framework in a particular sector or in an institution can be reduced by rules institutionalizing operative conduct and providing incentives for participating actors. Moreover, incentives and disincentives provided by rules can be complemented by professional norms and standards of behavior shared within public institutions, and the recruitment function may even be delegated to professional bodies and independent civil service commissions (Kopecký et al., 2016; Meyer-Sahling, 2006; Peters, 2010).

When this line of argumentation is used to address the reform of social services provision in Croatia, the corresponding expectation is that the ability of political parties to impose discretion over the reform process and its results can be limited in services whose provision was institutionalized by formalized procedures and standards prior the reform. In the politico-administrative systems qualified by a frequent usage of ‘double talk’, however, formal rules are not necessarily practiced in ongoing situations and are thus not the most adequate representations of rule-ordered action (Peters, 2010). To account for this challenge, the model draws on the strand of institutional studies which highlight the analytical potential of the concept of rules-in-use. This set of rules, also labeled as the working rules, may or may not be formalized, but is necessarily referred to when actors are asked to explain or justify their own actions (Ostrom, 2007). In line with that, the model identifies working procedures and professional standards as features of the institutional setting for service provision whose presence or absence constrained or enabled political parties in the development of clientelistic practices within the provision of social services and led to diverse reform paths in social services.

Had the provision of social services been institutionalized with dense working procedures and well-established professional standards before the reform, it is argued that executive politicians would have limited ability to decisively run service management reform and would need to invest considerable energy in trying to overtake implementation with the scope of establishing patronage practices. In this way, the existing institutional setting for service provision offers constraints for the political capture, and discourages political actors from rapid or comprehensive service management reform. Accordingly, new management ideas will be embedded into the existing implementation practice incrementally and consistently,
with the resulting service delivery mode representing a modernized version of the mode prevalent prior to the reform.

On the other hand, in services characterized by minimal or non-existent working procedures and professional standards prior to the reform, the implementation setting can be considered as lacking institutional constrains for the politicization of reform process and results. In such cases, it is argued, whether or not and to what extent politicians will be incentivized to misuse reform for patronage purposes can be explained by their re-election calculus. As Schneider and Ingram (1997) claim, an important part of the re-election calculus is the anticipation of the ways in which beneficiaries of a certain policy will respond to its design and delivery, as well the ways in which others will perceive the beneficiaries and their entitlement to benefits or burdens associated with the policy. In clientelistic policies, even though ‘clients’ acting as the recipients of jobs and other selective benefits are likely to endorse the clientelistic exchange, those real clients – the beneficiaries of public services used for patronage purposes – are the ones most likely to object the clientelistic design and delivery of services they are receiving. The success of this objection, if regarded in the light of the re-election calculus, partly depends on the political power of the beneficiaries themself (constructed as votes, money and propensity of the group to mobilize and act), but also on the extent to which others support benefits or costs being directed toward beneficiaries (Schneider & Ingram, 1997).

In other words, in order to reduce attractiveness of patronage strategy for the ruling party, citizens targeted by the policy under reform need be able to politically mobilize or to have strong advocacy groups promoting their well-being and deservingness. The model predicts that while the presence of empowered or represented beneficiaries will discourage political capture of the service reform, the lack of pre-existing working rules will enable comprehensive (re)design of arrangements for the service provision. In a setting with such institutional and dynamic features, political leaders will be incentivized to appeal to service beneficiaries with the offer of a programmatic package based on innovations in social service provision, and the service will have the best chances to result in a novel mode of service delivery that would consistently reflect the reformist ideas.

In services marked by a minimal or non-existent institutional framework and politically weak and non-represented beneficiaries, the transformation of service management may be used to enhance political control over implementation. Free from limitations of institutional rules and pressures of a politically potent target group, the political executive will have no constrains or disincentives to swiftly and decisively lead the reform while pursuing rent-seeking interests of a ruling party. The model predicts the reform to be led primarily by political leaders and include the comprehensive transformation of service management in which reformist ideas will be introduced selectively in order to enable political interference in service provision. Moreover, the argument being proposed in this article is that reformist ideas and techniques can even be modified and merged with patronage practices in such services and reform can therefore result in a novel delivery mode distorted by patronage practices.

**Research design**

In order to describe the kind of service delivery modes produced by the reform of social services in Croatia (Research Question 1) and to validate and modify the proposed explanation.
of factors whose combination accounts for the variation in the delivery modes that the reform resulted in (Research Question 2), this article employs the comparable case strategy. A focused comparison was achieved through the most similar system design based on Mill’s method of difference in outcomes (George & Bennett, 2005). Using this design, the similarity among researched cases was controlled through case selection procedures, while data collection and analysis were focused primarily toward dissimilar factors and toward those which can explain the differences in the social service reform results.

From a whole universe of social services targeting populations included in the domain of the Croatian Ministry of Social Policy and Youth, only those containing the following elements were selected: those with a primary focus on vulnerable social groups, with a national scope, a clear service design, as well as those characterized by a strong presence of reform drivers. The latter implied the presence of demographic and socioeconomic challenges, as well as the inclusion of services in some reform packages introduced during the 2000s and mainly promoting the reform toward devolution, deetatization and deinstitutionalization. Preliminary interviews with social policy actors, analysis of documents and review of existing research reports indicated these six services:

1. Accommodation in homes and foster homes for the older citizens,
2. Home care for the older citizens,
3. Accommodation in homes and foster homes for children without parental care,
4. Supervision of parental care for families at risk,
5. Accommodation in homes and foster homes for persons with disabilities and
6. Personal assistance for persons with disabilities.

In order to enable the development of converging lines of inquiry, semi-structured interviews were combined with analysis of documents related to the implementation of chosen social services. Interviews were conducted in the period between July 2013 and April 2014, on the sample of 70 participants. Interview participants were sampled on the basis of the variations in participants’ positions in the management and provision of selected services, which ranged from political officials and civil servants in the ministry and regional/local government, researchers and consultants, representatives of civil society and international development organizations, to employees and beneficiaries of public, private and non-profit organizations providing the services selected. Documents collected include regulative and strategic acts, guidelines for implementers, tenders and open call documentation, as well as monitoring and evaluation reports related to the provision of selected services.

The analysis of both interview transcripts and documents included the combination of within-case and cross-case analysis for data coding, pattern seeking and claim verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A mixed strategy was employed to answer the Research Question 1, where the within-case analysis provided an in-depth insight into service management a decade after reforms were introduced and the cross-case comparison enabled the clustering of similar management practices into joint modes of service delivery. The coding of data here was guided, though not determined, by Hill and Hupe’s (2014) distinction between ‘enforcement’, ‘performance’ and ‘co-production’ perspectives on managing implementation. Modes of service delivery that were established in the first stage were then, in the search for the answers to Research Question 2, treated as a variation of the dependent variable. The validation of the hypothesized and the search for other factors that could account for the established variation relied on the integration of a case oriented with
Findings

Research Question 1: What kinds of service delivery modes were produced by the reform of social services in Croatia?

Qualitative data analysis revealed how reforms of the six social services researched have triggered the emergence of three rather distinctive modes of service delivery:

1. ‘Enforcement upgraded by performance’ – modernized version of the service delivery mode prevailing before the reform (four cases).
2. ‘Novel and captured co-production’ – novel mode distorted by party patronage (one case).
3. ‘Novel and consistent co-production’ – novel mode consistently reflecting reformist ideas (one case).

Enforcement upgraded by performance

The largest group of cases includes four services: supervision of parental care for families at risk; accommodation in homes or foster families for older citizens; children without parental care; and persons with disabilities. In 2014, a bit more than a decade after social sector reforms were introduced, these services were all provided within the social care system characterized by a detailed regulatory framework. Analysis of this framework and interviews with policy actors engaged in its implementation revealed that in the course of the reform, managerial focus on performance proved to have dominant influence, while traditional input-based control was complemented by reformist output-based management. Nevertheless, governmental monopoly and hierarchal structure of the traditional social care system were not replaced but only upgraded by adding elements of contracting-out type of provision. This reform brought about the inclusion of private and non-profit homes and foster families into networks of service providers, but the dominance of state-founded or state-subsidized institutions remained visible.

The hybrid nature of arrangements for the provision of all four services was in 2014 clearly reflected in the management of the service delivery process in which the Ministry of Social Policy and Youth was combining traditional focus on ensuring the explicit mandates with novel managerial orientation toward the creation of a framework for contracting service provision. In the provision of support to families at risk, explicit and densely codified mandate was given to Centers for Social Work, often simultaneously managing and conducting the supervision of parental care. As regards accommodation services and the matter of deciding on placement of service beneficiaries into homes or foster families, these Ministry’s arm-length bodies were guided by strict stipulations. Strict rules and standard operating procedures were also key management tools in the relation which the Ministry had with providers of accommodation services, but the emerging contractual nature of service provision was loosening up hierarchical links. This process went the furthest with private and
non-profit homes and foster families with whom the government was gradually taking up the role of an inspector, while shifting its focus toward defining performance outputs and ensuring contract compliance.

The dual, even internally conflicted nature of the arrangements for the delivery of all four services clustered in this group was most clearly reflected in the management of interpersonal contacts. While in contact with potential beneficiaries, Social Welfare Centers would still apply strict standards which tested the qualifying conditions for the approval of the right to fully or partially covered accommodation. The contracted provision of accommodation, on the other hand, was marked by a standardized but flexible service. Although still strongly relying on standard operating procedures, social workers in Social Welfare Centers and professionals providing all four services did recognize the emergence of output-based management. When doing so, professionals working in the system were mainly referring to the more and more widespread usage of individual plans for service provision meant to define targets of intervention; they were instructed to do it in consultation with service beneficiaries. However, as assessed by the most interviewed actors, there was still a long way to go toward the internalization of defined targets, or, what is more, of a user-centered approach.

Novel and captured co-production

The case of home care for older persons is an instructive case which reveals how public service reform can be misused as a cover for the distortion of service provision by patronage practices. The home care services were developed in the course of reforms to the Ministry for Family, Veterans and Intergenerational Solidarity (MFV AIS) that existed from 2003 to 2011, in the course of two subsequent terms of the HDZ-ruled government. Often referred to by interviewed actors as ‘the HDZ’s Ministry of Pilot Programs’, the MFV AIS established a new home care services program in 2004 as a parallel to the home care services that had already existed within the state social care system, but were criticized for the rigidity and a small number of users. After the change of government and the abolishment of MFV AIS in 2011, the ‘new’ home care was placed under the umbrella of the Ministry of Social Policy and Youth, but the integration with the ‘old’ home care and restructuring of arrangements for service provision were postponed until late 2014. In the meantime, as analyses of documents and interviews with actors indicated, the service kept its structure and content in the same form as developed by the MFV AIS.

The declared objectives for the introduction of the new arrangement for home care provision were to mobilize community stakeholders toward a joint care for the elderly, and foster a wider inclusion of elderly citizens, their empowerment and enhanced involvement in service delivery. To attain this, the government decided to rely on soft management tools and to promote the inclusion of a wide spectrum of actors in the implementation process. Both novelties in the provision of home care were introduced by means of co-management and co-production, with the MFV AIS signing a contract on co-funding with the units of regional/local self-administration which were then in charge for creation and maintenance of local home care networks.

While fostering local actors to engage in the collaborative organization of service provision, national and local office holders acted as mobilizers of unutilized community resources. The analysis of collected data revealed that this role, however, was merged with the role of a clientelistic capo in practice. On the national level, clientelistic capture was most evident
through biased funding decisions in which the Minister of FVAIS was applying political discretion in the over-award of contracts to mayors recognized as local party activists. On the local level, as administrative leaders responsible for the service management were stipulated to rely solely on soft steering tools, and as officials in the social system inspectorate had no oversight power over the service delivery, the actual service management was dependent on the leadership style of local political executives. Consequently, in communities in which local politicians were inclined to engage in rent-seeking or party patronage, decisions on recruitment of home care staff were made not only based on a candidate’s competences, but also in accordance with her/his party affiliation.

The integration of a clientelistic strategy into the selection of actors that would participate in the elderly care network had rather ambivalent effects on the users of the home care service. On the one hand, to capture a wider population in targeted communities, the inclusion of beneficiaries in service provision was flexibly framed and guided by general indicators such as age, the existence of a family support network or of health conditions. Situation-bound application of these criteria was left to the discretion of home care teams that were even encouraged to reach the citizens that needed the service but lacked information about it. After joining the program, citizens were invited not only to use the service, but also to guide their caregivers in the definition of intensity, regularity and elements of the care they would be receiving. In that way, elderly citizens that were lucky enough to live in the communities encompassed by the program were offered a chance to co-create the service and adjust it to their own needs.

On the other hand, the politicized nature of the overall implementation management affected the position of beneficiaries to whom, as indicated by participants of the interviews conducted, local politicians often presented home care services as direct material incentives for electoral behavior:

Politicians were often using home care in pre-election campaigning, they were presenting it as their achievement with the sub-message: if you choose me, you will have this service, if you don’t choose me, the program will probably be abolished. (Interview 73, senior civil servants in regional and local government)

This tendency to reinforce user dependence instead of empowerment was especially present in localities characterized by patronage practices. In that way, instead of in the empowerment of communities and users, the reform path toward soft steering and collaborative implementation for Croatian elderly care resulted in the empowerment of political parties for clientelistic capture of service provision.

**Novel and consistent co-production**

The case of personal assistant for persons with disabilities is the case of a service which emerged during the reform as a new initiative directed toward the co-production of public services. As well as the home care for older citizens, the service was created as a special pilot project of the MFVAIS and gradually grew into a nationwide program. It was introduced by means of the *National Strategy for Creating Equal Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities* which embraced collaborative arrangements with persons with disabilities (PWD) and their associations, while prioritizing services that fostered their independence, effective participation and inclusion in the society. The framework for this was provided by the grant scheme through which associations of persons with disabilities were invited to propose programs envisioning independence and social inclusion of PWDs. In 2011, after the MFVAIS was
abolished, this grant scheme became an integral part of collaborative programs coordinated by the Ministry of Social Policy and Youth.

When designing this grant scheme, political leaders followed the spirit of the National Strategy and acted primarily as facilitators and evokers of joint responsibility. Civil servants who took over the task of nurturing implementation partnerships fulfilled this task by giving grant recipients substantial discretion in managing service provision. In order to foster establishment of shared values, public managers even abandoned strict regulatory practices and produced voluntary quality standards that, among others aspects, emphasized the accessibility and appropriateness of service, cooperation and networking of providers, and stressed the importance of enhancing user engagement in service provision.

The focus on user engagement marked the management of interpersonal contacts which was done by local associations whose members were also beneficiaries of the service. An important aspect of service provision was the combination of professionalism and user empowerment. On the one side personal assistants acting as service providers had defined a monthly sum of working hours and activities that could be provided as parts of a service. On the other side, the way the service was provided was determined primarily in partnerships with beneficiaries. According to an Ethics Code designed especially for this service, the beneficiary of personal assistance was autonomously deciding on the content of the service while respecting the integrity and rights of his/her assistant. In that way users became real experiential experts, and the service developed into an exemplary case of co-management and co-production in Croatia.

Research Question 2: Which factors can account for the variation in the service delivery modes that the reform resulted in?

To answer Research Question 2 and to buttress inferences made by the model of service management reform in a clientelistic context, as presented in Table 1, the findings on three distinctive modes of service delivery were treated as reform results and integrated into cross-case analysis of the effects of factors hypothesized as accountable for variation in the results of the social service reform.

Among all six services, the one with the least institutionalized pre-existing implementation setting was the provision of personal assistance for persons with disabilities. This service emerged during the reform with no regulatory or professional foundations of any kind. In the beginning of 2000s, when reforms were launched, quite the opposite situation was the case in the three accommodation services that were deeply embedded in the traditional social care system and mainly provided by the state institutions. In the overall organization of service provision, the Social Welfare Centers acted as the State’s focal points, applying strict rules when deciding on the eligibility of actors that could act as care providers and beneficiaries of state-funded accommodation services. The actual provision of services in such a system was, as pointed out by many interviewed actors, marked by a combination of formalism and the domination of experts, features inherited from the socialist era welfare policy.

The positions in-between these two extremes were taken by the supervision of parental care and home care for older persons, the two services introduced in the social care system during the 1970s as a means of preventing the institutionalization of vulnerable children and older citizens. The coordination of both services was handed to Centers for
| Cases                                      | Institutionalization of social services provision prior to the reform (X1) | The power and representation of the population that is the target group of a policy (X2) | Reform effects on the implementation management (Y) |
|-------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
|                                           | Formal rules and regulations | Working rules and standard procedures | Professional codes or bodies. | The presence of an active individual or groups of users in service design or delivery | The involvement of domestic or international organizations that promote the interests of service beneficiaries | Modes of service delivery |
| Accommodation for the older persons       | Dense web of rules-in-form | Rules-in-form referred to by actors | Present | Minimal | Minimal | Performance upgraded on the enforcement |
| Accommodation for children without parental care | Dense web of rules-in-form | Rules-in-form referred to by actors | Present | Moderate | Significant (UNICEF especially) | Performance upgraded on the enforcement |
| Accommodation for persons with disabilities | Dense web of rules-in-form | Rules-in-form referred to by actors | Present | Significant | Significant (UNDP especially) | Performance upgraded on the enforcement |
| Supervision of parental care for families at risk | Moderate web of rules-in-form | Rules-in-form referred to by actors | Present | Moderate | Significant (UNICEF especially) | Performance upgraded on the enforcement |
| Home care for the older persons           | Scant rules-in form | Rules-in-form not referred to by actors | Absent | Minimal | Minimal | Novel and captured co-production |
| Personal assistance for persons with disabilities | Minimal rules-in-form | No rules-in-use | Absent | Significant | Significant (UNDP especially) | Novel and consistent co-production |
Social Welfare whose professionals were even envisioned as key service providers in the case of supervision of parental care. After a very slow growth in the first half of 1980s, the development of institutional capacities for the provision of supervision of parental care was supported through education of Social Welfare Center professionals; this actually induced the creation of standards and protocols for the assignment and provision of the service. At the beginning of 2000s, as indicated by the actors interviewed, the service functioned as an integral part of the social care system.

Home care, on the other hand, played a fairly insignificant role in the general system of social care and was qualified with a very low number of users. Despite the fact that the allocation of right to access to service provision was guided by very strict rules, due to its marginal status, at the beginning of 2000s, the organization of home care provision was only vaguely outlined by the general Social Care Act and was not operationalized through any lower level act or standard operating procedure. As the lack of rules-in-form was not compensated by the work of professional or educational organizations, the actual management of care provision and the work of care-givers were minimally institutionalized and it varied from one case to another. This was indicated in following remarks by a main nurse in one welfare home:

The staff that works in homes for the elderly, and in other homes, of course, are professionals whose competences are defined, taught through specific education programs and their work is often licensed and supervised by professional associations such as the Croatian Chamber of Nurses. The profession of care givers in the home care services is still undefined, there is no formal education program in which people can acquire the skills needed, there is no association of care givers. (Interview 51, coordinator of service provision team in home for older persons)

If these findings are merged with the cross-case analysis of data collected on the delivery modes that the reform management resulted in, it becomes visible that limitations to political pressures for control over the service provision were posed in the supportive services for families at risk and long-term accommodation services, all of them characterized by the highly regulated and bureaucratic institutional setting in which these services were delivered in the period preceding the reform. This connection was also indicated by the actors interviewed. Moreover, the actors interviewed indicated that while the strictly codified eligibility of actors that could provide or receive these four services made their provision hardly suitable for exploitation for patronage purposes, the bureaucratic state system for social care that these services were a part of proved to be very resistant to any rapid or overly comprehensive change. This is the reason why, as vividly illustrated in a statement of an actor engaged in the reform, the reform process did not attract much political attention and the main role in the transformation of implementation management was taken by civil servants and experts in social care.

Services within the traditional social care system were never interesting for politicians. It is a massive system, very resistant to significant changes. Even more so, the effects of reforms cannot be quickly visible … due to that, these services were rarely on the radar of political officials in our Ministry … so most of the changes were mainly initiated by us, civil servants, who followed external trends and knew what service provision looks like in reality, knowing what changes were feasible and what were not. (Interview 7, managerial civil servant in Ministry of Social Policy and Youth)

In the choice of the specific reform course, civic servants were guided by general ‘reform packages’ through which international actors such as the World Bank, United Nation
Development Program, UNICEF and the European Union promoted the shift from hierarchical or government-based public services toward performance-based or user-based orientation in the Croatian social policy. Nevertheless, when making operative decisions through which the new management ideas were turned into practice, public servants often acted as representatives of institutional service providers. Due to the bureaucratic character and the prevailing domination of professionals engaged in the service design and delivery, both users and organizations advocating their interests only had limited ability to influence or monitor the reform of service delivery modes.

In other two services, home care and personal assistance, which had a minimal and no pre-existing institutional setting, the strength of institutional and regulatory constrains was diminished by the establishment of a completely new Ministry and the programs in which politicians in government took a very proactive role. Nevertheless, while the national and local political executive acted as a unified action center pursuing the interests of the spoil-seeking party in the development of home care for the elderly, in the design of a personal assistant, decisions made by the political executive were scrutinized by associations representing disabled persons. The ability of the latter actor to mobilize public attention and the support of international organizations, as pointed by an actor engaged in the reform process, placed persons with disabilities in the position of co-creators as co-implementers of the personal assistant service.

The service was the initiative of the Croatian Union of Associations of Persons with Disabilities and other NGOs. The Ministry accepted it but left its implementation out of reach for politicians. They knew that domestic NGOs have the support of UNDP and the EU and were able to place potential implementation problems on both the media and the political agenda … Also, the Ministry executive recognized that personal assistance was a good instrument for social inclusion that started to dominate among the goals of disability policy, so they assessed they gain more by allowing us to do our job with the help of NGOs. (Interview 7, managerial civil servant in Ministry of Social Policy and Youth)

On the other hand, even though elderly citizens may be a potentially powerful target group in general as they make up 18% of all of the population, beneficiaries of long-term care services are perceived as apolitical and often socially constructed as vulnerable members of society. In turn, as was highlighted by the representative of a pensioner’s union, they lack the potential for political mobilization and joint action among themselves.

Sometimes I feel that we are fighting like Don Quixote. Nobody takes us seriously... Older citizens are not a homogeneous group, and never will be. To put it frankly, we are a large group of voters, but we are not using that potential and we are not united in asking for the gratification of own rights and interests. On the contrary, we are the most heterogeneous and the most silent voters in the country … and politicians are using that. The more we are disunited and disorganized, the better it is for them as they do not need to listen to us. (Interview 13, representative of an umbrella organization for pensioners)

Additionally, unlike people with disabilities, the elderly in need of care had not been in the focus of advocacy efforts of national civil society organizations and international organizations over the last decade. Only marginal involvement of external actors was that of the World Bank and the European Union, resulting in incentives for the reform of the overall social care system that the long-term institutional care was a part of.
Back to the model of service management reform: institutions and actors do matter

The presented comparative case study has confirmed the importance of both institutions and actors, and, more specifically, of the pre-existing institutional setting of service provision and the power and representation of service target group. Furthermore, as the cross-case analysis of six analyzed services enabled the formation of three modes of service delivery that the reform resulted in, the model of service reform in clientelistic context could be refined with more specific insight on the reform results. More refined version of the model is presented in Figure 2 and elaborated in text that follows it.

The reform of services whose provision was well-rooted in the traditional system of social care prior the reform, as the cases of supervision of parental care and accommodation for vulnerable social groups showed, did not prove as attractive or prone to clientelistic capture. Among the institutional features of the social care system, limitations to political pressures for control over implementation were posed not only by a dense web of legal acts set in place during socialism, but also by numerous standard operating procedures that materialized...
rules-in-form in a very bureaucratic manner. As the effects of rules were complemented with the effects of norms of professions engaged in the service provision, the political executive was left with a limited number of institutionally available options for the interventions in the hiring of service providers.

In addition, the institutional conditions for the provision of these services also narrowed down the space for the exertion of citizen pressure for management change. This in turn significantly decreased chances for the integration of participatory instruments of the NPG into the service provision. Due to limited interest of political actors and minimized space for the influence of users, changes of service management were led by senior civil servants who demonstrated hesitation to abandon the reliance on central steering and were reluctant to engage in any comprehensive transformation of the arrangements for service provision. When introducing changes, they proved to be keen on management ideas and tools that can be related with either Neo-Weberian State or NPM strategies. Nevertheless, reformist ideas and tools were never fully integrated in the system, but just attached to the existing management activities and techniques. As a result, a decade after the reformist initiatives were launched, performance perspective on the service management functioned mainly as an addition to the previously existent, and still prevailing, enforcement perspective.

In cases that were, on the other hand, characterized by a non-existent or minimal institutional setting, the comparative study confirmed the strength of the empowered or represented beneficiaries. The presence of active individuals or organizations which advocate or represent the interest of the persons with disability service reduced the attractiveness of personal assistance service for the patronage strategy for the ruling party. As the service had no institutional roots that could limit the scope of the reform, elected office holders were incentivized to appeal to service beneficiaries with an offer of a programmatic package based on comprehensive innovations in service provision. Due to substantive engagement of civil society actors in the reform process, the design of the new arrangement for service provision was inspired by collaborative ideas and management instruments behind the NPG strategy. In that way, the introduction of a personal assistance resulted in a novel service delivery mode for the Croatian context, characterized by a co-production perspective on implementation management.

On the other hand, in the case of home care service that was characterized by a minimal institutional framework and a politically weak and non-represented beneficiaries, the comprehensive transformation of the arrangements for the service provision was used to enhance political control over the service provision. Free from limitations of institutional rules or opposition of a politically potent target group or advocacy actors acting to protect user interests, political actors politicized the reform process. By deforming ideas and soft steering tools offered by the NPG strategy, they were able to build clientelistic practices not only into the selection of actors participating the service delivery network, but also in the management of street-level workers. Such politicized application of reformist tools in the reform of emerging home care service resulted in a captured variant of co-production.

Conclusion

The sub-national comparative analysis presented in this article has demonstrated how NPM, Neo-Weberian State and NPG ideas have inspired the reform paths of the delivery of six social services analyzed here in a very diverse manner. Comparative analysis also revealed
how features of institutional setting and the interactions of actors involved in the re-organization of service provision helped explain the fate of reform initiatives, especially with respect to their expected political objectives, including objectives directed toward the establishment of partisan patronage networks. In administrative and policy contexts which are highly politicized, bulwarks against political capture of reform ideas can emerge in the shape of a well-established implementation setting and empowered or represented beneficiaries.

In services that lack such bulwarks, as the home care case showed, softly managed co-production of public services can become adversely affected by the commitment of policy-makers directed toward expanding discretionary powers which they have in the delivery process. At the operational level, this can be observed through the misuse of the trust of key management mechanism and the mismatch between rules-in-use and rules-in-form, where formally adopted fiscal, legal and discursive conditions of street-level work are not enforced in practice. The mismatch can disturb job placement and carrier management systems very severely, so much so that these become distorted by the usage of partisan and ascriptive criteria in recruiting and promoting public servants. In this way, co-production as the service delivery mode might operationalize not only the NPG vision of an inclusive and flexible public sector, but also reveal its weaknesses with respect to accountability and oversight.

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