

## Programme « Society and Future »

### Final report – part « Summary of the research»<sup>1</sup>

RESEARCH CONTRACT: [TA/00/019](#)

ACRONYM OF THE PROJECT: MANDATE

TITLE: THE MANDATE SYSTEM IN FEDERAL GOVERNMENT IN AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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*This summary aims to represent the results of the research on the internet. It will be submitted by the network promotor to the programme administrator for approval and in three languages (Dutch, French and English).*

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<sup>1</sup> See art. 5.5.2 in the base contract.

## Links to the websites where the products of the research team related to the project are mentioned

- KUL: <http://soc.kuleuven.be/io/ned/project/inhoud/hrm21.htm>

- UCL : <http://www.uclouvain.be/372070.html>

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## Executive summary

The aim of the Copernic reform was to transform the Belgian federal administration into a management pioneer (Hondeghe & Depré, 2005). Belgium joined the international trend towards contractualisation with the introduction of a mandate system in 2000. First, this reform altered the labour relationship significantly, as permanent appointments for top civil servants were brought to an end and since then, they are employed on a “contractual” basis – by means of renewable 6 year-mandates<sup>2</sup>. Second, the steering relationship was also contractualised, through the introduction of performance agreements for senior civil servants which are management and operational plans. In these plans, objectives are made explicit, and performance indicators are fixed, in order to determine priorities and to make senior civil servants more accountable for the management of their organisations (Putseys & Hondeghe, 2002).

Furthermore, the reform brought a new structure and a new vocabulary to the federal administration: ministries were transformed into federal public services, and the former secretary generals are now called ‘president of the board of directors’. The reform also sought to improve the relationship and balance between the administration and the ministerial cabinets.

Based on Christopher Hood’s typology of “Public Service Bargains<sup>3</sup>” (PSB), we contend that the Copernic reform aimed to introduce a “managerial public service bargain” in the Belgian federal administration (Hood, 2000; Hood & Lodge, 2006). In such a PSB, senior civil servants’ employment is based on an individual labour contract, instead of a statute, and labour conditions are individually negotiable, as in the private sector. Senior civil servants are managers of their organisation, with a large degree of autonomy, and often directly recruited from the wider public or private sector. They often receive better compensation, in exchange for more responsibility. In case of unsatisfactory results or mistakes, they are held responsible, instead of their minister.

## Research questions and hypotheses

Based on Hood’s typology of Public Service Bargains (PSB), we distinguish three variables to characterise the contractualisation of civil servants: identity or role perception, institutional relations and performance management system (Hood, 1998; 2000). These three variables determine our first research question: *“Does the introduction of a mandate system imply a shift in civil servants’ identity, institutional relations and performance management system?”* (RQ 1).

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<sup>2</sup> There are some exceptions: senior civil servants in the Foreign Affairs department have four year mandates, and the mandate of the president of the Chancellery of the Prime Minister is linked to that of his political master.

<sup>3</sup> A PSB is an implicit or explicit agreement between politicians and civil servants to exchange some ‘x’ for some ‘y’. In the classic PSB, civil servants put their loyalty and competencies at the disposal of politicians, who, in exchange, give up employment flexibility. Civil servants have tenure, on a statutory basis, and receive some responsibility and rewards. In exchange, they do not challenge politicians and their policies (Hood & Lodge, 2006).

Hood clearly indicates that senior civil servants' identities differ between different bargains. Following the introduction of a mandate system, we expect a shift from a more 'traditional' administrative identity<sup>4</sup>, towards a more managerial identity. Furthermore, we expect a shift in the institutional relations between senior civil servants and other actors: from a traditional, hierarchical steering towards a more horizontal steering model. With regard to performance management, we expect a shift from compliance to the rules towards a performance and result based system.

However, changes in public service bargains are heavily constrained by constitutional, social and political factors (de Visscher et al., 2004). In practice, very few countries have adopted a pure managerial public service bargain. The majority of them evolved towards a hybrid public service bargain. This leads us to our second research question: "*Do bargains require that the identity, institutional relations and performance management system all make a shift in the same direction?*" (RQ 2). In other words: is it possible that some variables evolve towards a managerial public service bargain, while others remain within the original public service bargain?

In order to test these hypotheses, empirical research was conducted with the presidents of the board of directors (level N) and the directors-general (level N-1) in the Belgian federal public services. A questionnaire was sent to these senior civil servants in mandate positions, and semi structured interviews were conducted in two phases between Spring 2009 and Spring 2011. A response rate of 72,6% (or 45 senior civil servants) was obtained. This report presents the results of our findings.

## **Empirical observations**

*The independent variable in our research was the contractualisation of senior civil servants in the federal public services*

The Belgian federal government launched the Copernic reform in 2000, and redefined the relationship between ministers and senior civil servants. As mentioned above, permanent tenure was replaced with renewable six year mandates<sup>5</sup>. The appointments to these positions are of a temporary nature. In exchange, the senior civil servants in a mandate position receive more autonomy in managing the organisation he is responsible for. The aim was to introduce a modern management culture into the federal administration.

The steering relationship between the minister and the mandate holder is shaped by means of a management plan, which serves as the basis for the evaluation of the official and for determining the renewal or not of the mandate. A mandate can be ended during or at the end of the mandate term, in the case of insufficient performance.

In counterbalance to the greater accountability of senior civil servants, the reform aimed to adapt the rules and procedures in matters of administrative and budgetary control. The objective here was to move towards an 'ex post' control system, instead of the existing 'ex ante' control system. To date, this particular objective has not been met.

*The dependent variables*

## **Identity**

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<sup>4</sup> The 'traditional' administrative identity implies a politically neutral career civil servant, who works anonymously and is loyal to his minister. The civil servant adopts the prescribed rules and procedures strictly. Any mistakes are covered by the principle of ministerial responsibility.

<sup>5</sup> We refer to the Royal Decree of 29/10/2001, regarding the designation and practice of management functions in the federal public services (B.S. 31/10/2001).

The variable 'identity' consists of three sub variables: personal identity, role identity and social identity. We try to find out to what extent 'different' senior civil servants are in office today, as opposed to before the reform.

### 1. Personal identity

We investigated some demographic characteristics, the educational and professional background, and the personal values of the respondents, in order to determine whether the profile of senior civil servants has changed since the reform.

The proportion of female mandate holders has slightly increased: from 11% in 2004 up to 16% in 2009. The average age of senior civil servants has fallen slightly, but the fall was greatest amongst directors-general, who in 2009 were six years younger compared to 1988 (Hondeghe, 1990). Female directors-general in particular are younger with an average age of 49. There were, however, only six females out of 53 directors-general in office in 2009. In summary, there appear to be some, but no significant changes in both gender and age.

Again, with regard to the educational background, there is no major change. Amongst presidents, degrees in social sciences have caught up with degrees in economics and law. Externally recruited mandate holders and career senior civil servants tend to hold different degrees; the former graduating more often in economics and applied sciences and the latter more in law and social sciences. Some 18% of our respondents were recruited directly from the private sector and so the goal of the Copernic reform to attract mandate holders from the private sector is being met. However, 44% were former members of ministerial cabinets, which is a confirmation of earlier research findings (Pelgrims, 2005).

We can conclude that although some changes in the senior civil servants' profile is evident, no major shifts have occurred. The aim of getting 'different' profiles for the federal administration has largely been achieved by recruiting external candidates for the mandate positions.

### 2. Role identity

The Belgian senior civil servant may take on several different roles: the professional, the manager, the bureaucrat, the leader and the policy advisor. One of the reform's objectives was to have less bureaucrats in leading positions of the administration, and more leaders and managers. We sought to measure these different roles using Likert scales.

#### The professional

Presidents and directors-general respectively scored 8.3 and 6.8 out of 10 (standard deviation being 1.50 and 1.82)<sup>6</sup> on the Likert scale. The presidents perceived themselves more as professionals in public management than the director generals. The difference between the two groups is likely to be explained by a different role perception, with director-generals being more technical experts in their field, and the presidents more as general managers.

#### The leader

Both groups obtained a high score for the leadership role: presidents scored on average 9

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<sup>6</sup> Differences between both groups of this magnitude were only found for this role. In addition, this difference is statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

out of 10 (standard deviation 1.02), and directors-general scored on average 8.1 out of 10 (standard deviation 1.09). Based on the results of the scale analysis, one might conclude that the leader role is the primary role of all senior civil servants in federal government. One must, however, take into account that these scores are the result of senior civil servants' assessment of their own job responsibilities. It is thus possible that their answers are the result of social desirability, or that there is a difference between rhetoric and reality. Within the leadership role, the items concerning motivation of and communication with staff obtained higher scores than the items concerning 'vision', which is also part of the leadership role.

### The manager

We expected a high score for the manager role but the results of the scale analysis do not entirely confirm this. The average score for the presidents is 6.2 out of 10 (standard deviation 1.7). During the interviews, most presidents mentioned their role as manager as their primary role, while the scale analysis allotted the last but one place to the manager role. We found a clear difference between the self-assessment of role and the empirical measurement. The directors-general's average score on this scale was an average of 6.6 out of 10 (standard deviation 1.62). Although this score is not particularly low, the scales for the roles of leader, professional and bureaucrat were higher, and both groups are comparable when looking at the order of importance of these different roles.

We have found a link between the score on the manager role and training in (public) management. This role has also been linked to the opinion on mobility amongst senior civil servants: those who scored higher on the manager role, were more in favour of an increased mobility. We conclude here that modern management principles have gained a foothold at the top of the federal administration.

### The bureaucrat<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to our expectations, the role of the bureaucrat is still very strong. This can be best explained by the principle of 'layering'. This means that the traditional bureaucrat role identity continues to exist, including the corresponding values such as equality, legal security and risk avoidance, but the 'newer' roles – such as leader, professional and manager – seemed to be superimposed or layered on top of this traditional role. The score on the bureaucrat scale was also somewhat higher amongst director-generals at 6.8 out of 10 (standard deviation 1.53), than among presidents at 6.2 out of 10 (standard deviation 2.19). This can possibly be explained because of the importance of technical expertise on the director-general level.

### The policy advisor

Traditionally, senior civil servants in Belgium are not strongly involved in the policy formulation process. The survey results confirm this as senior civil servants do not consider providing policy advice as one of their primary tasks. The presidents had a very low average score at 4 out of 10 (standard deviation 2.29), with one exception. With an average score of 4.7 out of 10 (standard deviation 2.16), the directors-general also achieved a rather low score. The increased standard deviation for this scale indicates larger differences between the respondents, as compared to the roles previously discussed. Analysis on the individual level shows that senior civil servants working in the Chancellery of the Prime Minister or in other services predominantly occupied with policy consider themselves more as a policy

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<sup>7</sup> The 'bureaucrat' has no negative connotation in this report. It is used in the 'Weberian' sense: someone who knows the rules and procedures

advisor than other senior civil servants. This role perception can probably be explained by the position of the policy cell<sup>8</sup> in the policy cycle.

Comparison of the role identities of internally and externally recruited senior civil servants in mandate positions shows that those externally recruited do have a different role identity than career senior civil servants. The role of manager and leader have relatively higher scores amongst the externally recruited officials.

### 3. Social identity

As senior civil servants now are expected to bear more responsibility for the achievement of their organisation's objectives, we would expect them to identify more with their own organisation (meso level), and less with the federal government (macro level). The empirical data tends to support this hypothesis for both groups of senior civil servants. Amongst Dutch-speaking director-generals in particular the identification with their own department or directorate-general was relatively higher than French-speaking directors-general who tended on average to identify more with the macro level. Therefore, our assumption was not entirely confirmed.

Directors-general working with an integrated management plan or with an administrative contract clearly identified themselves less with smaller groups, such as their directorate-general or their work team, compared to directors-general with an individual management plan.

Although a high degree of professionalism was found amongst senior civil servants, they do not tend to identify themselves with each other as a group. This could be partially explained by the lack of opportunities for networking offered in the Belgian system.

Furthermore, it was found that French-speaking senior civil servants place a higher emphasis on working for government, rather than the private sector, in contrast to their Dutch-speaking counterparts. After controlling for other factors, we suggest that this might be explained by a different administrative reference culture. But more research on this subject is needed to obtain definite conclusions.

### 4. Conclusions on the variable 'identity'

We can conclude from our research that a partial shift has occurred in the identity of senior civil servants. However, there is no complete substitution of the traditional identity by the new, more managerial identity.

## **Institutional relations**

Within the variable 'institutional relations', we inquired into the existing relations between senior civil servants and the minister and his personal staff; the horizontal departments<sup>9</sup>; parliament; interest groups. We investigate to what extent a shift towards a more 'horizontal' relationship between senior civil servants and these actors is observable.

### 1. Relations with the minister and his personal staff

The steering relation between the minister and his senior civil servants is now organised on

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<sup>8</sup> The Copernic reform changed the name of the former ministerial cabinet into 'policy cell'.

<sup>9</sup> The 'horizontal' departments are federal public services who provide support to and/or exercise supervision over your department, usually in the following areas: budget, human resources, etc.

the basis of a performance agreement. We expected the traditional hierarchic relationship to shift towards a more 'horizontal' relationship, at least partially, thus increasing the responsibilities of the senior civil servant, and his autonomy in managing his organisation.

The empirical analysis, however, does not confirm this hypothesis entirely. Although a slight increase can be found in the involvement of senior civil servants in the policy cycle, this involvement remains very limited. The perception varies between both language groups: Dutch-speaking senior civil servants feel more involved in the policy cycle than their French-speaking colleagues, who consider this to be more of a ministerial prerogative.

With regard to cooperation and the allocation of tasks, we found that these remain organised in a hierarchical and Weberian way. Senior civil servants consider their relation with the minister and his personal staff as 'good' and 'cooperative', adding that this personal staff operates as some kind of 'gate keeper' for the minister. It was very interesting to see that senior civil servants do not consider the policy cell to be interfering with their job, as opposed to what is generally assumed. Some of the most determining factors in the relationship between ministers, their personal staff and senior civil servants are the personality, vision and style of all parties involved.

We found again only a slow evolution from a hierarchical relationship towards a more horizontal one between senior civil servants, their ministers and their personal staff since the introduction of the mandate system.

## 2. Relations with the horizontal departments

The hypothesis concerning the relations with the horizontal departments is that, as a result of the introduction of a mandate system, there is a shift from a hierarchical relation, functioning by means of an ex ante control system for personnel and budget, towards a more horizontal relation, with an ex post control system and long-range envelopes. For the presidents of the board of directors, the relation with the horizontal departments was studied. At the director-general level the relation with staff services directors was studied.

This hypothesis could not be fully confirmed by our results. Despite a relative increase in the autonomy of senior civil servants in managing their organisation, this autonomy is generally considered to be 'average'<sup>10</sup>, both for personnel and budgetary resources. Increased autonomy seems to be found mainly on the level of the presidents, and less at the director-general level<sup>11</sup>. The research team also found that the autonomy of career civil servants was lower ('limited') than the autonomy of externally recruited senior civil servants (between 'average' and 'large').

There is a general consensus that the current system could/should be improved, and that more autonomy would be welcomed. Despite the promises of the Copernic reform, many ex ante controls are still in place, and little ex post controls have been established. Some difficulties remain in creating internal audit systems, and in the installation of the Fedcom system.

The perception of the horizontal federal public services is rather ambiguous as they are seen as both control bodies and also as supporting bodies. The Budget Office is perceived more as a control body than the federal public service of Personnel and Organisation. In general,

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<sup>10</sup> Senior civil servants were asked to evaluate their autonomy with regard to the horizontal public services for personnel and budget. There were 4 possible answers: large autonomy (value 10), average autonomy (6.6), limited autonomy (3.3) and very little autonomy (0).

<sup>11</sup> Budget: 7.4 out of 10 for the presidents – 4.9 for the directors-general (sd = 3.6). Personnel: 6.3 out of 10 for the presidents – 4 for the directors-general (sd = 2.9).

Dutch-speaking senior civil servants perceive the horizontal departments as less interfering, and they also perceive themselves as having more autonomy than their French-speaking colleagues.

We conclude that the introduction of a mandate system has resulted in presidents having more autonomy in relation to the horizontal departments. As for the directors-general, there is a perception of limited autonomy and more variable relations with the horizontal departments.

### 3. Relations with parliament

We expected to find an evolution from a hierarchic relationship in which parliament exercises control over the administration through ministerial responsibility, towards a more horizontal relationship in which parliament exerts direct control over senior civil servants' performances, by means of the management plans.

However, this hypothesis has not been confirmed by the research results. We have found no evidence of an increased accountability directly to parliament amongst the mandate group of Belgian senior civil servants. The principle of ministerial accountability is still practised. Contacts with parliament remain largely confined to supplying technical information, mostly by lower level civil servants, rather than by senior civil servants themselves.

### 4. Relations with interest groups

We assumed that the introduction of a management plan, designed to make senior civil servants more accountable and transparent about their activities, would lead towards an evolution from a hierarchical relation between both parties to a more horizontal relation. From restricted access for interest groups to senior civil servants, one would evolve towards a more open system with quite frequent contacts between both parties, and greater transparency towards interest groups.

This hypothesis has been confirmed by our empirical analysis. Both presidents of the board of directors and directors-general indicate having more contacts with interest groups than before. They make mention of a positive evolution in this matter throughout the past ten years. This is an interesting finding, since Dierickx & Majersdorf wrote in the early nineties that "senior civil servants were living in an administrative beguinage" (1993). Our results confirm results from an earlier post Copernic research by de Visscher et al. (2004), who found a similar trend, in 2002, towards more frequent contacts and more transparency.

### 5. Conclusions on the variable 'institutional relations'

We conclude that a small shift has occurred towards a more horizontal relation between senior civil servants and other institutional actors. This shift is most noticeable in the relations with interest groups.

## **Performance management**

Following the avalanche of New Public Management reforms passing through Belgium, we want to inquire into the nature of the steering mechanisms for senior civil servants. Our question was: Is there evidence of a shift from compliance to the rules towards steering by results? By studying the four phases of the performance management cycle, we investigate to what extent such a shift has occurred for Belgian senior civil servants.

### 1. Plan



In the planning phase we investigated which actors were involved in the creation of the management plans, whether specific objectives were included along with key performance indicators. In Belgium, the presidents lay down a management and operational plan for their departments, while senior civil servants in hierarchically lower mandate positions attune their management and operational plans to his plan.

The survey results show that, at least for the planning phase, a shift from compliance to the rules towards a steering on results is present. Plans are drawn up and valued as a useful instrument by the majority of the respondents. There also seems to be a greater emphasis on output and outcome indicators, than on input and process indicators. This is one of the indications for the shift, but this finding has to be treated with the necessary precaution.

## 2. Do

The monitoring phase is one in which the implementation of the plans and the goal attainment is continually checked. We inquired into the management instruments, the frequency and nature of reporting, etc.

Although the scores on the scale are quite high, we found quite large differences between and within the departments. These differences can be found in the frequency of reporting, the kind of monitoring, and the actors involved. It is remarkable to see that for almost half of the senior civil servants the only follow-up happens at the official evaluation moments. The use of management instruments is widespread. However, to what extent they are used depends on the initiative of the senior civil servants, the involvement of the president and the entire board of directors plus the minister. Currently the internal control systems and internal audits are not really getting off the ground. There is definitely a shift towards managing and controlling by results, but there are considerable differences between the organisations. Therefore, the changes are not as widespread as in the planning stage of the performance management cycle.

## 3. Evaluation

When studying the evaluation phase, we look into the practice, to what extent it was taken place, and which actors were involved.

Overall, senior civil servants in mandate positions are satisfied with the nature of the evaluation procedure, although there is some concern about the objectivity in the evaluation process. Performance indicators are not always taken into account to the same degree for each mandate holder during the evaluation. At the director-general level where presidents are the first evaluator, the evaluations seem to be more thorough, as compared to the presidents. Also, the practice differs widely between different departments. In general, the involvement of the minister is minimal at director-general level. But at the president level it was found that the goodwill of the responsible minister is very important. Some suggestions for ameliorations were made by the respondents, which are treated at the end of the final report on the Belgian case.

## 4. Action

The consequences of the evaluation are studied in the act phase. If the mandate holder receives a final assessment of 'very good', the mandate is renewed automatically. When he is graded as 'sufficient', the mandate holder has to postulate for his function again, if he wishes to take on a new mandate. In the case of those graded 'insufficient', no new mandate is possible. If the mandate holder comes from a statutory position in the administration, he

can return to his old position; the externally recruited mandate holder leaves the administration. Data gathered in 2009 reveal that 82.5% of mandate holders received a grade of 'very good'. Some observers consider this is an indication that evaluation is not taken very seriously.

There are rewards for good performances, although no bonuses or wage increases are granted. However, a positive evaluation is of importance for further career development, as one is allowed to take on a new mandate function. As such, performance related pay in the narrow sense of the word does not exist, but performances can be rewarded by means of renewal of the mandate or by promotion to a higher mandate. A certain shift towards steering by results is therefore observable, but not on a large scale.

## 5. Conclusions on the variable 'performance management'

We conclude that moves in the direction of steering by results have been made, but traditional steering by compliance to the rules has not disappeared. The average scores of senior civil servants on the scales for planning, monitoring and evaluation are more or less the same, between 7/10 and 9/10. For both levels – presidents of the board of directors and director-generals – we can say that steering by results has been adopted relatively well up to the evaluation phase. At each step in the performance management cycle the standard deviation rose (from 1.52 over 1.96 to 2.20 for the directors-general – from 1.17 over 1.67 to 1.83 for the presidents of the board of directors).

This indicates that the further one proceeds in the performance management cycle, the larger the differences between individuals and organisations become. The strongest evidence of a shift towards steering by results has been found in the planning and monitoring phases, but in the two following phases this was much less the case. One of the explanations for this is the failure to adapt the control systems. Consequently, we can say that for the moment, there has been no complete shift from compliance to the rules towards steering by results.

## Conclusion

With regard to the first research question: *Does the introduction of a mandate system imply a shift in senior civil servants' identity, institutional relations and performance management system?*, we conclude that the Copernic reform has had an impact on the three variables in our PSB model.

Our first hypothesis concerned the variable 'identity': *'By introducing a mandate system, senior civil servants' traditional administrative identity evolved towards a 'managerial' identity'*. This hypothesis has been confirmed, subject to some nuances. Regarding the dimensions of the personal and role identity this hypothesis has been confirmed, especially amongst externally recruited senior civil servants. However, the traditional administrative identity has not been entirely replaced by the new 'managerial' identity. Some aspects of the new identity have been layered on top of the traditional 'bureaucratic' identity. Our hypothesis with regard to social identity was for the greater part confirmed.

Our second hypothesis: *'The mandate system leads to a shift in the institutional relations between senior civil servants and a number of other actors: from a hierarchical relation towards a more horizontal relation'* has barely been confirmed. The relationship with the minister and his personal staff is still largely 'hierarchical', and contacts with parliament have not really changed. Relations with interest groups have changed, with an increase in the frequency of contacts and a heightened transparency, but the change is limited. Finally, the relations with the horizontal departments are evolving, but this is not unidirectional.

The third hypothesis: *'The introduction of a mandate system induced a shift from compliance to the rules towards steering on performances'* has been partially confirmed. Steering by results is more observable at the beginning of the performance management cycle, than it is towards the end, where the quality of the evaluations, and the limited consequences linked to it are to blame. As many mandate holder stated: "We have the carrot, nor the stick".

Our second research question investigated to what extent all variables did or did not evolve in the same direction, this in: towards a managerial public service bargain, or was there in practice a hybrid public service bargain? There has not been a complete shift from a traditional public service bargain towards a managerial public service bargain. Elements from the original public service bargain remain in place, but there has been some 'layering' of the new system on top of the old. The new public service bargain established since the Copernic reform combines characteristics of both the traditional public service bargain and a number of typical aspects of Hood's managerial public service bargain.

In conclusion, not all variables have evolved in the same way. The current public service bargain in the Belgian federal administration can best be defined as a hybrid public service bargain. It is difficult to predict whether the variables discussed above will diverge or converge in the future and it is difficult to predict in what direction the planned reform of the mandate system will change the public service bargain. At this point in time, the federal government administration is in a hybrid phase, in between a traditional 'Weberian' vision and a performance oriented managerial culture.

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