

Command, Control and Co-Creation: Drivers and Barriers Faced by Professionals Co-Creating in the Slovenian Public Sector

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ABSTRACT

The academic contribution to the field is twofold. Firstly, the paper identifies co-creation drivers and barriers from the professionals' point of view – a largely overlooked perspective in the relevant literature. Secondly, by being placed in the Slovenian administrative context, the paper complements and enriches the debate on co-creation shaped predominantly by the experience of Northern and Western Europe.

Purpose: By focusing on the Slovenian public sector, as a traditionally hierarchical administrative context, the paper aims to identify factors that stimulate professionals to implement co-creation in their everyday work, as well as factors that impede their decision and behaviour in this direction.

Design/methodology/approach: The paper relies on two Slovenian case studies capturing the experience of professionals from the Ministry of Public Administration and the Municipality of Ljubljana. The key data-gathering methods were qualitative open-ended interviews with 'lead professionals' (at managerial positions) and focus groups with professionals who have regular contact with service users/external stakeholders and/or experience with co-creation.

Findings: The findings of the paper indicate that professionals implement co-creation even in 'unfavourable' hierarchical and centralised settings. A key driver for them to co-create in such a context is strong political support at the highest level. However, a more profound internalisation of

co-creation depends on the redefinition of their professional identity, as well as on the (personal or collective/organisational) interest in co-creation.

Originality/significance: The paper makes a pioneer step in providing an in-depth look into the drivers and barriers professionals face when implementing co-creation in the Slovenian public sector. As such, it provides valuable input for further comparative analyses of co-creation drivers and barriers faced by professionals across Central and Eastern Europe.

Keywords: barriers, co-creation, drivers, professionals, Slovenia

JEL: H83, L84

1 Introduction

Public sectors across the globe have been facing unprecedented challenges stemming from economic crises, pandemics and climate change. A promising solution to these wicked problems is 'co-creation' – a concept resting on the assumption that their successful solution requires wider collaboration and exchange of resources among all relevant actors, including citizens, companies, NGOs, etc. (Dixon et al., 2021; Torfing, 2019). However, the very adoption of this idea by public organisations does not automatically guarantee success (Magnussen and Rønning, 2021; Engen et al., 2020), as the outcome largely depends on the role played by professionals.

The paper aims to map drivers and barriers professionals face during the implementation of co-creation in the Slovenian public sector. Precisely, the goal is to identify factors that stimulate professionals to implement co-creation in their work, as well as factors that impede their decision and behaviour in this direction. Thus, the paper addresses two key shortcomings in the literature on co-creation: 1) the largely overlooked perspective of professionals, and 2) its contextual bias. The latter implies that the theory and research on co-creation are shaped almost exclusively by the experience of Northern and Western Europe, marginalising other regions as relevant research sites (specifically Central and Eastern Europe, see Jukić et al., 2019, p. 11). Given the importance of the context, this is highly problematic as it widens the discrepancy between theory and practice and thus challenges the relevancy of the theoretical conclusions as to when and why co-creation works. Addressing both these gaps simultaneously, the paper will contribute significantly to the literature on co-creation, in terms of identifying conditions that stimulate professionals to co-create even in 'unfavourable' (e.g. centralised and hierarchical) settings.

Therefore, the paper shifts the research focus to the co-creation experience of the Slovenian public sector and the prism of professionals. Slovenia is an interesting administrative environment due to its resilience and impact of the local context on reform outcomes – *inter alia* evident in the failure to achieve full convergence with the EU benchmarks on administrative reform (Verheijen, 2010, p. 232). Moreover, the Slovenian context has provided space for the

emergence of some authentic collaborative innovations, such as participatory budgeting (Klun and Stare, 2019) and co-creation and co-production initiatives at the national and local levels (Vrbek and Jukić, 2021; Dečman, 2019; Bastin and Weinberg, 2018). The limited research conducted specifically about the co-creation experience of Slovenian public organisations has managed to capture co-creation drivers and barriers related to (un)favourable organisational features (Hržica et al., 2021; Vrbek and Jukić, 2021), thus drawing an image of the Slovenian public sector as a rather centralised structure embodying top-down culture (Regal and Ferlie, 2020). However, the key problem is that we still lack an understanding of the perspective and role of professionals to be able to conclude whether and to what extent this kind of administrative environment enables or impedes them to implement co-creation.

Hence, the following research question is posed:

What are the drivers and barriers that stimulate and impede professionals in the Slovenian public sector to implement co-creation in their work?

To answer the research question, the paper relies on two case studies referring to the experience of professionals within the Slovenian Ministry of Public Administration (MPA) and the Municipality of Ljubljana (MoL). The former case captures the endeavours and activities undertaken in the area of digitalisation, where professionals often (aim to) apply co-creation. The latter case refers to the experience of professionals within the MoL, which sets collaboration with citizens among its key strategic priorities and implements innovative practices featuring aspects of co-creation (e.g. the Service of Citizens' Initiatives, see Vrbek, 2020).

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. In the next chapter, we review the relevant literature to define who professionals are and discuss their role regarding co-creation. The third chapter presents the methodology of the research and the two Slovenian case studies. The fourth and fifth chapters discuss co-creation drivers and barriers faced by professionals from the MPA and MoL, respectively. In the concluding chapter, we provide an answer to the research question and revisit the empirical findings through the prism of their contribution to the theory on co-creation. Eventually, we finish with a discussion of the findings of the two cases with a view to making more general conclusions about the Slovenian context, while pointing out the research limitations and suggesting directions for future research.

2 Professionals and co-creation – a theoretical discussion

Professionals are the ones who actually 'make' policies through their crucial role in implementing public policies (Lipsky, 2010, see also Hill, 2003; Jilke and Tummers, 2018; Zacka, 2017; Hupe et al., 2016). Thus, they emerge as the key 'gatekeeper' when introducing new 'ways of doing things' that could disturb the established equilibriums, roles or power structures. In a time of change, their behaviour can vary on a spectrum from resistance to acceptance (Numerato et al., 2012), depending on the specific situation and their motiva-

tion. Precisely in the context of co-creation, Osborne et al. (2021) note that the result can be sometimes negatively affected by professional power or by manipulation of the very process to suit their ends. This, however, should not be understood as an a priori opposition of professionals to co-creation. Often, professionals are simply expected to co-create although this idea is novel in terms of their professional culture and they lack the support, tools and methods for creating interaction and dialogue with the citizens (Tuurnas, 2015). Thus, they might be willing to co-create, but simply do not have the knowledge or ability to do so.

Moreover, the efforts of professionals to internalise and practice co-creation in their work is expected to vary across different contexts. The impact of different administrative traditions is an important aspect in this regard, which had caught the eye of scholars before – e.g. concerning the implementation of New Public Management (NPM) reforms and Europeanisation (Painter and Peters, 2010). Now, the administrative and/or national context emerges as a prominent factor also in the debate on co-creation (Torfing et al., 2019; Voorberg et al., 2017; Parrado et al., 2013). Namely, Parrado et al. (2013) observe that national contexts are an important aspect that shape the quality and level of collaborative innovations. Moreover, contrary to the general expectations, Voorberg et al. (2017, p. 191) conclude that an authoritarian state tradition does not automatically represent a barrier to co-creation – in some national contexts (e.g. Estonia), it actually enables easier implementation of co-creation initiatives. Hence, Torfing et al. (2019) reject any deterministic correlation between co-creation and specific countries (e.g. the Nordic countries), arguing that such initiatives exist in different national contexts. Unfortunately, the question as to how different administrative/national contexts affect the position and behaviour of professionals is still largely overlooked.

Hence, the goal of this chapter is to present the state-of-the-art of the relevant literature about the role and behaviour of professionals, with a specific focus on co-creation. We will start off with a conceptualization of professionals as daily ‘creators’ of public policies, followed by a discussion of how professionals are portrayed as either ‘stubborn’ or actual change agents in literature. The concluding paragraph delves into what is currently known about drivers and barriers that professionals might face when co-creation. As this debate is largely shaped by the experience of Northern and Western Europe, this chapter is crucial for understanding our empirical findings vis-à-vis (the limits of) the present theoretical knowledge. A clear overview of the theory on professionals and co-creation will prepare the setting for the discussion (in the conclusion) as to whether and to what extent our findings confirm present theoretical assumptions or challenge our understanding of professionals’ behaviour regarding co-creation in different (non-Western) administrative contexts. The latter will not only require additional research and potentially redefinition of the very theoretical basis as to when co-creation works, but will have valuable practical implications – providing basis for the development of practical tools supporting public organisations to successfully implement co-creation in different administrative environments.

2.1 Professionals as day-to-day 'creators' of public policies

Despite the professionals' contribution to solving complex societal problems and implementing public policies (e.g. Zacka, 2017; Hupe and Hill, 2016), their perspective in co-creation research is underrepresented (van de Grift et al., 2020; Steen and Tuurnas, 2018). However, before turning to a more in-depth consideration of (the importance of) the roles that professionals play in making co-creation 'work', we need to define who professionals are and to examine and delimit the term 'professional'.

Harold Wilensky is considered the first to have adopted the 'professional' concept in social science research. Ever since his ground-breaking work *The Professionalization of Everyone?* in which Wilensky identified the key characteristics of professional occupations, his work has inspired a large body of literature on the sociology of professions (e.g. Evetts, 2009; Noordegraaf, 2007; Freidson, 2001). Notwithstanding the popularity of the term, the concept 'professional' is often loosely applied and scholars refer to somewhat different characteristics to describe what 'professionalism' entails. Still, we can identify three main principles that seem dominant in the current day literature on professionalism.

First, professionals have acquired specialised knowledge. Through enduring training, professionals obtained a 'technical base' (Wilensky, 1964), a shared body of knowledge that is sometimes even called 'esoteric' because it is specialised and takes time and effort to acquire (Freidson, 1970). Second, professionals ideally share a 'service ethic'; they know how to act like professionals, according to their professional standards, and they are devoted to the service of the public, beyond material or financial incentives (Evetts, 2009). Codes of ethics for example prescribe appropriate behaviour (Wilensky, 1964). By investing in education, associations and codes of conduct, professionals secure both the 'technical base' of their profession as well as its 'service ethic' (Wilensky, 1964), and high levels of professional autonomy. The third principle is a regulatory one; professionals themselves have control over the content of their occupation. They develop professional standards and associations, determine professional qualifications, set up training and education programmes, and develop codes of conduct. Besides this occupational autonomy, individual professionals have the leeway to apply their body of knowledge and make decisions about individual cases (Freidson, 1994).

These three principles – a technical base, a service ethic and autonomy – together form the 'archetypical' or 'classic' model of professionalism. Despite a wide scholarly agreement on these key assets, they do not provide decisive answers as to which occupations can be considered 'professional' whilst others cannot. As a result, scholars might get bogged down in debates about 'more' or 'less' professional. For instance, medicine and law are often portrayed as 'full' or 'classic' professions, while social workers, police officers and elementary school teachers have been positioned as 'semi-professionals' – because their knowledge base is considered less 'esoteric', or because they exercise less control over the content of their work (Etzioni, 1969). In general,

the more standards are set by occupational fields, the stronger these professionals are considered in terms of their autonomies and power (Noordegraaf and Steijn, 2014).

Occupations that are often considered as semi-professional or 'street-level professionals' (e.g. social workers, police officers, teachers) (Noordegraaf, 2015) have important similarities with what Michael Lipsky called 'street-level bureaucrats'. In his seminal work, Lipsky (2010) argues that street-level bureaucrats actually 'make' policies through their crucial role in implementing public policies (Lipsky, 2010, see also Hill, 2003; Jilke and Tummers, 2018; Zacka, 2017; Hupe et al., 2016). Both 'full' professionals and street-level professionals/bureaucrats have the leeway – Lipsky refers to it as 'discretion' – to make decisions about individual cases that often have an important impact on people's lives. Compared to 'full professions', street-level professions are educated, trained and socialised, but they operate within more strict bureaucratic and organisational frameworks, with procedures and protocols (Noordegraaf, 2015).

Hence, we can identify the professionals in this paper – civil servants working at the municipality and ministerial level – as 'street-level professions'. In the case of civil servants from the ministry, we focus on professionals as 'redesigners' of public services directed at digitalisation and in collaboration with external stakeholders. In the case of civil servants working at the municipality, we focus on professionals as 'daily producers' of public services, that is, people who are in direct contact with citizens and other stakeholders while they make decisions on specific cases. Although in both cases we primarily focus on professionals that collaborate with other stakeholders to (re)design and deliver services within the (legal) frameworks of the ministry and municipality, we also capture the perspective of 'lead professionals' (on a managerial position). Thus, we acknowledge the ongoing scholarly discussions about whether managers can be considered professionals (as they also develop a technical base and set professional standards; see e.g. Adams, 2020; Van Bockel and Noordegraaf, 2006).

2.2 Professionals from 'stubborn' to 'change agent'

To gain an insight into the current knowledge about the drivers and barriers that professionals face when co-creating, we first explore how they view and deal with change directed at co-creation. For this purpose, we refer to literature on New Public Governance (NPG) (Bryson et al., 2014; Osborne, 2010) and to sources analysing the (changing) roles of professionals in earlier reforms, such as NPM. The latter is recognised as relevant since the present behaviour of professionals towards co-creation largely depends on the roles and skills they acquired in the past (McDermott et al., 2015).

Unfortunately, due to limited empirical evidence of how professionals respond to co-creation related change, their role is mostly hypothesised. A dominant storyline of the literature on both 'street-level bureaucracy' and 'sociology of professions' draws the image of professionals as 'stubborn' and resistant to change. Namely, street-level bureaucracy literature focuses on the coping behaviour of professionals (see e.g. Tummers et al., 2015 for an

overview) and identifies three 'families' of such behaviour: moving towards clients, moving away from clients, and moving against clients. These strategies strongly resonate with the behaviour described by Lipsky (2010) – when professionals, to ease their work, either 'cherry pick' simple cases or ration services by saying to service users "today is very busy, please return tomorrow" (due to lack of time and information).

Similarly, the literature on the sociology of professions portrays professionals as resistant to change, particularly when it comes to NPM-like reforms entailing market-based competition and (quantitative) performance measures that have been implemented in many Western European societies (see e.g. Kuhlmann et al., 2009; Thomas and Davies, 2005; Blomgren, 2003). Farrell and Morris (2003, pp. 136-137) refer to a quote by Ackroyd et al. (1989) that is quite illustrative of this period: "To put it crudely, professionals would be the 'losers' and managers 'the winners'" – implying that the key reason for the professionals' resistance to NPM reforms was the perceived threat to their autonomy (Farrell and Morris, 2003; Sehested, 2002).

In contrast to these dominant trends, professionals are also seen as potential change agents (Leicht, et al., 2009). Namely, not only discretion has been used to thwart change, but also to circumvent barriers in order to implement and achieve the agreed policy objectives (Campbell 2012). Hence, since professionals do have discretion and valuable knowledge required for effective interaction with citizens and other stakeholders (Dent et al., 2016), their active engagement can be a success factor for collaborative initiatives. In sum, although professionals have been mostly portrayed as 'stubborn' and resistant to change, they are increasingly seen as important actors whose efforts are an absolute requirement to make new approaches, such as co-creation, work in practice.

2.3 Drivers and barriers professionals face when using co-creation

Unfortunately, the relevant literature does not explicitly tackle the issue of drivers and barriers professionals face when co-creating. This is not surprising, as professionals are often portrayed as actors who are simply expected to embrace reforms (inter alia toward processes of co-creation) and 'just do what it takes'. Hence, most literature focuses on how to engage citizens in co-creation (e.g. Brandsen et al., 2018) and not on what professionals need to do to co-create successfully with citizens and other stakeholders. Despite the prevailing assumption that professionals are key for successful public policy delivery (Jilke and Tummers, 2018; Zacka, 2017; Hupe et al., 2016), the issue as to how professionals actually implement co-creation in their work has been hardly dealt with. This is problematic, as an approach towards more integrated or 'holistic' services is new to professionals; therefore, it is unrealistic to expect that they will 'automatically' take on new roles in the wake of NPG reforms (Tuurnas, 2015).

Put it differently, professionals have always been trained to provide specialised services for which they endured continuous training. Lately, however, professionals have been faced with increasing expectations to become what is known as 'T-shaped professionals' (see e.g. Barile et al., 2012), meaning that on top of their specialised expertise (the vertical axis of the letter T) they also need more general expertise to be able to collaborate with others (the horizontal axis of the letter T). The demand for T-shaped professionalism not only requires more and different knowledge but also implies a shift in professional identity. In traditional models of professionalism, professionals were seen as 'experts' or 'guardians of the law' that use their specialised knowledge to make decisions about complex cases. The horizontal layer of the letter 'T' implies a need for more holistic knowledge, but also a professional identity of a 'collaborative partner' able to connect expertise from different domains and stakeholders (Hendrikx et al., 2020).

Based on the limited research it can be concluded that professionals, in general, seem to proactively support the aims of co-creation efforts – e.g., responsiveness to local needs of service users (van Gestel et al., 2019, Weir et al., 2019; Steen and Tuurnas, 2018; McDermott et al., 2015). An important driver for them to use co-creation is recognition of added value from collaboration with citizens and other stakeholders. At the same time, however, professionals often struggle to fulfil the new roles expected from them, because they feel constrained (van Gestel et al., 2019) or inapt (Tuurnas, 2015) to do so (Aschhoff and Vogel, 2019). Co-creation is simply expected from them, while an explication of what co-creation actually stands for – in terms of a shift in professional identity, new skills and roles that come with it – is lacking. Thus, professionals often lack the support, tools and methods for interacting with other stakeholders (Tuurnas, 2015), which is a key asset of T-shaped professionalism. As professionals are not supported in developing their new role, Moynihan and Thomas (2013, p. 790) argue that most of them continue to identify themselves as 'experts', while co-creation is better served by those who see themselves as ('lead') partners in service development and delivery (see also Steen and Tuurnas, 2018). Consequently, professionals simply keep applying their familiar professional practices and frames since there is little attention for training and professional development directed at new approaches of service delivery, such as co-creation (Noordegraaf et al., 2016; Tuurnas, 2015).

Thus, it can be concluded that professionals are often willing to co-create, but not able to take on a new identity and use co-creation in their daily work. However, we should be cautious in making generalisations as these conclusions rely on empirical evidence gathered in Northern and Western European contexts (see for example the work of Tuurnas (2016) conducted in the Finnish context). Having in mind the importance of the national administrative environment, they will be revisited in the concluding chapter of the paper in light of the conclusions made about the Slovenian context.

3 Methodology

The paper relies on two Slovenian case studies – one at the national and the other at the local level. The first case focuses on the efforts and activities of professionals within the Ministry of Public Administration (MPA), undertaken specifically in the area of digitalisation – e.g. development of e-services, digital co-creation platforms and data management. Although the MPA fits into the general idea of the Slovenian public sector as a hierarchical and centralised structure nurturing a top-down culture, there are organisational units within it that practice different, more innovative approaches that depart from the standard ‘way of doing things’. This is particularly relevant for the area of digitalisation featuring project-based organisation of work and co-creation with external stakeholders aimed at solving complex problems. In 2020 (when the research was conducted), the organisational unit responsible for most tasks related to digitalisation – such as the development of e-services and portals for external users, back-office information systems and data management – was the Information Society and Informatics Directorate. Besides the work of the Directorate, there were other innovative digital platforms established by the MPA and enabling co-creation activities on a regular basis, e.g. the Stop Bureaucracy portal and the E-democracy portal. The former provides a channel for citizens and entrepreneurs who encounter problems during administrative procedures and enables them to work together with the relevant institutions on their solution, while the latter offers a platform for citizens (and anyone interested) to comment and suggest amendments to legislative acts in the procedure for adoption.

The second case study captures the experience of professionals working in the Municipality of Ljubljana (MoL) – an interesting research site due to the existence of innovative collaborative practices with citizens, specifically within the framework of the Service for Citizens’ Initiatives (see Vrbeč and Jukić, 2021). Just like the first case, the MoL resembles a traditional administrative environment marked by hierarchy and a top-down approach. However, a specific feature of this case is that the same Mayor has run the municipality ever since 2006. He has established himself as the key figure influencing the strategic direction of municipal development, inter alia regarding the introduction of a citizen-oriented approach to the work of the municipal administration and institutionalisation of collaboration with external stakeholders (in particular citizens). A key innovative practice established upon his direct initiative (Vrbeč and Jukić, 2021) is the Citizens’ Initiative Service – an interactive online tool that enables direct participation and contribution of citizens to the work of the municipality by pointing out local problems that need to be fixed and/or suggesting ideas for better solution of certain issues under municipal authority. However, to analyse the stance of MoL professionals on co-creation and identify co-creation drivers/barriers, we have taken a more general perspective – beyond specific collaborative projects/practices implemented by the municipality (e.g. the Service). This is expected to give us a more realistic idea about their attitude regarding co-creation, as well as about the level and quality of collaboration during the performance of their regular everyday tasks.

The data for the case studies were gathered in the context of the COGOV project – specifically, as part of Working Package 6, which analysed 14 case studies of professional involvement in co-creation efforts across Europe. The process of data gathering relied on a unified methodology building on two key methods – open-ended interviews with managers or ‘lead professionals’ and focus group interviews with professionals. Both questionnaires (for the interviews and focus groups) captured three main topics: (1) What are the main changes professionals experience in their work? (2) How do they deal with these changes? and (3) How do professionals believe the process of co-creation can be improved? By covering these main themes, the aim was to learn more about new professional roles and identify the drivers and barriers that professionals face when using co-creation in their work. To make sure respondents had the time and felt safe to frame their own answers to our questions, we asked them to first individually note down their answers. After that, we started a group discussion in which professionals shared their views.

All interviews and focus groups sessions were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Next, for each case, an extensive report was written, based on a template provided by the working package lead partner. The template allowed us to relate the findings of our cases to the findings from the literature review, according to the purpose of this paper. Namely, the template directly addresses questions in the interview protocols and spells out themes to be tackled in the case study reports. Hence, the findings of the two cases presented in this paper, are based on the case study reports and full transcripts of two anonymous interviews and two anonymous focus groups conducted in October 2020 (for a detailed insight into the structure of the interviews, focus groups and the report see: Hendrikx et al., 2020, Appendix A and B).

Precisely, for the MPA case, we interviewed an office head within the Information Society and Informatics Directorate and conducted a focus group with seven professionals working on different IT projects. The focus group participants were professionals from the Information Society and Informatics Directorate and other departments directly engaged in digital projects/platforms under the authority of the Ministry (e.g. the Stop Bureaucracy portal). In the MoL case, we interviewed a person at a managerial position within the Municipal Police Department and conducted a focus group with four professionals from different departments – the City Administration Secretariat, the City Inspectorate, the Department of Urban Planning and the Department for Real Estate. The key criterion for the selection of the professionals for the two case studies was contact with service users/external stakeholders as an integral part of their professional tasks and/or regular experience with co-creation.

The analysis of the drivers and barriers faced by professionals in the Slovenian administrative environment presented in the following chapters rely on both the information contained in the case study reports produced in the context of the COGOV project and full interview/focus group transcripts.

4 Co-creation drivers and barriers at the national level – the case of the ministry of public administration

4.1 Drivers of co-creation faced by professionals from the Ministry of Public Administration

The key driver paving the way for co-creation to be accepted as an attractive idea among professionals is the general change of the mainstream discourse embracing collaboration with external stakeholders as a crucial aspect for successful policymaking. Although this shift has happened mainly at the declarative level, it has set an environment where, in contrast to a decade ago, it is no longer appropriate to (publicly) question the need for collaboration and participation of external actors.

Hence, MPA professionals strongly and genuinely believe in collaboration with external stakeholders (citizens or businesses – depending on the type of the service) as the most important phase of service creation/renewal. Precisely this attitude emerges as the key driver that stimulates them to actively create opportunities and engage in co-creation (even in the absence of systemic institutional support). However, in addition to the ‘moral’ aspect of their support to co-creation as the right way to do things, there is also a more ‘pragmatic’ side, as MPA professionals recognise a strong interest in applying co-creation in their work. At the personal level, this is explained as finding an intellectual stimulus and challenge in their work; while at the organisational level, their interest to engage in co-creation derives from their desire to better promote new services among potential users. Interestingly, in the context of the latter, co-creation is referred to as a promotion tool – a free advertisement of new services provided by their organisation.

Moreover, the internalisation of co-creation ideas by MPA professionals has been largely facilitated by the very nature of the work they perform – implying more decentralised and project-based activities that are inherently compatible with collaborative innovations. Thus, collaboration with external stakeholders has been more easily incorporated as an additional aspect of their regular work activities than it would have been if their direct work environment or tasks were more traditionally and hierarchically organised.

Eventually, despite a general lack of regular and systemic institutional support to co-creation, the *Inovativen.si* project – an EU project implemented by the MPA – has been pointed out as a ‘safety net’ offering concrete support to professionals (e.g. consultation, facilitation, etc.) when faced with acute challenges related to collaborative innovations. In addition to *Inovativen.si*, acknowledgement has been made of the work of the Administrative Academy as a body providing training to public servants, inter alia on the topic of collaboration.

Table 1: Co-creation drivers recognised by MPA professionals

Co-creation drivers for MPA professionals
Change of the general discourse and recognition of collaboration with external stakeholders as a crucial aspect for successful policymaking
Strong and genuine belief in co-creation as the right approach to work
A professional interest in applying co-creation
Nature of the work performed by professionals – featuring decentralised and project-based activities
Direct institutional support to co-creation initiatives
Training opportunities

Source: own

4.2 Barriers to co-creation faced by professionals from the Ministry of Public Administration

The last decade has been marked by political instability and frequent changes in government. In the period between 2012 and 2020, five governments changed (the incumbent one being the fifth) and only one managed to stay in power for the full term (from 2014 to 2018). This has had a very negative and disruptive effect on professionals, as each new political leadership often undermines the work done in the previous term – by aborting already implemented projects and setting new goals. Moreover, political changes not only affect the highest managerial levels but also the lower levels within the public sector hierarchy. These changes profoundly affect digitalisation as a strategic priority, which apart from declarative support has not received the attention it deserves. As a key argument in this regard, professionals point out that Slovenia does not have a digitalisation strategy – the one adopted in 2016 covered the period until 2020 (Digitalna Slovenija, 2016). Such a negligent attitude by the highest political levels is interpreted by professionals as being left on their own in pursuing the digitalisation agenda.

These developments (at both the political and strategic levels) are identified as the key barriers for professionals to co-create. Namely, the fear among the political leaders of being quickly removed from office makes them press on professionals to deliver fast solutions – often at the detriment of co-creation. Moreover, political changes and the lack of strategy imply that professionals need to constantly adapt and establish relations with the new leadership, instead of focusing on their professional tasks (including co-creation). Precisely the limbo of priorities and strategic direction makes them confused as to where to invest their efforts and knowledge. The underlying problem is that regardless of which political option comes to power, there is a general lack of knowledge and support to co-creation across ideological lines.

In addition to the political and strategic barriers, professionals note three organisational barriers to co-creation. The first one refers to the unfortunate 2018 integration of two substantially different directorates into the Information Society and Informatics Directorate, which diverted the focus from the development of new digital solutions to operational support. However, the mistake was soon recognised and eliminated by the (re)establishment of the Information Technology Directorate and Information Society Directorate (see GOV.SI, 2021).

The second organisational barrier stems from the lack of co-operation among ministries, as well as the lack of awareness of the importance of co-creation within other ministries. Although MPA professionals are only responsible for the digitalisation of public services owned by other ministries, in practice they often find themselves in a position to develop and co-create these services as a whole – i.e. by identifying needs on the ground, contacting service users, pushing for legislative changes, drawing process models for service provision, etc. The higher demand for more digital services resulting from the Covid-19 crisis only intensified this problem and added additional workload on MPA professionals. As a solution to this unsustainable situation, they see ministries as service owners taking the lion's share of service development, including co-creation with different stakeholders and MPA professionals as internal 'relevant' stakeholders. Unfortunately, due to the indifference and ignorance of their colleagues from other ministries, this scenario seems impossible.

The third organisational barrier relates to the rigid rules defining the work of professionals. Namely, due to the lack of domestic interest and support, co-creation initiatives are usually financed by EU projects. This implies clear (if not rigid) deadlines for implementation, which collides with the very idea of co-creation as an unpredictable process that cannot be confined in tight timeframes. Moreover, co-creation often requires work beyond the traditional workday – e.g. during weekends, afternoons and evenings yet the rules applying in the public sector are not flexible enough to recognise and value such activities. The rigid system of salary and incentives also emerges as a barrier to attracting experienced professionals from the private sector. Regardless of their accomplishments and years of service in the private sector, they would – in case of a transfer – need to start from scratch.

The last group of barriers identified by professionals affects their relationship with external stakeholders. The issue identified as the most problematic in such regard is the lack of structured guidance and support during co-creation, in particular in the phases of identification and inclusion of external stakeholders. There are no developed strategies for mobilisation of external stakeholders, nor are specific techniques used, such as stakeholder analysis. Moreover, professionals lack facilitation skills deemed important for the conduct of the very act of co-creation. Despite this awareness of their weaknesses, they are not provided with systematic and regular training. Therefore they often improvise or act in an ad-hoc manner – to the best of their ability and creativity.

Eventually, an external barrier over which professionals do not have much power is the interest and capacity of external stakeholders to contribute to the process of co-creation. In this context, as a specific feature of Slovenia, professionals point out the strong ideological cleavage between 'right' and 'left' among common people, which could represent an irreconcilable barrier to constructive co-creation among citizens belonging to different ideological 'poles'.

Table 2: Co-creation barriers recognised by MPA professionals

Co-creation barriers for MPA professionals
Political instability
Absence of digitalisation strategy
Pressure on professionals to deliver fast solutions
Lack of cooperation among ministries
Lack of knowledge and indifference about co-creation among professionals from other ministries
Rigid rules defining the work of professionals
Lack of institutional support to co-creation
Lack of skills relevant for co-creation
Capacity and willingness by external stakeholders to constructively participate in co-creation
Highly politicised/polarised society along ideological lines

Source: own

5 Co-creation drivers and barriers at the local level – the case of the Ljubljana municipality

5.1 Drivers of co-creation faced by professionals from the Municipality of Ljubljana

As the key driver for the establishment of innovative collaborative practices, MoL professionals unequivocally point out the strong support by the top leadership – foremost, the Mayor as well as the lower levels within the hierarchy (down to the heads of units). Without explicit support and 'green light' by their superiors, professionals would not dare to take an independent initiative, which confirms the perception of the municipality as a rather traditional and hierarchical environment. Interestingly, the top leadership (both political and managerial) has been recognised as the most responsible for fostering a collaborative culture internally, by building trust among employees from

different departments. Thus, overcoming silos is recognised as an additional driver for professionals to collaborate not only internally, but also with external actors.

As a related driver, MoL professionals note a clear legal basis regulating the inclusion of the public in decision-making. Although the existing legislative framework is not recognised as problematic as no specific legal acts prohibit professionals from engaging in co-creation, professionals argue in favour of a more explicit legal basis regulating collaboration with citizens in the context of their tasks. This gives an impression that professionals do not feel confident to go beyond the letter of the law and initiate (new forms of) collaboration independently. Although pointed out as a driver, this reveals a mind-set of legal positivism, which can emerge as a barrier since co-creation requires a softer, unregulated approach prone to experimentation and ‘learning by doing’.

Therefore, it cannot come as a surprise that the Citizens’ Initiative Service is noted as one of the key co-creation drivers providing an official institutional platform for collaboration with citizens. Precisely the institutionalisation of this collaborative practice – in terms of its integration in the structure of the municipality and the regular work tasks – gave professionals a sense of authority and the right/obligation to collaborate with citizens. In addition to the Service, there are also various international projects implemented by the MoL that set collaboration with external stakeholders as a key aspect of implementation (e.g. the European Green Capital). Eventually, as an important co-creation driver for citizens, professionals point out the high public trust their municipality enjoys, which is built by the provision of efficient and high-quality public services.

Table 3: Co-creation drivers recognised by MoL professionals

Co-creation drivers for MoL professionals
Strong support by the top (political) leadership
Explicit legal basis requiring collaboration with external stakeholders
Official institutional platform for collaboration
International projects (e.g. EU funded projects)
High public trust in the municipality

Source: own

5.2 Co-creation barriers faced by professionals from the Municipality of Ljubljana

The main co-creation barrier has not been explicitly defined as such by MoL professionals but has been induced from their answers – namely, the lack of understanding of collaboration, in particular of the concept of co-creation. Collaboration is usually defined very narrowly, in terms of communication and

cooperation among different departments to perform tasks under municipal authority; or inter-institutional cooperation with central level organs, e.g. ministries, the police, etc. Although collaboration with the public is pointed out as an important aspect of the work of professionals, this is often understood as a one-way communication during service delivery – from professionals to service users.

The dominant (traditional) identity of professionals as subjects who derive their authority and leverage exclusively from the existing legal framework emerges as an additional barrier to co-creation. Therefore, even when referring to more substantial types of collaboration with external stakeholders, they stick to existing formats/procedures of participation prescribed by the law or specific practices of collaboration institutionalised by the municipality (i.e. the Service for Citizens' Initiatives). Precisely, their prime professional identity as 'guardians of the law' largely explains their narrow (if not mistaken) understanding of collaboration as a one-way channel for informing citizens about formal procedures and service provision to claim their rights as prescribed by law.

Moreover, the 'identity' aspect can also explain the professionals' lack of trust in the capacity of citizens (e.g. their knowledge or sense of aesthetics) to constructively contribute to the work of the municipality. Namely, there is an evident feeling of superiority among professionals, which in combination with the lack of understanding of the idea of co-creation does not leave much room for accepting citizens as equal partners. An additional barrier here is the problem of competing values and interests between professionals and citizens, where the former are usually (self-)perceived as 'guardians' of the public interest, while the latter are seen as subjects pursuing personal, particularistic interests.

Moreover, professionals mention the lack of mandate and authority for implementing changes. Namely, the adoption of many citizens' initiatives requires cross-sectoral or cross-institutional cooperation, which could challenge co-creation. Hence, even when the municipality is keen on supporting citizen initiatives, it might fail to implement them because of shared authority with other (central level) institutions that do not see an interest or feel the same pressure for a solution as the MoL does.

Professionals argue that the very nature of their tasks rarely leaves room for co-creation with citizens. As particularly unsuitable for co-creation they point out the work of the municipal police as a repressive organ; of departments dealing with the very final phase of service delivery; and of bodies whose actions are strictly regulated (e.g. the municipal inspectorate). Moreover, although professionals recognised the policy areas they cover as (over)regulated, this is not considered necessarily bad. Instead, they warn that a looser regulative framework might stimulate unlawful behaviour, thus additionally confirming their general distrust of citizens.

Eventually, barriers to co-creation also include the lack of interest by citizens to contribute constructively to the work of the municipality, as well as their pressure for fast change. Regarding the former, it is argued that citizens

usually expect to get free services/benefits instead of contributing their resources. Citizens are also criticised for having unrealistic expectations, being impatient and pressing for fast change even when this is not possible (due to political negotiations, adoption and implementation activities). Not only this can cause disappointment among citizens in the short run, but can – in the long run – negatively affect trust in the public organisation and thus undermine one of the key drivers for co-creation for external actors (noted in the previous sub-chapter).

Table 4: Co-creation barriers recognised by MoL professionals

Co-creation barriers for MoL professionals
Lack of understanding of the idea of co-creation
Traditional identity, i.e. role of professionals as ‘guardians of the law’
Sense of superiority over citizens
Shared institutional authority (e.g. with the central level)
Nature of tasks
Lack of interest by citizens to collaborate
Expectations by citizens for fast change

Source: own

6 Conclusion

The analysis of the two case studies paints an image of the Slovenian public sector as a traditional administrative environment – implying a hierarchical and centralised setting that embeds the logic of ‘command and control’. Nevertheless, the very existence of collaborative innovations in the Slovenian context confirms the conclusions of Voorberg et al. (2017) that the ‘traditional’ administrative context does not necessarily hinder the establishment of units – ‘islands’ of experimentation (as in the MPA case). In certain cases (as in the MoL case), such a context can even emerge as a driver for the institutionalisation of collaborative practices with citizens. The latter, however, requires a strong political figure who recognises the importance of co-creation with external actors and capitalises on the traditional top-down environment to implement such practices.

Precisely this aspect – strong political support – is recognised by professionals at both national and local levels of governance as the key driver of being empowered and/or in authority to co-create with external actors. Moreover, the fact that political support was present in one case and not in the other provides an additional perspective on its strength. Namely, in the MoL case, where political support/pressure for collaboration with citizens was present, professionals changed their behaviour in this direction, but only when this was explicitly required from them. This, however, has not equalled genuine

transformation of their state of mind and thus embracement of co-creation as a standard 'way of doing things' during the performance of their (other) professional tasks. The fact that MoL professionals collaborate with citizens predominantly in the context of the Service – as an official framework for collaboration with citizens – or when observing the law indicates that in the case of a political or legal change they will not have problems adapting to the new situation that significantly diverts from the present state of play. In contrast to the MoL case, MPA professionals managed to develop strong awareness about the need for co-creation in the absence of political support and in a rather unfavourable environment due to political instability.

Hence, although political support at the highest level emerges as the most important issue for securing concrete and visible changes on the ground (e.g. institutionalisation of collaborative practices), it is not a sufficient factor for socialisation and actual internalisation of co-creation ideas among professionals. Instead, the drivers for securing more profound changes towards acceptance of co-creation rather include their professional identity and recognition of interest (be it personal or collective/organisational) in collaboration. Regarding these two drivers, we note some differences between the cases, which are relevant in the light of the literature review presented in chapter 2.

Firstly, we do see differences in how professionals identify themselves as 'professionals' and consequently how they employ co-creation in their work. Some professionals (e.g. the MoL case) still rely on the image of professionals as 'experts' and 'guardians of the law' – thereby differentiating themselves from other stakeholders based on their 'technical base' (cf. Wilensky, 1964) and defining co-creation mostly as 'one-sided' communication from 'experts' to service users. Professionals that presume a predominantly one-dimensional role as 'guardians of the law' (in the traditional Weberian sense) rather than 'lead professionals' or 'collaborative partners' (cf. Moynihan and Thomas, 2013) do not have the capacity to practice co-creation. Their 'natural' inclination towards a legal positivist approach does not leave much leeway for experimentation or inclusion of external stakeholders beyond what is stipulated by the law or required by their superiors.

Secondly, we see a difference between the recognition of interest in and 'fitness' for co-creation and the very nature of professionals' work. For instance, MoL professionals who regarded the nature of their work as repressive (e.g. municipal police and inspectorate) and strongly regulated noted less room for the implementation of co-creation in their everyday tasks. In contrast, internalisation of co-creation ideas by the MPA professionals was largely facilitated by the very nature of the work they perform – implying more decentralised and project-based activities that are inherently compatible with collaborative innovations. Thus, co-creation more naturally fits their institutionalised professional values and practices. This corresponds to the findings of van Gestel et al. (2019) who recognise social workers as more apt to internalise NPG initiatives (collaborative practices and client-centeredness) compared to teachers and doctors, precisely because of the good fit between the nature of their work and their professional values.

Although identity change is a complicated and long-term challenge, the experience of MPA professionals indicates that such a change can be stimulated by reflection and recognition of both individual and collective benefits from co-creation. However, even the 'right identity' – implying awareness and desire to co-create – and the initiation of collaborative projects are not sufficient if professionals lack appropriate skills. This requires a strategic orientation by public institutions to secure regular and systematic capacity building, as well as the creation of a more responsive environment that appropriately values the collaborative innovation efforts made by professionals. Similarly, as in other 'Western' administrative contexts, Slovenian professionals are expected to simply embrace co-creation initiatives, whereby the complexity of what this demands from professionals in terms of their professional repertoire is overlooked. However, the fact that they have insufficient training on this matter comes with the risk of further applying their familiar professional practices and frames (Noordegraaf et al., 2016; Tuurnas, 2015) under a new 'label'.

Eventually, the MPA case draws attention to the fact that collaboration with external parties should not overshadow the importance of inter-institutional collaboration, i.e. among the 'relevant' actors of co-creation. Namely, although professionals within the ministry acted as 'frontrunners' who genuinely believe in co-creation, they were faced with insurmountable challenges due to the indifference by other responsible ministries, which confirms the importance of crossing borders both across and within organisations (see also Kuiper and van Gestel, 2021).

This paper represents the initial step for the detection of co-creation drivers and barriers professionals face within the Slovenian administrative context. However, to draw more universal conclusions about their experience we need a larger number of empirical cases at both the local and national levels, referring to various types of public organisations and policy areas. Hopefully, this will be addressed by future research, which should secure additional evidence and thus the basis for strategic action against the impediments professionals face when applying co-creation in different organisational and policy settings. Moreover, this research provides valuable input that can be used in the context of a comparative analysis of co-creation drivers and barriers faced by professionals across Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Such a perspective will contribute significantly to the literature on co-creation for better understanding the impact of administrative traditions – especially when they do not fit the idea(l) of favourable context for co-creation, as painted by the present literature (dominated by the Anglo-Saxon and Nordic administrative experience). Eventually, this can have great practical consequences for CEE public sectors, by providing directions and ideas for larger-scale reforms towards the introduction of co-creation as the standard way of policy-making/service provision.

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