

# EUROPEAN POLICYBRIEF



Coordinating for cohesion in the public sector of the future (COCOPS)

## The impact of public sector reform in Europe on social cohesion

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This policy brief summarises the findings of the COCOPS project as they relate to the impact of public sector reforms on social cohesion, fair treatment, equal access and trust.

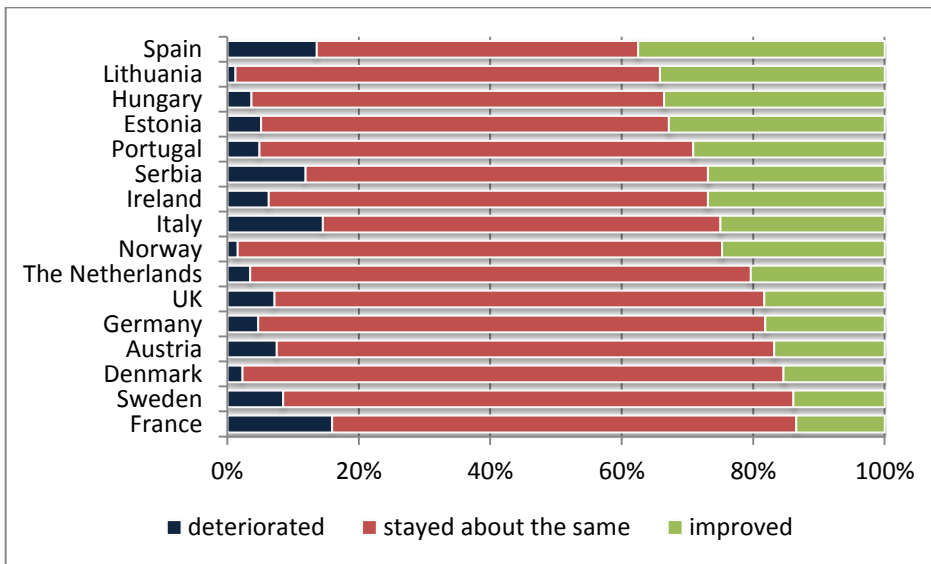
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### ACCESS TO PUBLIC SERVICES AND FAIR TREATMENT

Access to public services and equity in public service delivery has featured prominently in policy debates around social cohesion. As a result of public sector reforms focused on improving efficiency, concerns have emerged that certain social groups being disadvantaged in terms of socio-demographic background or geographical location may experience difficulties in accessing public services. At the same time, technological innovation may have improved overall access to services, but may also have made access harder for disadvantaged groups who often lack the material or social resources to benefit from technological advances.

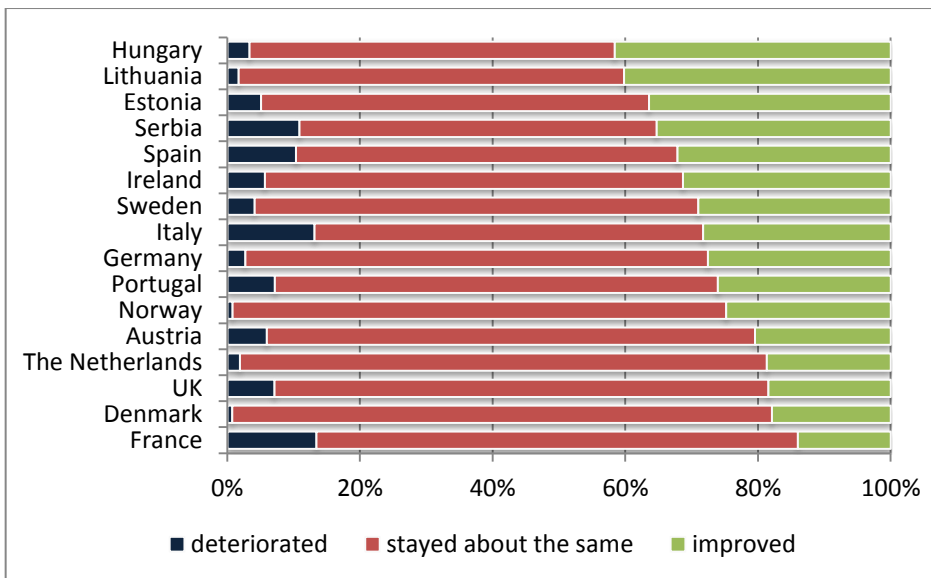
A meta-review of existing evaluations of public sector reforms in European countries conducted as part of the COCOPS project (see also policy brief 1) revealed that most of these studies have focused on issues such as efficiency and output quality. Only about one out of ten reports addressed issues of equal access to public services. Of these, roughly about one out of four signalled an improvement, while slightly more than half found deterioration. COCOPS work package 4 looked at citizen satisfaction with access to general public services. This research suggested that satisfaction with access is quite high (above 80%) for all services, except internet (69%), gas (72%) and railways (73%).

Building on Work Packages 1 and 4, the COCOPS survey of top public sector executives illustrates that only a small group of top public executives in countries such as France, Sweden and Denmark see improvements in equal access as compared to five years ago (figure 1). Executives in Lithuania, Hungary and Estonia are quite positive. In Spain, the number of executives who say access improved is high, but so is the number that says it has deteriorated.



**Figure 1: Perceived changes in equal access to services over last 5 years** (COCOPS Top Executive Survey – recoded from a 1 - deteriorated significantly, to 7 - improved significantly scale)

Fair treatment is another important value in public services with implications for social cohesion. Unlike efficiency assessments, fair treatment captures procedural justice. A very small number of top public executives indicate that fair treatment has deteriorated. The largest improvements are perceived by executives in Hungary, Lithuania, Estonia and Serbia, all CEE countries.



**Figure 2: Perceived changes in fair treatment of citizens over last 5 years**

## EFFECTS OF PUBLIC MANAGEMENT PRACTICES ON EQUITY & RESPONSIVENESS

To build a picture of the impact of public management on social cohesion, the COCOPS project looked at the relationship between new public management (NPM) practices in English local government and citizens' perceptions of service equity and responsiveness. It was found that public-private partnerships were associated with worse equity and responsiveness, whereas an entrepreneurial strategic orientation exhibited a positive association. Performance management was negatively related to equity but positively related to responsiveness, and a customer focus positively related to citizens' perceptions of equity, but unrelated to responsiveness.

Many of the relationships identified in the English local government setting were also observed in research exploring the impact of public management reforms using the COCOPS survey. This work found a positive connection between citizen-orientated reforms and social cohesion, with both a customer focus and transparency within government being associated with higher levels of service access and fair treatment. By contrast, contracting-out and privatisation were strongly associated with worsened service access and fair treatment. For more inward orientated management reforms, bureaucracy reduction and intra-sector collaboration have a positive relationship with both measures of solidarity, but mergers a negative one.

Overall the effects of NPM practices largely point in the same direction for equity and responsiveness. Management reforms that involve the private sector seem likely to result in weakened social cohesion. By contrast, becoming more focused on citizens' needs and informing them about the work of government appears likely to enhance cohesion.

## SOCIAL COHESION AND PUBLIC TRUST

In addition to the contribution that service access, responsiveness and fair treatment in the public sector make to social cohesion, citizen trust too is an important factor. Thus, a final topic addressed in this policy brief is social cohesion and public trust. The COCOPS Top Public Executive Survey finds that public executives do not see improvements in social cohesion broadly defined. In countries such as France, Portugal and Spain, a substantial number see a deterioration. Respondents in the Netherlands, Denmark and Norway are the most positive.

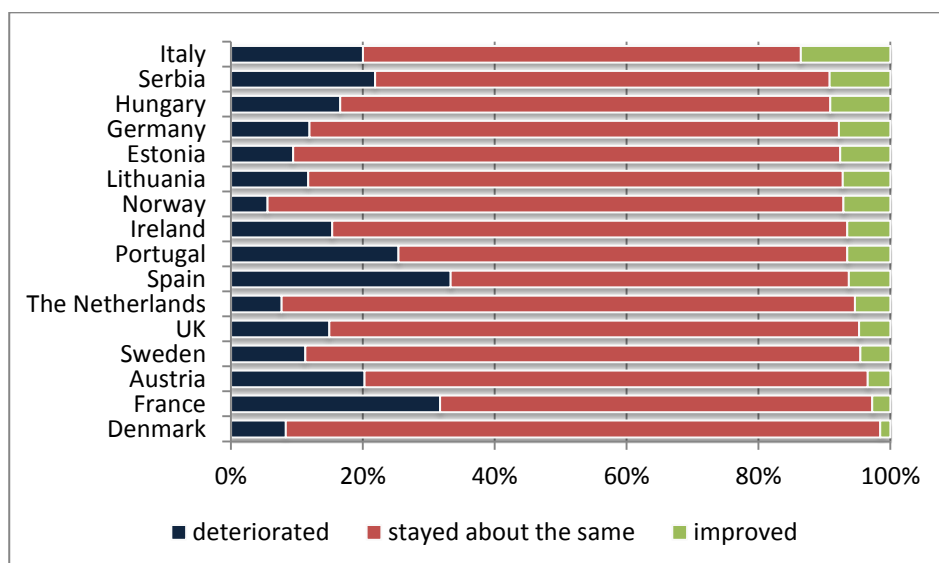


Figure 3. Perceived changes in social cohesion

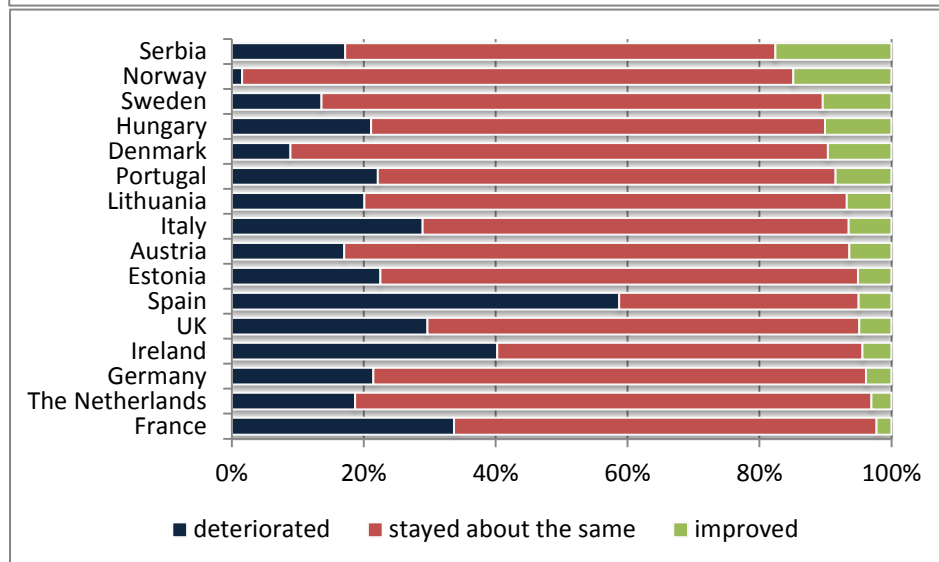


Figure 4. Perceived changes in citizen trust

As for citizen trust in government, a substantial number of executives think it has declined. This is especially the case in Spain, Ireland, France and Italy. In Norway and Denmark, the number of executives who think trust has deteriorated is the lowest, whereas Serbia has the largest number of executives who see improvements. Analysis of the connection between reforms and cohesion and trust using the COCOPS survey, revealed a positive impact on cohesion and trust for transparency, a customer focus and intra-sectoral collaboration, but a negative one for downsizing.

Overall, the lessons from the COCOPS project for policy-makers concerned about cohesion are quite clear – citizen-centred reforms offer the best route to success.

## PROJECT IDENTITY

<b>Project name</b>	Coordinating for cohesion in the public sector of the future (COCOPS)
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<b>Consortium</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Bocconi University, Department of Institutional Analysis and Public Management &amp; Centre for Research on Health and Social Care Management, Milano, Italy</li><li>• Cardiff University, Public Management Research Group, Cardiff Business School, Cardiff, United Kingdom</li><li>• Corvinus University Budapest, Department of Public Policy and Management, Budapest, Hungary</li><li>• Erasmus University Rotterdam, Department of Public Administration, Rotterdam, Netherlands</li><li>• Hertie School of Governance, Berlin, Germany</li><li>• Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Public Governance Institute, Leuven, Belgium</li><li>• Tallinn University of Technology, Ragnar Nurkse School of Innovation and Governance, Tallinn, Estonia</li><li>• University of Bergen, Department of Administration and Organization Theory, Bergen, Norway</li><li>• University of Cantabria, Department of Economics, Cantabria, Spain</li><li>• University of Exeter, Department of Politics, Exeter, United Kingdom</li><li>• University Paris II &amp; Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS), Center for Studies and Research on Administrative and Political Sciences (CERSA), Paris, France</li></ul>
<b>Funding scheme</b>	COCOPS is funded as a Small or Medium-Scale Focused Research Project by the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme under grant agreement No. 266887, Socio-economic Sciences & Humanities
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<b>Budget</b>	EU contribution: € 2,698,927.00
<b>Website</b>	<a href="http://www.cocops.eu">www.cocops.eu</a>
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<b>Further reading</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Andrews, R., Jilke, S. &amp; Van de Walle, S. (2014). Economic strain and social cohesion in Europe: Does institutional trust Matter? Forthcoming in <i>European Journal of Political Research</i></li><li>• Andrews, R. &amp; Van de Walle, S. (2013). 'New Public management and citizens' perceptions of local service efficiency, responsiveness, equity and effectiveness'. <i>Public Management Review</i>, 15(5): 762-783</li><li>• Andrews, R., Downe, J., Guarneros-Meza, V., Jilke, S. &amp; Van de Walle, S. (2013). <i>Public management reforms and emerging trends and effects on social cohesion in Europe</i>. COCOPS Research Report 6.1. Rotterdam: Erasmus University Rotterdam</li></ul>