

Italian Public Administration capacity between decline and attempted reforms

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Next Generation Eu represented a significant window of opportunity for reforming the Italian political economy. The number of available resources and the innovative governance tools in the programme – aimed to link together investments and reforms coherently with European priorities and Country Specific Recommendations – are a unique occasion to change significantly different policy fields.

Many theoretical frameworks – such as worlds of welfare or Varieties of Capitalism – in the analysis of the Italian case stress the poor public sector capacity on several aspects, for example, the poor capacity in providing social services – mainly linked to the social investment turn – instead of relying on cash transfer or tax expenditure, or the insufficient capacity in coordinating economic actors and invest in physical and social infrastructure. This lack of capacity seems acknowledged in the Italian Recovery and Resilience Plan, which stated how "poor administrative capacity in the Italian public sector represented an obstacle for the improvement in providing services and public investment in recent years". The public administration reform is very relevant in the plan, labelled as horizontal, meaning "a structural innovation in the legislation, cross cutting all missions, aimed to improve fairness, efficiency, competitiveness and the general economic climate in the country". The main goal of this intervention is to address the poor administrative capacity of the Italian public sector, considered a result of years of austerity-driven cuts and constraints. For these reasons, framing, contents, and goals seem partially different compared to previous administrative reforms in Italy.

This paper aims to critically analyse the literature on public administrative reforms in Italy, stressing their relationship with the evolution of the Italian political economy. The review traces recent reform waves, from the nineties to current reforms, looking particularly at the role of policy actors, paradigms and epistemic communities involved in their design. Additionally, an important part is dedicated to analysing the growing role of the European Union. Since 2009, when the Lisbon Treaty introduced a supportive European competence in the administrative field, the primary influence in the aftermath of the crisis was made mainly through austerity concerns and cost-constraining measurements. Thereafter, from 2014-2015, a partially new framework emerged from the realm of cohesion policy: the idea that the European Union should support capacity building in the public administration sector. These capacity-oriented

goals are crucial for analysing and better understanding the potential discontinuity in recent reforms related to NGEU in terms of objectives, goals and discourses to justify the policy.

The review is part of a PhD research project that aims to analyse the administrative reforming Italy linked to the PNRR. The project will investigate administrative reforms – especially related to access and public sector training – to understand if these reforms are led by a new, capacity-enhancing paradigm. The project wants also to trace the policy design process in order to understand if and how the European Union led, steered, and influenced the policy process.

The research aims to contribute to the debate on the changing Italian political economy, putting at the centre of the investigation the public administration's capacity to provide public services, manage investments, stakeholders, and policy reforms process.