

## CHANGE MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION UNDER AUSTERITY: THE REFORM EXPERIENCE OF THE GREEK MINISTRY OF DEVELOPMENT

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### Abstract

*This article examines change management strategies within the Greek Ministry of Development during the economic crisis (2010-2018). Amidst severe austerity and external pressure from Economic Adjustment Programs, the Ministry underwent a radical transformation to improve efficiency and attract investment. Utilizing John Kotter's 8-step model and the principles of New Public Management (NPM) as a theoretical framework, the study analyzes key reforms such as the simplification of business licensing and digital transformation. The findings suggest that while the crisis acted as an accelerator for structural and technological changes, the lack of focus on organizational culture and human resource motivation led to "reform fatigue" and resistance. The study concludes that technology-driven reforms proved more resilient than purely administrative ones, highlighting the need for a balanced approach between top-down enforcement and internal cultural adaptation.*

**Keywords:** *public administration; austerity; greek economic crisis; new public management; digital transformation.*

### INTRODUCTION

The global financial crisis of 2008 and the subsequent debt crisis in Greece in 2010 were not merely fiscal challenges; they acted as a violent accelerator for state restructuring. At the center of this process was the Ministry of Development, a pivotal organization that had to transform from a cumbersome bureaucratic mechanism into a flexible entity capable of attracting investment and stimulating entrepreneurship. Change management in this context was not a "best practice" choice but an imperative for survival within the strict limits of the Economic Adjustment Programs (McCarthy & Eastman, 2021).

According to Spanou (2019), the crisis in Greece functioned as an "external shock" that disrupted traditional balances and forced the political system to accept changes that had remained stagnant for decades due to high political costs. Due to its nature, the Ministry of Development was the organization called upon to implement the most radical reforms, such as market liberalization, simplification of licensing, and the complete overhaul of the public procurement system.

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As Lampropoulos (2017) points out, the uniqueness of this period lies in the fact that change management did not stem from an internal organizational will for self-improvement, but from an "imposed adjustment". This element is critical because, in change management literature, the source of the initiative largely determines the degree of acceptance by the workforce. Pollitt & Bouckaert (2017) argue that in public organizations, change imposed by external lenders often hits walls of passive resistance, as public officials feel their professional identity and the institutional autonomy of the state are threatened.

The present study focuses on the theoretical and practical analysis of these change strategies. It will examine how classic models were applied (or failed to be applied) in an environment where resources were limited, salaries were decreasing, and uncertainty was the norm. Furthermore, the transition from the traditional hierarchical management model to the principles of New Public Management will be analyzed, examining whether these changes had depth or remained a superficial "compliance" with Troika requirements. The purpose of this literature review is to highlight the lessons learned from the experience of the Ministry of Development, offering a framework for understanding how public organizations can manage large-scale crises through the reorganization of structures and the change of organizational culture.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK – CHANGE MANAGEMENT MODELS IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR**

Change management in the public sector constitutes one of the most complex and contested fields within management science. While private sector organizations are generally driven by a singular, clear objective -profit maximization- public organizations like the Greek Ministry of Development operate within a "multiple-constituency" environment. In this context, change leaders must balance conflicting goals: political expediency, social welfare pressures, strict legal constraints, and the demands of international lenders.

The complexity is further exacerbated by the inherent rigidity of public bureaucracies. As noted in the literature, public administration is often characterized by "path dependence," meaning that historical decisions and established structures create a powerful inertia that resists new initiatives. In the case of the Ministry of Development during the crisis (2010-2018), the theoretical challenge was not merely operational but existential: transforming a Weberian, rule-bound bureaucracy into a flexible, results-oriented organization under conditions of extreme resource scarcity (Maepa, 2022).

To analyze this transformation, this study utilizes two complementary theoretical lenses: John Kotter's 8-Step Model for the *process* of change, and New Public Management (NPM) for the *content* and ideology of the reforms.

### **John Kotter's 8-Step Model: Application and Deviations**

At the heart of organizational change theory lies Kotter's (1996) model. This framework describes a linear, eight-step process starting from creating a "sense of urgency" and culminating in anchoring the change within the organizational culture. While designed for the corporate world, its application to the Greek Ministry of Development reveals both the necessity of the steps and the structural inability of the Greek state to follow them linearly.

Step 1: Establishing a Sense of Urgency. In typical change scenarios, leadership must manufacture a crisis to wake up a complacent workforce. In the Greek case, the "sense of urgency" did not need to be artificially constructed; the economic collapse, the drying up of liquidity, and the looming risk of sovereign default made the need for change self-evident. However, this urgency was "imposed" rather than "organic," leading to fear rather than motivation.

Step 2: Creating the Guiding Coalition. This step proved to be the Achilles' heel of the reform effort. Pollitt & Bouckaert (2017) argue that creating a cohesive guiding coalition is notoriously difficult in the public sector due to the fragmentation of power. In Greece, extreme political polarization and the frequent reshuffling of cabinet ministers hindered the creation of a stable leadership team. The lack of continuity in management meant that a "guiding coalition" was often disbanded before it could gain traction, causing reforms to "fade" or be reversed as soon as the political supervisor changed. Consequently, the role of the "coalition" was often filled by external bodies (e.g., the Task Force for Greece), which lacked legitimacy in the eyes of the permanent staff.

Step 3 & 4: Developing and Communicating a Vision. Kotter emphasizes the need for a vision that clarifies the direction of change. At the Ministry of Development, the vision was technically clear (e.g., "make Greece business-friendly"), but the communication was problematic. The message was often framed in terms of "fiscal obligation" rather than "organizational improvement." As a result, employees viewed the vision not as an aspirational goal but as a punitive compliance exercise dictated by the Memoranda.

Steps 5, 6 & 7: Empowering Action and Consolidating Gains. To empower employees and remove obstacles (Step 5), the Ministry relied heavily on digital tools (e.g., ESHDIS, GEMI) to bypass human resistance. This led to "short-term wins" (Step 6), such as the reduction of licensing times. However, the consolidation of these gains (Step 7) was often undermined by the lack of incentive systems. Without the ability to reward high performers financially, the momentum for further change relied solely on the patriotism or professional consciousness of a few dedicated officials.

Step 8: Anchoring Change in the Culture. The final and most critical step is anchoring new approaches in the corporate culture. This requires that the new behaviors become "the way we do things around here." The evidence suggests this was only partially achieved. While procedures changed, the underlying culture of risk aversion and formalism remained strong, suggesting that the change remained at the level of "processes" rather than "values."

### **New Public Management (NPM) and the Shift to "Effectiveness"**

While Kotter provides the *roadmap*, the *vehicle* for change in the Ministry of Development was the ideology of New Public Management (NPM). Emerging in the 1980s, NPM challenges the traditional public administration model by arguing that the public sector should adopt private-sector practices.

The central tenet of NPM applied in Greece was the shift in focus from "inputs" (how much money is spent, how many laws are passed) to "outputs" and "outcomes" (measurable results). Nikitas & Vasilopoulou (2022) underline that the financial crisis imposed this transition violently. The lenders demanded measurable indicators (KPIs), such as the number of days

required to register a property or the absorption rate of NSRF funds. This forced the Ministry to move from a culture of "legal correctness" to a culture of "measurable efficiency."

The introduction of NPM caused a severe cultural clash. The Greek public administration is traditionally dominated by a "legalistic" culture, where the primary value is adherence to the letter of the law to avoid liability. NPM, conversely, values managerial discretion and speed. At the Ministry of Development, this clash manifested as "bureaucratic obstructionism". Employees, feeling threatened by the new demands for speed and accountability, utilized the labyrinthine legal framework as a shield. They could delay the implementation of simplified procedures by citing obscure regulations or arguing the need for further legal clarifications (Rachmad, 2022).

Under NPM, performance measurement is key. However, in the absence of a functional evaluation system (which was a highly controversial political issue in Greece), technology served as a proxy for management. Digital platforms introduced a form of "panopticon," where employee actions were recorded and timed. This aspect of NPM was effective in reducing corruption and delays, but it also increased stress and contributed to a sense of alienation among the workforce.

### **The Human Element: Resistance and the Psychological Contract**

Finally, no theoretical framework is complete without addressing the human factor. The resistance observed at the Ministry of Development cannot be dismissed simply as laziness or incompetence. It must be understood through the lens of the "Psychological Contract" -the unwritten set of mutual expectations between employee and employer.

Vakola & Nikolaou (2005) highlight that organizational change is a primary source of stress. In the Greek public sector, the psychological contract traditionally promised job security and a predictable progression in exchange for lower (compared to the private sector) but steady pay. The austerity measures shattered this contract. Employees were asked to work harder, learn new complex digital systems, and take on more responsibility, all while suffering significant pay cuts and facing public vilification.

In this environment, resistance was a rational defense mechanism. Lampropoulos (2017) notes that because the reforms were externally imposed ("conditionalities"), they lacked "ownership". Change management literature suggests that when employees feel they have no voice in the process, they resort to passive resistance. This highlights that successful change management is not just a matter of passing new laws (NPM) or following a checklist (Kotter), but primarily a matter of rebuilding trust and motivation within the human capital.

### **THE ECONOMIC CRISIS AS AN ACCELERATOR AND THE REFORM ENVIRONMENT**

The period 2010-2018 for the Ministry of Development was not just an era of fiscal retrenchment, but a phase of violent transformation of its operational identity. The economic crisis acted as a catalyst that made the Ministry a "testing ground" for the most ambitious New Public Administration reforms in Greece.

### **External Adjustment Pressure and "Memorandum" Management**

According to Spanou (2019), the reform effort at the Ministry of Development differed from previous attempts due to "conditionality". Every organizational change was linked to the disbursement of loan tranches, creating an environment of suffocating pressure. This framework affected Change Management in two ways: on one hand, it provided the necessary "political cover" to break established interests, but on the other hand, the change often lacked "ownership" from the Ministry's staff (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2024).

As Lampropoulos (2017) notes, the presence of the Task Force in Greece within the walls of the Ministry of Development created a unique organizational dynamic. Foreign experts introduced "Business Process Reengineering" methodologies aimed at eliminating redundant stages in licensing and market monitoring. However, the integration of these methods clashed with the existing legal culture of the Ministry, where adherence to form was often considered more important than the substance of the result.

### **Restructuring: Mergers and the Abolition of Silos**

One of the greatest challenges was the organizational consolidation of different sectors (Trade, Industry, Investment, Research, and Technology) under a single strategic scheme. The crisis forced the reduction of General Secretariats and Directorates. Pollitt & Bouckaert (2017) argue that such mergers during periods of austerity aim to create "economies of scale". At the Ministry of Development, this effort was expressed through the 2014 Organic Law, which attempted to reduce the fragmentation of responsibilities. For example, creating a central structure for Public Procurement aimed to stop the practice where each directorate operated as an autonomous "fiefdom". This change caused serious internal conflicts; Vakola & Nikolaou (2005) note that the loss of a "position of responsibility" or the change of job description during mergers is a primary source of stress and resistance, which was strongly observed in the services of the General Secretariat of Commerce.

### **The Role of NSRF as a Tool for Organizational Learning**

An aspect often omitted in the literature, but highlighted by Lampropoulos (2017), is the role of NSRF (ESPA) services within the Ministry. These services operated under different rules than the rest of public administration. The crisis forced the "traditional" Ministry to adopt some of these practices. This process is described in the literature as "organizational learning through diffusion". The need to absorb funds acted as the "carrot," while the threat of fiscal collapse acted as the "stick," forcing the Ministry to develop new capabilities in project management and policy evaluation.

### **The Digital Dimension as a Mechanism for Change**

Finally, digitalization was not treated merely as a technological upgrade, but as a strategic Change Management tool. The establishment of systems like "Diavgeia," ESHDIS, and KIMDIS at the Ministry of Development radically altered the way employees operated. Nikitas & Vasilopoulou (2022) argue that technology in this case functioned as a "disciplinary mechanism". When a process becomes digital, the employee's ability to deviate from the rule or delay unjustifiably is drastically reduced. This "digital transparency" was one of the most

successful aspects of change, as it managed to overcome personal resistance through automated controls. Nevertheless, the lack of digital skills in a large part of the personnel remained an unresolved problem that slowed the full performance of the new systems.

## **LICENSING SIMPLIFICATION AND "FAST TRACK" AS EMPIRICAL APPLICATIONS**

The most emblematic intervention of the Ministry of Development during the crisis was the radical reform of the framework for establishing and operating businesses. This issue is an excellent example of Change Management, as it concerned not only legislative change but the complete redesign of the state-entrepreneur relationship (Aggarwal & Agarwala, 2023).

### **From Bureaucracy to Trust: The Paradigm Shift**

Bureaucracy is a system of organization and administration used mainly by the state and large organizations and is based on clear rules, hierarchy and division of responsibilities (Weber, 2023). Within the framework of bureaucracy, decisions are made according to predetermined procedures and not based on personal relationships or arbitrary judgments, while each employee has a specific role and responsibilities. Its aim is to ensure stability, predictability, equal treatment of citizens and effective control of the operation of an organization through the maintenance of records and documents. Although bureaucracy contributes to organization and transparency, it is often criticized because it can lead to delays, excessive formality and rigidity, making procedures time-consuming and less adaptable to the real needs of society (Besley et al. 2022).

According to Lampropoulos (2017), the old licensing model was based on "ex-ante" approval. The Ministry official functioned as a gatekeeper, exhaustively checking every detail before permitting a unit to operate. The change strategy adopted with Law 4262/2014 and later Law 4442/2016 shifted the burden to "ex-post" compliance. Employees had to accept that their signature was no longer a prerequisite for starting an activity. Spanou (2019) argues that this change met the fiercest resistance, as many officials believed that abolishing preventive controls would lead to environmental and public risk. In reality, this resistance masked the fear of losing power and the need to acquire new skills in the field of inspections.

### **"Fast Track" as a Strategy for Bypassing Obstacles**

Concurrently, the introduction of strategic investments functioned as a "parallel path" within the Ministry. Change management here used the tactic of creating an "island of efficiency". Rather than changing the entire Ministry at once, special structures were created that operated on private-sector criteria to serve large investments. Pollitt & Bouckaert (2017) point out that such structures are common in developing or crisis economies to bypass dysfunctional central administration. However, the long-term impact is controversial, as it often creates a "two-speed" organization where privileged structures absorb the best resources, leaving the rest of the administration to wither.

### **Integration of the "Notify Business" System**

The change was completed with the introduction of the digital notification information system. As Nikitas & Vasilopoulou (2022) state, technology was used as an "enforcement tool". Once the process became digital and automatic, the official could no longer intervene to request additional documentation. This represents the ultimate application of New Public Management (NPM), where rules replace employee discretion, simultaneously reducing opportunities for corruption.

## **HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT, RESISTANCE, AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE**

### **Breach of the Psychological Contract**

Human Resources Management plays a crucial role in the functioning and development of organizations, as it connects the goals of the company with the needs and expectations of employees. Through practices such as personnel selection, training, performance evaluation and communication, HRM directly influences organizational culture, that is, the set of values, rules and behaviors that characterize an organization. When these practices are consistent, fair and transparent, they strengthen employee trust and commitment. On the contrary, when there are inconsistencies or a lack of clarity, resistance often appears, especially in periods of organizational change (Georgescu et al. 2024).

Employee resistance usually manifests itself when they feel that their security, role or identity within the organization is threatened. Organizational culture can either strengthen this resistance or mitigate it: in cultures that promote participation, dialogue and respect, employees are more willing to accept changes. In contrast, in strictly hierarchical or controlling cultures, resistance tends to be more intense.

A central concept in the relationship between HRM, resistance, and culture is the violation of the psychological contract. The psychological contract refers to the informal, unwritten expectations that employees have of the organization, such as fair treatment, opportunities for advancement, and recognition for their efforts. When employees perceive that the organization is not keeping these promises—for example, through sudden changes, broken promises, or unequal treatment—they experience a violation of the psychological contract. This often leads to reduced trust, lower commitment, negative attitudes, and increased resistance.

Vakola & Nikolaou (2005) define the psychological contract as the set of expectations between employee and employer. In the public sector, this contract included low but secure salaries, steady progression, and a low workload. The crisis shattered this framework, with employees working more for significantly less pay. This led to "reform fatigue". Change management often failed to offer incentives; as Lampropoulos (2017) emphasizes, reforms were always presented as "sacrifices" rather than opportunities for professional growth. Consequently, change was experienced as punishment, reinforcing passive-aggressive behavior among middle management.

### **Cultural Conflict: Technocrats vs. Bureaucrats**

An interesting dynamic was the conflict between the "political-technocratic" group (Ministers, Task Force, advisors) and the "administrative" hierarchy. Nikitas & Vasilopoulou (2022) observe that the former pushed for quick results, while the latter insisted on legal protection and maintaining existing hierarchies. To overcome this, the Ministry often used "parallel working groups," bypassing General Directors. While this accelerated work production, it undermined long-term acceptance as permanent staff felt sidelined and thus less committed to supporting the reform once advisors departed.

According to Kotter's (1996) model, success must be "locked in" through recognition and reward. At the Ministry of Development, the absence of a reliable evaluation system during the crisis deprived management of a key tool. Change could not become "permanent" because it was not linked to individual employee development. Reform efforts relied on the dedication of certain officials rather than a structured organizational change mechanism.

### **CRITICAL ASSESSMENT AND FUTURE CHALLENGES**

The trajectory of the Ministry of Development during the crisis years (2010-2018) reveals a complex landscape of "creative destruction." The organization that emerged from this period is undeniably different from the one that entered it: leaner, more digital, and more conscious of its economic footprint. However, a critical assessment suggests that while the *hardware* of the Ministry (structures, laws, IT systems) was upgraded, the *software* (culture, values, motivation) remains largely incompatible with the new operating system. The reform experience offers a cautionary tale about the limits of top-down change management under conditions of extreme austerity.

### **The Trap of "Formal Compliance" and Institutional Mimicry**

A central theme in the evaluation of Greek administrative reforms is the chasm between the formal adoption of a measure and its substantive integration into daily practice. Spanou (2019) characterizes this phenomenon as "instrumental" change. The Ministry, under immense pressure to release loan tranches, often prioritized the *legislative* aspect of reform over the *operational* one.

This led to a phenomenon described in organizational theory as "Institutional Mimicry". The Ministry adopted the external forms of a modern, western public administration -strategic plans, goal-setting documents, and performance indicators- to satisfy the "Troika" of lenders. However, beneath this veneer, the traditional bureaucratic "modus operandi" often persisted. For instance, while laws required "ex-post" audits for businesses, many directorates continued to operate with a "pre-approval" mentality, inventing informal intermediate steps to maintain control. This "compliance culture" meant that change was viewed as a box-ticking exercise to avoid sanctions, rather than a strategic imperative for improvement.

### **The Sustainability of Changes: "Hard" vs. "Soft" Reforms**

The sustainability of the reforms varies significantly depending on their nature. Pollitt & Bouckaert (2017) argue that the longevity of a reform depends on whether it survives the departure of its initiators (e.g., external consultants or specific Ministers).

The Resilience of "Hard" Reforms (Technology): The most sustainable changes at the Ministry of Development proved to be those embedded in technology. Reforms like the "Diavgeia" transparency portal, the General Commercial Registry (GEMI), and the electronic procurement system (ESHDIS) created a "lock-in" effect. Once a process is digitized, it is technically and politically difficult to revert to manual processing. Technology acted as a "ratchet," preventing a slide back to previous practices.

The Fragility of "Soft" Reforms (Culture): In contrast, changes that relied on human behavior and administrative circulars proved fragile. Attempts to change the organizational culture towards a more "managerial" approach often faded once the pressure from the Task Force subsided. Without a deeply rooted belief in the value of the new methods, employees frequently reverted to familiar, risk-averse behaviors when faced with ambiguity.

### **The "Hollowing Out" of the State and Organizational Memory**

A critical, often overlooked side effect of the fiscal consolidation was the loss of institutional capital. Lampropoulos (2017) points out that the violent reorganization, combined with the "3 to 1" (and later "5 to 1") hiring attrition rule, led to a severe "brain drain".

The departure of experienced staff -many of whom opted for early retirement to lock in pension rights before further cuts- resulted in a loss of "organizational memory". The Ministry lost the "keepers of the knowledge" regarding how the market actually works and how past policies had performed.

The Consultant Dependency: To fill this gap, the Ministry increasingly relied on external consultants and the technical assistance of the Task Force. While this provided immediate expertise, it prevented the transfer of knowledge to the permanent staff. As a result, when consultants left, the "know-how" left with them, leaving the permanent administration weaker ("hollowed out") and less confident in its ability to manage complex projects.

### **Future Challenges: Moving from Crisis to Strategy**

As the Ministry of Development moves out of the era of Memoranda, it faces new, distinct challenges. The management of change must shift from "Crisis Management" (survival) to "Strategic Management" (growth).

1. Addressing Reform Fatigue: The staff is exhausted. After a decade of pay cuts, constant restructuring, and public vilification, morale is at a nadir. The primary challenge for future leadership is to re-engage the workforce, moving from a narrative of "sacrifice" to one of "professional pride" and development.

2. Bridging the Digital Skills Gap: While the systems are modern, the workforce's skills are lagging. There is an urgent need for massive reskilling (upskilling) to ensure that all employees, not just a specialized elite, can utilize the new digital tools effectively.

3. From Policing to Facilitating: The final hurdle is the complete cultural shift from the "State as Policeman" to the "State as Partner." Despite the legal changes, the deep-seated suspicion of the private sector remains prevalent in parts of the administration. Overcoming this requires not just new laws, but a sustained investment in changing the values and the "esprit de corps" of the Ministry.

## CONCLUSIONS

The case of the Ministry of Development (2010-2018) constitutes a unique "laboratory" for change management in public administration. The study concludes with three key points:

Crisis as opportunity and constraint: The economic crisis served as the necessary "external reason" to overcome resistance, yet its nature hindered participatory processes, making change authoritarian and top-down.

Superiority of technological reform: The most successful changes were those embedded in information systems, which acted as "rails" forcing the bureaucracy to move forward and reducing backtracking.

The human factor as the "great absentee": While immense emphasis was placed on processes and laws, the management of organizational culture and human resources was insufficient. Without investment in retraining and psychological commitment, reforms remain fragile. In summary, the Ministry of Development modernized its relationship with the market and investment, but its internal operation remains a field of ongoing struggle between the traditional state and the principles of New Public Management.

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