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**Contingencies and Convergence in European Social Security  
(ICT Coordination in the Back Office of the Welfare State)****ABSTRACT (100-150 WORDS)**

In Western European welfare states, one of the uses to which ICT has been put is the delivery of integrated public services in social security. In order to do this, the deployment of ICT (especially in the back office) requires coordination among various central and local levels of government, and among social insurance executive institutions, welfare authorities, and job centers. Viewing ICT-enabled integration as a technological and managerial 'practice', we analyze ICT coordination in various institutional regimes (in a decentralized regime like Denmark, a decentralized unity state like the Netherlands, and in a federal state like Austria). By comparative case study, we investigate whether ICT coordination adapts to the institutional context in which it is shaped (contingency-approach), or whether in various institutional contexts coordination practices more or less resemble each other (convergence-approach). Two methods were used to gather data. First, for each country policy documents and strategy papers were analyzed by using a structured code list. Second, in each country five key respondents at ministerial level and five

respondents at local / regional level were interviewed. We reflect on the findings by discussing the role of ICTs in providing coordinated and integrated services in various welfare state regimes.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Social security service delivery can be defined as the public task of providing incomes for citizens experiencing loss of income due to illness, disability, unemployment, or old age. It is considered to be one of the cornerstones of welfare state regimes in the Western European world (and beyond), and generally consists of:

- welfare schemes (financial aid or welfare services for disadvantaged or deprived citizens, funded through taxes, and commonly executed at regional or municipal levels); and
- social insurances (benefits for employees in compensation for monetary losses due to illness, disability or unemployment, financed by premiums paid by employers and employees, and generally implemented at national levels).

In this chapter we report on an analysis of ways in which in three European welfare states (Austria, Denmark, and the Netherlands), information and communication technologies are implemented in order to provide integrated social security services to citizens, and, moreover, how cooperation of various service providers is coordinated through activities of central-level governments. The chapter is composed as follows. In the ‘Background’ section, we describe developments in European welfare states and identify two competing hypotheses about the relation between technology on the one hand and institutional context on the other hand. In the section labeled ‘Coordination in European Welfare State Back Offices’ we explain the methodology of the study underlying this chapter, and report how coordination of information exchange in social security actually takes place in Austria, Denmark and the Netherlands. Inspired by the results we identify new research trajectories in the section Future Research Directions. In the section labeled Conclusions, we describe similarities and differences in ways in which technologies are implemented in social security, come up with explanation for similarities and differences, and reflect on the implications of findings for the role of technology in providing health and care services.

## **2. BACKGROUND**

In many European welfare states, welfare schemes on the one hand and social insurances on the other hand have developed along different paths. Welfare schemes originate in voluntary (often religious) sector organizations that had provided basic assistance to homeless and otherwise deprived individuals until about the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; since then, the task of providing welfare services has been relegated to municipal governments. Social insurances, on the other hand, have a basis in arrangements drafted by associations of employers and employees. During the development of 20<sup>th</sup> century welfare state regimes throughout Europe, many countries have drafted national legislation in order to provide social insurances, and the implementation of social insurances Acts and schemes was taken up by executive institutions at national levels. Three developments have redirected attention to the way social security service delivery takes place.

First, there is the development of modern information and communication technologies with increased potential for information integration and interoperability. Second, there is the advent of more or less managerial ideas in the public sector like ‘joined-up government’, ‘customer orientation’, and in general individualized and personalized forms of public service delivery (Homburg & Dijkshoorn, 2011). Third, alongside the emerging wave of New Public Management reforms, various national European governments have blended the traditional focus on providing benefits and aids with initiatives to re-activate unemployed citizens and to stimulate citizens to become self-sufficient. Henman (2010) refers to a change from a so-called passive system (whereby recipients receive benefits as rights with limited strings attached), to a system in which receipt of aid and services is conditional on undertaking welfare-to-work, workfare and activation activities. Job centers and labor re-integration services have become more important in many welfare state regimes.

As a result of the three developments mentioned above, European welfare states have, since about the early 1980s, displayed fundamental changes, both in terms of aims and focus of social services (e.g., re-activation and a focus on self-sufficiency alongside the delivery of benefits, see Henman (2010)) as well as in terms of organization (e.g., emergence of partnerships and networks of various social security institutions, increased exchange of citizens’ information in order to enable personalized services, and so forth, see for instance Homburg (1999)). In these changes, there is a prominent and enabling role for information and communication technologies. First of all, Internet technologies have enabled citizens to communicate and apply for services on-line, and in various countries, electronic front-office services have emerged. Second, and arguably more important, technologies have enabled actual joined-up governance in the back-offices of social security institutions, job centers, re-integration service providers, and so forth. The integration of services is relevant for citizens as sometimes, citizens may receive benefits from various public service providers at the same time; but even if this is not the case, previously issued benefits or services, or simply job history, may be relevant for current service provision.

In this chapter, we will focus on the emergence of back-office partnerships and information networks in the back offices of social security institutions of European welfare states, with special attention to express ways in which coordination between various institutions takes place, and on ways in which national governments in various European welfare states attempt to promote and develop more integrated and personalized forms of social security service delivery. This focus on ‘enabling technologies’ and coordination in back office of welfare states raises a familiar debate on the relation between technology and the institutional context in which technology is developed and implemented: the debate between technological determinism on the one hand and social shaping of technology on the other hand (Orlikowski & Barley, 2001; Adler & Henman, 2005; Homburg, 2008). Following the lines of this debate, two competing hypotheses can be identified in the literature.

The first one is the ‘convergence’ hypothesis (for an explanation and critique, refer to Pollitt, 2001; Pollitt, Van Thiel & Homburg, 2006), stating that technological opportunity (the advent of novel information and communication technologies and their associated methods and rhetoric of administrative change) drives organizational and institutional trajectories of reform in such a way that eventually welfare regimes converge towards globalized similar patterns.

The second one is ‘welfare state’ regime hypothesis (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Adler & Henman, 2005; Loughlin & Peters 1997; Lijphart 1999; Pollitt & Bouckaert 2004) stating that the specific applications of ICTs and information networks reflect and are shaped by the pre-existing structures, policies and values embodied in specific welfare state regimes (Homburg, 2008), thus,

given the existence of a variety of regimes (see for instance, Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004; Esping-Andersen, 1990), resulting in different trajectories and patterns. This hypothesis draws attention to the existence of various types of technology that are supposed to be contingent on institutional contexts in which technologies are developed and implemented. Millard, Kubicek, Westholm and Cimander (2004), for instance, conclude in a study of back-office e-government integration projects throughout Europe that back office integration “requires careful consideration of the existing organizational and technology conditions, which often themselves reflect national and/or regional regulatory and institutional regimes and cultures (...)” (Millard et.al, 2004, p. 61).

In the remainder of the chapter, we address the following research question: what are differences in similarities in ways in which technology-enabled back-office integration is coordinated?

### 3. COORDINATION IN EUROPEAN WELFARE STATE BACK OFFICES

#### 3.1 Introduction

In the subsequent section we assess the coordination of back-office integration in social security. We start by presenting the countries that are central in this study (3.2). Next, the organization of social security in each of the selected countries is briefly introduced (3.3). Before discussing the theoretical concepts we discuss the research methodology (3.4). The operationalization of the theoretical concept follows in the next section (3.4). After a discussion of the research methodology and operationalization of theoretical concepts, we present our empirical analyses of back office coordination (3.5). We conclude by presetting differences, similarities, convergence and contingencies in organization of back office coordination in the selected countries (3.6).

#### 3.1 Country selection

We analyze back office coordination in three Western European Countries. These are Denmark, the Netherlands and Austria. These three welfare states share institutional characteristics of relatively advanced levels of social security (access to benefits) and e-readiness (penetration and availability of ICT in society, (OECD, 2007; United Nations, 2008)), but can be differentiated based on the type of administrative structure (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Lijphart 1999; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004; OECD, 2008 see Table 1). As such, in order to be able to analyze similarities and differences in relation to institutional environment we adopt a most similar case study design (Lijphart, 1975). This design assumes that cases show a variation on the descriptive characteristic (administrative structure), but are comparable at as much as possible other relevant characteristics (social security, welfare state regime, e-readiness).

*Table 1. Description of various welfare state regimes and country selection*

Country	Type of welfare state regime	Descriptive characteristic
Austria	Federal corporatist regime	Federal structure
Denmark	Social democratic regime	Decentralized structure
The Netherlands	Decentralized unity state regime	Unitary structure

The general administrative structure offers an overview of how public administration is organized in welfare states. It offers insight in whether there are decentralized public organizations within a country and if these public organizations have autonomous responsibilities. The social security domain is embedded within this general administrative structure.

### **3.2 Organization of social security in Denmark, Austria and The Netherlands**

#### ***Denmark***

The main executive organizations within in the Danish social security domain are local job centers (*Jobcentre*), regional unemployment agencies (*Beskæftigelsesregionen*), and insurance funds (*A-kasse*). The first two types of organizations operate under the responsibility of the National Labor Market Authority (*Arbejdsmarkedsstyrelsen*), which is a department within the Ministry of Employment (*Socialministeriet*). Local job centers – established in 2009 as a result of a merger of municipal welfare agencies and central job centers – are the local access point for jobseekers. Before 2009, central government was responsible for job seekers with unemployment insurance, while municipal agencies had the responsibility to help jobseekers without insurance. Since 2009, job centers have been responsible for, among other things, the intake and re-integration of all jobseekers. Jobseekers that are insured receive their benefits from a non-governmental insurance company. Jobseekers who do not have such an insurance scheme receive their money, in form of social assistance, from the job center.

The integration of municipal and central organizations did also affect back office cooperation. Different local and central systems had to be integrated. The job centers were able to develop their own new local registration system. However, the job centers were obliged to develop registration systems that were able to exchange information with already existent central back office systems: a central data warehouse and a system called Jobinstat. The data warehouse helps the ministry of employment to monitor statistics of individual job centers and social security as a whole. It also offers the possibility to exchange information among job centers. Jobinstat is an element of the data warehouse that is freely accessible for public (professional, academic) scrutiny. The National Labor Market Authority formulates requirements (technical and semantic) that prescribes job centers how they should process information, and what they should do in order to connect their local systems to the data warehouse. The role of unemployment agencies is to monitor whether job centers are indeed exchanging information from their local registration systems to the central data warehouse.

#### ***Austria***

In Austria, the most important organizations are the Federal Ministry of Employment and Social Affairs (*Bundesministerium für Arbeit, Soziales und Konsumentenschutz*) and the unemployment agency (*Arbeitsmarktservice*). The unemployment agency is a quasi autonomous public organization, tasked with the implementation of social security Acts and schemes, financed by the Ministry. The unemployment agency organization itself operates in a geographically dispersed manner. It consists of a federal head quarters, 9 regional offices and 99 local offices, each level having various tasks and responsibilities.

The federal level of the unemployment agency is responsible for allocating resources to local offices and developing ICT applications. It is governed by an administrative board (in which employers associations and labor unions are represented) and a board of directors. The 9 regional unemployment offices assist local offices in their day-to-day activities. However, the

regional offices also monitor the local offices within their region and set framework conditions for service delivery. Almost every municipality has one or more local unemployment offices. The local offices are responsible for assisting job seekers to find a job, and for paying benefits, assistance, and pensions.

The local offices use a central data warehouse, in which all data within the social security domain is registered. Like in Denmark, this system is used to gather statistics of individual job centers and general statistics about the social security policy. It also offers the possibility to exchange information. Each local job center has a controller that monitors job center's task performance. Each region also has a controller who collects the reports from local controllers and communicates this to the federal level.

### ***The Netherlands***

Important organizations in the Dutch social security domain are the Ministry of Social Affairs (*Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid*), the central unemployment agency (*Uitvoeringsinstituut Werknemers Verzekeringen*), local job centers (*Centra voor Werk en Inkomen*), and municipalities through their welfare departments (*Sociale Diensten / Diensten Werk en Inkomen*). Recently, the central unemployment agency merged with the local job centers, *UWV-CWI*, now forming the access point for jobseekers. The unemployment agency carries out Acts like the Unemployment Insurance Act, Work and Income according to Labor Capacity, Disablement Assistance Act for Handicapped Young Persons, Invalidity Insurance Act and the Sickness Benefits Act, to name a few examples. In the Netherlands, job centers, municipalities, and the central unemployment organization use their own registration systems and are responsible for development and maintenance of these systems. These systems are not part of a national data warehouse. However, the aim in the Netherlands is to create a digital client dossier. This is a personalized service that connects the various back office systems, and allows job seekers to access relevant information. A specific division of the central unemployment agency UWV, *BKWI (Bureau Keteninformatisering Werk en Inkomen)* is tasked with the development of information exchange and further digitalization in the domain of social security.

### **3.3 Research methodology**

We used two primary methods to gather data: document analysis and interviews. The aim of the document analysis was to create an insight into how back office coordination was organized in Denmark, the Netherlands, and Austria. From each country policy papers since 2000 from the department of social affairs, central Unemployment agency, job centers, and inspection services were selected (see appendix A for list of sources). This gave a wide range of documents over a time span of 10 years. The aim of the interviews was to get more in-depth data on how respondents within the social security domain experience back office coordination. The interviews are also used to validate the results of the document analysis. During the in-depth interviews a structured questionnaire was used. The key criterion used for the selection of respondents for these interviews was that they had comparable functions. In each country five key respondents at ministerial level and five respondents at local/ regional level were interviewed. The interviews were all recorded and transcribed.

Subsequently, the data from the document analyses and interviews were analyzed by using content analyses techniques. Central in this technique is a structured code list, consisting of words that reflect the theoretical concepts. The words in the selected texts and interviews were categorized using Max Qualitative Data Analysis, a computer program which helps to

systematically analyze large amount of texts. Theoretical concepts were operationalized by analyzing the prevalence of codes that resemble theoretical concepts, using a back-and-forth (i.e., deductive and inductive) approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Back and forward coding means that new words that were found in policy documents that could be associated with the theoretical concept, were included in the code list. If new codes were included in the code list, former documents were coded again with the updated code list. The words in the code list were linked to a sentence or section. It was possible to determine how many times a concept was used in specific documents, but also what the prevalence was of concepts in all documents in specific countries.

### **3.4 About the concept of coordination**

In our analysis we are primarily interested in similarities and differences ways in which various organizations involved in social security service delivery are actually ‘joining up’ (Pollitt, 2003; Ling, 2002; Bogdanor, 2005). ‘Joining up’ of organizations in general, and perhaps social security executive institutions in particular (Homburg, 1999), is by no means a panacea. Institutional inertia (Craig, 1995), micro-politics prohibiting sharing data (Homburg, 2008) and economic (budgetary) incentives unfavorable to joining up in information partnerships (Homburg, 2008) make it unlikely that joining up and developing joined-up cooperative structures happen overnight, seamlessly and/or autonomously. In order for joining up to happen, some sort of coordination seems to be required. The public administration- and public management literature provide three forms or ideal types of coordination: (horizontal) markets, networks and (vertical) hierarchies. Hierarchy, around which much of the public management discourse of the 20<sup>th</sup> century centers around, relies on coercive authority of rules and regulations supported by budgetary control; network coordination (Kickert, Klijn & Koppenjan, 1997; Klijn & Koppenjan, 2004) emphasizes moral, social and professional inducements or constraints, while market coordination, favored in the New Public Management literature (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992) is based on the use of contracts, performance-related pay and economic incentives to promote coordination.

Various authors have stipulated that coordination is not a black-or-white situation. For instance, James (2004) suggests that joining up in policy sectors like public health or national security often takes place through complex mixtures of policies, rules, prescribed processes, incentives, guidance, persuasion and training. Or, as Kettl (2002) has phrased it, “it is not so much that horizontal relationships have supplanted the vertical ones, but rather that the horizontal links have been added to the vertical ones” (Kettl, 2002: 128). However, following a ‘welfare state regime hypothesis’ (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Adler & Henman, 2005), one would assume a dominance of network and market types of coordination in decentralized welfare state regimes, whereas in unitary and federal welfare state regimes, there is a dominance of hierarchical coordination.

This chapter focuses on the coordination of IT practices within the social security domain that, in order to work, assumes information exchange between for example job centers, municipalities and other executive institutions. In section 3.2 we elaborate on specific IT practices within Denmark, the Netherlands and Austria. In order to identify and differentiate between various types of coordination attempts during the implementation of these projects, and in line with authors like Mintzberg (1979), Rogers & Whetten (1982), Chisholm (1989), Peters (1995) and Bekkers (2007), we define coordination as a steering process. The objective of this process is to influence the behavior of organizations involved in social security service delivery

in such a way that information exchange in back offices actually takes place and that joined-up governance emerges (Van Os, 2011). The public administration- and public management literatures provide various analytical elements that enable the analysis of coordination (Peters 1992; Rogers & Whetten 1982; Pollitt, 2003; Hood, 2005). We distinguish three analytical elements in order to assess coordination in order to map similarities and differences: policy instruments, steering perspective, and back office autonomy (Table 2).

Policy instruments indicate the kind of instruments that are used to stimulate cooperative behavior. We distinguish legal, economic and communicative instruments. Legal instruments include Acts, regulations, written policies, and multilateral agreements. Economic instruments relate to budgets, subsidies and grants, project financing agreements, loans, and performance-related incentives. Communicative instruments relate to the use of training, diffusion of best practices and advice, and use of benchmarks.

With respect to the steering perspective we distinguish a direct and an indirect steering perspective. Central to a direct steering perspective is the command and control of back office integration (Bekkers 2007). In essence this means that a central authority controls back office integration through a top-down approach, for example by formulating measurable goals and monitor whether these goals have been achieved. An indirect steering perspective, however, emphasizes more or less spontaneous, collective action between various back offices. The aim is, for example, to negotiate and formulate collective agreements on how to connect services.

The element 'Influencing back office autonomy' relates to the eventual aim of the steering process, that is, whether the aim is to enhance (simulate) or limit back office autonomy (Hood 2006; Stone 2001; Bekkers 2007). When the aim is stimulating back office autonomy, the emphasis is on self-steering and (non) financial incentives. If restriction of autonomy is central, there will be a focus on prescription, enforcement of standards and prescribed behavior within relatively strict frameworks. Non-compliance with this framework is penalized.

These three analytical elements are operationalized in a code list. This code list is central to the content analysis as described in 3.3. Table 2 lists the core concepts, the initial codings used to analyze interview transcripts and documents, and the list of codings that emerged after the back-and-forth coding exercise. The documents and interviews were coded a second time with the eventual code scheme. The results of this iteration are used in this chapter.

*Table 2, Core concepts and associated codings*

Policy instruments	Initial codings	Eventual codings (after back-and-forth coding)
Legal	Law, Rules, Framework, Policy programme	Law, regulations, policy, contracts, agreement, standards, planning, monitor standards, written action plan, codified strategy,
Economic	Budget, Investment plan	Budget, subsidies, project financing, loans, financial audit
Communicative	Negotiation, Education, Exchange experiences, Research	Education, best practices, benchmarks, information, advice, workgroups, committee, interdepartmental forum, congress,
Steering		



perspective		
Direct perspective	Policy instrument aim to a change behaviour quick Policy instruments influence the internal organization Top down communication between central organizations and local organizations Responsibility to coordinate at the central governmental level	Direct, control, hierarchy, central, authority, vertical relationship, top-down organization, dependencies between public organizations, subordinate relation between job centers and department of social welfare, aim to influence information processing,
Indirect perspective	Policy instruments influence certain behaviour Policy instruments aim to create collective goals Policy instruments stimulate interaction between public organizations Horizontal relation between coordinator and other public organizations	Indirect, horizontal, local, bottom-up, cooperation, collaboration, interaction, negotiation, decentralization, partners, consensus oriented, compromising, self-steering, equal position
Influencing back offices autonomy		
Stimulating behaviour	Own responsibility to react to a policy instrument Self-steering Non compliance is not penalized	Delegate, incentive, stimulate, motivate, rewarding,
Restrictive behaviour	Obliged reaction of public organization to policy instruments Non compliance is penalized	Binding, prescribe, obligation, penalization, prohibited

With the concepts and codings displayed in table 2, the back office coordination efforts (in time period) in three European welfare states with various welfare state regimes were analyzed for similarities and differences.

### 3.5 Coordination and back office integration in Denmark, the Netherlands and Austria

#### *Policy instruments*

The first element is the type of policy instruments, which are central in Denmark, the Netherlands and Austria. The content analysis shows that there is a strong emphasis on legal policy instruments in all three countries.

*Table 3, Prevalence of policy instruments in the social security discourse*

Code segment/country	Denmark	The Netherlands	Austria

Communicative policy instruments	104 (18,2%)	122 (24%)	30 (7%)
Economical policy instruments	22 (3,8%)	20 (4%)	10 (2.5%)
Legal policy instruments	448 (78%)	368 (72%)	387 (90,5%)
Total	574 (100%)	510 (100%)	427 (100%)

In Denmark 78% the total score on the code segment policy instruments are legal instruments. The main focus is on regulation and agreements. Also the Netherlands scores 72% of the total on the code legal policy instruments. The main emphasis in the Netherlands is on law and agreements. Austria mainly uses law and regulation, which also results in a convincing score of 90.5% on the code segment legal policy instruments. The main emphasis is on law and regulation.

Interviews in Denmark, the Netherlands, and Austria show that back offices operate within a general social policy framework. Interviews also show that legal instrument are used during the development of Dutch digital dossier and to ensure communication of local registration system with the central data warehouse in Denmark and Austria. Respondents in all three countries emphasize law as an instrument to stimulate the integration of digital social services. In the following fragments respondents elaborate on this item.

“There is a law that prescribes that public organization reuse collected information. This does stimulate organizations to exchange information and motivates them to develop the digital dossier within the social security domain” (BKWI Netherlands).

“We have laws that control information exchange as well. How job centers have to store information is described and enforced by law. There are very specific descriptions how they have to process the information that is given by the unemployed to the job centers. Policy and law also prescribes how to connect this information with the data warehouse” (Unemployment agency Denmark)

“Local offices function within a federal social policy framework. This framework also prescribes standard ways of collection data. It also prescribes that local offices should connect their system to the central data warehouse” (Local job center Austria)

### ***Steering perspective***

The second analytical element is the steering perspective. The results of the content analysis show a high score on the coded segment indirect in Denmark and the Netherlands. Both countries score respectively 60% and 65% of the total score on this code segment. Austria however scores 54 % on the coded segment direct.

*Table 4. prevalence of steering perspective in social security discourse*

Code segment/country	Denmark	The Netherlands	Austria
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Direct	430 (40%)	405 (35%)	251 (54%)
Indirect	637 (60%)	752 (65%)	216 (46%)
Total	1067 (100%)	1157 (100%)	467 (100%)

Respondents in the Netherlands underline the indirect steering perspective that is visible in policy documents. The focus in the Netherlands is on cooperation, collectivism, co-creation, and self-organization. The following fragment of a Dutch respondent show that there are working groups where among other organizations, job centers, municipalities, Agency for Unemployment negotiate and co-create digital solutions.

“We have different working groups in which various stakeholders from the social security participate. In these groups we cooperate and try to co create digital solutions” (BKWI Netherlands)

In Denmark, however, there is an inconsistency between the results of the content analysis and what respondents claim during interviews. In the content analysis the emphasis is on cooperation, collaboration, local development, and decentralization. Interviews with social security employees show a rather direct steering perspective. According to respondents there is top-down approach with the focus on controlling the internal work process of job centers. A respondent who works in a regional unemployment agency claims that there is strong control from the Ministry of Social Welfare. This is in line with a direct perspective.

“The people we talk to have the feeling that the social surety organization is quite bureaucratic. This is the way we designed it and this is how it works in order for the minister to control what the job centers are doing. Officially it is decentralized, but in real life the ministry is responsible, also for IT systems” (Regional unemployment agency Denmark)

Respondents at the ministry of Social Affairs underline the top down approach. Standards are developed within the Ministry of Social Affairs so that job centers can use them.

“Job centers have to communicate with the central data warehouse and we offer standards in order for them to do it correctly” (Ministry of Social Affairs Denmark)

Interviews in Austria are consistent with the direct steering perspective that is visible in the coded policy documents. Respondents claim that information exchange is a central priority. A central authority – the Federal Unemployment Service – initiates, among other things, laws and regulations for the integration of digital local services through a top-down approach. This top-down approach is reflected in the hierarchical organization of the Unemployment service. This also was claimed by a respondent who work at regional level:

“We are lucky with our straightforward organization (...) we talked about cooperation between different organizations, but that is not really the case in Austria. It is all in the *Arbeitsmarktservice (AMS)*. So it is not really a point of discussion”. (Regional unemployment office Austria). (...) “The Federal AMS makes sure that this works. They are in charge of all the IT used in Austria” (Regional Unemployment office Austria)

Several employees in local job centers also mention the central approach in Austria. The federal level of the unemployment agency is in charge of ICT development and implementation.

Local job centers in Austria are subordinate to the regional and federal level. The federal Unemployment Service develops and maintains digital solutions – for example e-job room and the data warehouse – that local job centers use in their day-to-day work. The overall emphasis is on controlling the work process of local job centers at central level” (Local job center Austria)

“The federal level started the project e-job room, and then they go to the regional and local offices and Start to introduce the project” (Local job center Austria)

### ***Influencing back office autonomy***

The last analytical element, influencing back office autonomous, the restriction or stimulation of back office behavior is central. When we look whether the accent in policy documents is on restriction or stimulation, there is a variation between the three countries.

*Table 5, Prevalence of perceived restrictions / enhancements of autonomy*

Code segment/country	Denmark	The Netherlands	Austria
Restrict	79 (55%)	142 (46%)	46 (70.5%)
Stimulate	64 (45%)	168 (54%)	12 (20.5%)
Total	143 (100%)	310 (100%)	58 (100%)

The Netherlands is tending to stimulate behavior and leave policy autonomy to decentralized back offices, with a score of 54% on the code segment stimulation. Although the score is not convincing, respondents stress that encouragement of organizations to integrate digital services is an important element. Back offices have the ability to participate in the decision making process about service integration. Hence, a respondent emphasize that participation of municipalities in digital solutions is voluntary.

“Municipalities are not obliged to connect their local systems to ours. It is voluntary for them. But what we see is that more and more municipalities do link their local systems” (BWKI Netherlands)

The difference between the coded segments restriction and stimulation in Denmark is also not high. The focus tends to be more on restriction with a score of 55% on the code segment restriction. However, interviews seem to validate this score. The Labor Market Authority – a department of the Ministry of Social Welfare – prescribes in detail how job centers should exchange their information and which information they should share. Law requires that local job centers connect their services with a central data warehouse. In this sense there is no space to maneuver for local job centers. The Region monitors – under the mandate of the Labor Market Authority – whether local job centers exchange information correctly. This is also put forward by a respondent who works in a local job centre.

“Job centers must exchange information by law because they have to use the labor market portal and jobinstat” (Local job center Denmark)

An employee working for the regional unemployment agency explains how they monitor the local job centers.

“We create some digital standard forms that local job centers have to use. They have to use them, or else we can not read the data during the monitor’. (...) They have to use them by law”. We have a main auditing tool, which is Jobinstat.dk that is linked to the labor market portal. (...) Job centers have to link their local systems to the labor market portal and jobinstat.dk to exchange information. They have to register information” (Regional unemployment agency Denmark)

In Austria the autonomy of local back offices is distinctively minimal, with a score of 70.5% on the code segment restriction. Federal law obliges local job centers to connect their local systems to the central data warehouse. To do so, there are strict standards that prescribe to local offices how to process information. Controllers within local offices, monitor for the federal Unemployment Service, whether the correct information is stored, and if local job centers connect their information with the central data warehouse. This fragment of a respondent who works as a controller shows that the data warehouse has a prominent role in the Austrian social security organization.

“We have one system where everybody works in. I will show you the data warehouse. This is the whole of Austria. I go To Vienna and then we have all local offices. The data warehouse is so big, a lot of different data. So there is also a timeslot when to take the data from the local application system and suck it into the data warehouse” (Local job centre Austria)

### 3.6. Differences, Similarities, Convergence and Contingencies

A first assessment of differences and similarities in ways in which back office coordination takes place in Denmark, Austria and the Netherlands shows some rather striking similarities. In all three welfare states, adherence to concepts of joined-up governance, cooperation and coordination is commonplace, legal instruments are prevalent, and both in the federal corporatist regime of Austria as well as in the social democratic regime of Denmark, a direct steering perspective could be observed and back office autonomy is restricted by means of activities of central governments. The Netherlands seem to be a minor outlier, with the use of an indirect steering perspective and a coordination approach that seems to stimulate back office autonomy of executive organizations involved in the implementation of social security policies (see Table 6). Overall, the convergence hypothesis seems to fit the empirical data better than the welfare state hypothesis.

*Table 6, Similarities and differences between Denmark, The Netherlands, and Austria*

Welfare state/ analytical elements	Policy Instruments	Steering perspective	Influencing back office autonomy
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Denmark	Legal instruments	Direct	Restriction
Austria	Legal instruments	Direct	Restriction
The Netherlands	Legal instruments	Indirect	Stimulation

Interview data, however, display some anomalies in the converged patterns of coordination in the back office of social security. First of all, the legal instruments in the Netherlands, for instance, are perceived by key respondents working in executive institutions as less compelling than in the other countries. A closer inspection learns that Dutch legislation does not prescribe information exchange and registration in a direct manner as organizational or administrative means, but rather prescribes the end result (information should be re-used). It is left over to the discretion of executive institutions how to implement this principle, and central registrations are not used. Furthermore, although the Netherlands, in the typologies of Esping-Andersen (1990) and Pollitt & Bouckaert (2004) form a middle ground between the polar extremes of decentralized Denmark and federal Austria, we actually see that back-office coordination in Denmark and Austria takes place in apparently quite comparable fashions (use of central authority to realize joined-up governance, unitary yet geographically deconcentrated executive organizations), whereas back office coordination in the Netherlands is much more voluntary, emergent and bottom-up in character.

In order to reconcile the seemingly conflicting patterns, it might be useful to use Meyer and Rowan's (1977) concept of 'decoupling'. Meyer and Rowan argue that (international) trends and fashionable constructs (like in this case joined-up governance, the emphasis on re-integration, provision of personalized services through virtual or physical one-stop shops) are first and foremost adopted ceremoniously in various national welfare systems through so-called 'vocabularies of structure': through procedures, policies, legislation, partnerships, et cetera. As the fashionable constructs are perceived in similar ways by political and administrative key stakeholders in various welfare states, they result in homogeneity of formal structures, procedures, use of acts, and so forth. In other words, in the *front stage*, reactions by key political and administrative key stakeholders to global trends and pressures results in comparable and homogenizing structures, supporting the 'convergence' hypothesis. Meyer and Rowan also note that these formal structures (forms of cooperation as described formally, use of legislation and references to legislation as to indicate legitimate organizational behavior) is not more than an aura of administrative behavior, ensuring legitimacy and organizational survival, but not necessarily resulting in specific organizational and administrative behavior at the shop floor of social security institutions, or, in other words the *'back stage'*. In the back stage, which is analytically 'decoupled' from the front stage, stakeholders have to deal with more everyday challenges of actually implementing coordinative actions, implementing technologies, dealing with varieties of interests and power structures, and historically grown practices and path dependencies indicating 'how things work around here'. Especially the interview data show the prevalence of specific path dependencies, organizational, administrative and technological conditions that result in various technology-enabled joined-up trajectories in various countries, thus supporting the welfare state hypothesis. It must be noted, though, that the direction of the trajectories are not on line with what is assumed in the welfare state regime hypothesis: that is,

the polar extremes of Austria and Denmark show similar trajectories, whereas the middle ground case of The Netherlands displays back stage trajectories that are fundamentally different in terms of approaches towards cooperation, information exchange, interoperability, et cetera. Obviously, other organizational, technological and administrative conditions are at work than is apparent at first sight.

#### 4. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

In this chapter, we have analyzed how in various European welfare state regimes, the delivery of social security services (welfare assistance, unemployment benefits, welfare-to-work assistance, and benefits for disabled and otherwise deprived citizens) has reacted to a global clamor for reform (e.g., joined-up governance, emphasis on integrated service delivery to individual citizens, coordinated delivery of both benefits as well a reintegration assistance, et cetera).

This theme is relevant since the same challenges with respect to ‘joining up’ are reported in adjacent domains like social care (provision of sheltering services to the homeless, Goodall Powers, 2005) and health care (see for example the discussion about integrating information in the context of electronic patient records, Martin, Mariani & Rouncefield, 2007). In these studies, comparable issues are reported with respect to integration and coordination in the context of joining up: variety of approaches, organizational struggle, and so forth. Until date, a rigorous explanation of why integration and ‘joining up’ is so difficult to achieve, and why solutions that are found in one context are sometimes hard to translate to another context, is missing until date. This conclusion leads to the identification of a number of future directions of research.

First, description of variety that exists in attempts to realize actual joined-up structures, especially in the domains of health and care (where there is a manifest need for integration for reasons of quality of service rendered), with express attention towards front stage manifestations (policy rhetorics) and back stage manifestations (muddy practices).

Second, given the existence of variety, a subsequent question is how the occurrence of variety of joined-up approaches can be *explained*. There has been some work in this field, notably by Dawes, Cresswell & Pardo (2009) and Scholl & Klischewski (2007), but a thorough understanding is still lacking.

Third, given the existence of a variety of technology-enabled joined-up approaches, and given an understanding of why this variety exists among various domains, countries, or other relevant contexts, a more practical but nevertheless intriguing question is to what degree specific practices can be transferred from one context to the other (‘to what degree can Austria learn from Denmark and adopt Danish practices?’) and which are tailored to specific contexts and cannot be transferred (in case of which the prospects of policy learning are quite limited).

#### 5. CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have analyzed similarities and differences in ways in which in various European welfare states, coordination of technology-enabled back-office integration takes place. Using a most similar case study design we compared joining-up approaches in Denmark, Austria and the Netherlands on the basis of structured content analysis techniques of existing documents (see appendix A) and qualitative interviews with key stakeholders.

From the analysis, it can be concluded that in the front stage, emerging patterns are quite similar, suggesting that various countries converge towards homogeneous joining-up practices.

However a closer look, especially at the data that was gathered in the series of interviews, reveals that the actual practice of coordination information sharing in the back stage is quite varied. Surprisingly, the welfare states that had been selected as rather diverse examples of welfare state regimes (Denmark as decentralized social democratic welfare state, and Austria as corporatist federal welfare state) show rather similar patterns of ways in which information sharing is actually coordinated, whereas The Netherlands, selected as a ‘middle ground’ welfare state displays some quite diverging patterns of ways in which executive institutions in social security coordinate and organize sharing of information. Overall, this leads to a number of conclusions.

First, especially in the back stage, there is a variety in ways in which ICTs are used in order to achieve interoperability and joined-up governance in social security. Obviously, a ‘one best way’ or commonly agreed upon international converged practice cannot be assumed. This observation has important consequences for policy learning: obviously, there seem to be crucial administrative, organizational and/or organizational conditions that differ from country to country and that make the simply copying of ‘best practices’ less likely.

Second, the nature of the technological, organizational and administrative conditions cannot be simply derived from characteristics of welfare state regimes: it was observed that decentralized Denmark displayed a rather centralized, top down joining up approach (as did federal corporatist Austria), whereas the decentralized unity state regime of the Netherlands was characterized by a consensus-centered negotiation style between various executive institutions and the ministry of social affairs. Therefore, additional research activities have to be focused on the critical contingencies and possibly institutional path dependencies that can explain variety in technology-enabled joining-up initiatives in the domain of social security. However, similar questions can be posed in adjacent domains like health care and social care domains.

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## KEY TERMS & DEFINITIONS

Social security: system of social protection that provides benefits to citizens in case they experience loss of income due to illness, parenthood, disability, unemployment or old age.

Welfare state regime: set of rules, regulations, procedures, commonly formalized in Acts and schemes, that determines what kind of institutions are involved in the implementation of social security schemes in a specific jurisdiction.

Back office: part of the organization that is tasked with registration of information and exchange of information with other organizations.

Coordination: those activities or principles that are used to align the behaviors of actors (individuals or organizations)

Joined up government: coordination of activities of various public sector organizations in such a way that eventual recipients of services are not bothered with existing boundaries between organizations.

Policy instruments: tools that can be used to overcome societal problems and achieve outcomes.

Steering perspective: set of ideas and principles that determine how societal and/or administrative problems are tackled.

Back office autonomy: degree to which organizations in the back office are allowed to make decisions with respect to procedures, data definitions and conditions of information systems and information exchange.

## APPENDIX A: Studied documents

### Austria

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