

The Logic of Simplifying Public Administration in Hungary, 1900–1910

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Prime Minister Kálmán Széll announced a massive reform in 1900 to »simplify« administrative processes on all levels of public administration. A law in 1901 and several ministerial decrees in the subsequent years followed suit in a bid to »simplify, facilitate, and speed up« administrative processes and mitigate encounters between different administrative units – county, district, and municipal. The law created an extended debate on the possible directions of simplification and resulted in a mixed reception, including an oftentimes contested implementation. The present paper investigates the logic behind the reform both in terms of the legal and practical formulation of revised regulations and in terms of the actual implementation of the directives on the local level. I argue that »simplification« was a buzzword for the homogenization and rationalization of public administration that was considered increasingly inept at accommodating the new and expanding tasks of the state by the turn of the century.¹ It was an early attempt to increase the »technical efficiency«² of the system without explicitly interfering with the values and goals of public administration. »Simplification,« yet, resulted in a more complicated system, an oxymoron quickly flagged by contemporaries, while the reform intended to dispense with the »old« practices of administering the

population, judged traditional and impractical to cope with »modern life.« The simplification law is understood in the present paper as a case of innovation, and the paper thus contributes to our understanding of innovation processes in public administration. Innovation is approached from the perspective of both lawmakers and the consequences of the law and regulations in practice. The present paper asks how the simplification law was implemented based on the micropractices of administrators, what were the practical consequences of the law in relation to the purposes of lawmakers, who were the main agents that influenced the process, and how they could press their own agendas in the process. These questions are approached through the lens of the materiality of public administration, in which people, objects, and material processes can explain the outcome of innovation initiatives.

The first part of my paper deals with the conceptualization of reform, change, and simplification by contemporaries and describes how the simplification law relates to the concept of innovation. The second part of the paper presents the objectives of the reform based on the proceedings of the legislative committee, the survey of the ministry on the »need of simplification« in public administration, and expert opinions published in

journals and monographs prior to the implementation of the law. In the narrative of reformers, ›bureaucratism‹ needed to be overcome in an attempt to put a reasonable and scientific administration at work, well ordered and unified. The last two sections of the paper analyze the actual process of implementing the law in administrative proceedings based on the case of the guardianship bureau-árvaszék in Hungarian. This public office served as the first instance authority in administrative and judicial matters of orphan and guardianship cases. The guardianship bureau was created by law in 1877,³ and a detailed regulation of its administration followed suit in the same year.⁴ The administrative regulation of guardianship bureaus was adjusted to the simplification law in 1902,⁵ and subsequently, their financial management was integrated into the financial department at the county level in 1902 and 1903 by several other decrees.⁶

The third part deals with the actual changes in the regulations of the guardianship bureau based on the principles of the simplification law: how they implemented these principles and revised the existing regulations? what were the revised measures and methods in these regulations? how administrative processes were changed? The last part relies on the archival material of the guardianship bureau in Pest-Pilis-Solt-Kiskun County. Based on the experiences of civil servants, also expressed in professional journals like the ›Magyar Közigazgatás‹ (Hungarian Public Administration) I study the implementation of new regulations at the executive administrative level. Here, the stakes were altogether inverted as civil servants found the antidote of ›bureaucratism‹ not in punctuality and overregulation but in common sense and were more than happy to assume autonomy in administrative proceedings. The experience of the local civil servant sheds light on the inertia of the system vis-à-vis reform attempts and shows the perspectivism of the bad world that reform proposals pinpointed.

The present study covers the structure and functioning of public administration; lesser attention is devoted to the status itself of civil servants. In line with Jos. C. N. Raadschelders' definition, it belongs to administrative history proper and studies ›structures and processes in and ideas about government as they have existed or have been wanted in the past.‹⁷ My

approach, however, is more historical than theoretical. In a bid to detach the narrative from top government agencies and the perspective of the state, I provide an account of the ›grubby details‹⁸ of processes, practices, and events in public offices. Studying the mere technicalities of administrative processes represents, for the present purposes, a method not to reproduce the discourse of the state. Pierre Bourdieu calls for a necessary and difficult break with the state through, most of all, not using the state's vocabulary,⁹ and the present paper chooses the option to study bureaucratic practices rather than the official discourse.¹⁰ The paper also attributes a special emphasis to the ›ordinary things of the state.‹¹¹ These ordinary *things* include the registry stamp, forms, sheets, files, books, and the way they are filled in by administrators before and after the simplification law. The material side of public administration thus presents an opportunity to produce a narrative of the state devoid of the depersonalized and abstract nature of earlier accounts and one that provides a more varied view of the different agents active in public administration.¹²

Reform, Change, Innovation

The concept of ›administrative reform‹ was understood in a broad sense and was used in various contexts in contemporary Hungary. By and large, administrative reform denoted significant changes in the structure and function of public administration, necessary to remedy the functional deficiencies of the system. The ›Pallas Encyclopedia‹, published in 1897, defined reform as the ›transformation of the old according to a new principle or idea‹¹³ and clearly distinguished it from ›development‹ or ›deterioration‹ that took place without active intervention or guiding principles. Progress (fejlesztés in Hungarian) in administration was understood as a fulfillment of previously implemented principles. In the same vein, Lajos Návay, deputy lieutenant of Csanád County and later speaker of the House, set a clear boundary between reform and refinement in 1901. Accordingly, the simplification law focused on the ›gradual refinement‹ of public administration, in contrast to current trends of ›administrative reform‹ that aimed at ›throwing out all the old institutions‹¹⁴ The old institution that

Návay referred to was the noble county that possessed considerable legal and executive autonomy vis-à-vis the government. Yet, a few pages below, Návay would use the term »significant reform« to describe the very results of the simplification law, which pinpointed the malleability of the term. István Weis put forward the principle of efficiency in 1918, but his concept of reform similarly referred to »change« in public administration – in his case, based on expert judgment and not political motifs. In the eyes of the public servant at the law drafting division of the Ministry of Interior, the difficulty of reform initiatives was that change should always transform prevailing structures without hindering administrative proceedings.¹⁵ In contrast, private bureaucracies could be transformed easily, because they did not have to deal with traditional institutions.

Reform understood as the »transformation of the old« produced distress among defenders of Magyar constitutional traditions. Iván Moscovitz, a deputy judge, complained about the attitude that equaled administrative reform with the »burial of thousand-year institutions,« because it made it extremely difficult to dispose of outdated institutions and replace them with new, more developed, and more efficient ones.¹⁶ The old institution in question was again the noble county. As others incessantly pointed out, reform proposals were necessarily politicized as a consequence. Centralization and decentralization became the key terms in this debate, and reform proposals revolved around three issues: the balance between the nationalization of administration and municipal autonomy; the question of electing or appointing officials—by the local nobility and by the municipal committee—for a period of two to five years or an indefinite period; and the transformation of the noble county as the territorial basis of public administration and municipal autonomy.¹⁷ Kálmán Tisza, prime minister between 1875 and 1890, argued that the gentry—lesser nobles stereotypically employed in public administration—identified the political stakes more in terms of power than as a matter of administrative technicalities.¹⁸ This was a current attitude until the very end of the Dualist Monarchy, which made it extremely difficult to carry out administrative reforms in Hungary.

The first official survey concerning public administration, undertaken in 1880, provides a striking

illustration of the politicization of reform proposals. Győző Concha, an influential public law scholar, argued that the survey was not a real »enquête« because participants—mainly parliamentary deputies and deputy lieutenants—discussed general theoretical principles instead of hard facts. It was a »political discussion.«¹⁹ Significantly, administrative technicalities were not part of the proceedings; participants discussed issues of centralization and decentralization, and the modalities of nationalizing public administration.²⁰ Participants only sporadically touched upon the issue of uniformity, equality, and cooperation between and in relation to public authorities. In addition, all considerations were made from a theoretical perspective. This theoretical perspective, in contemporary parlance, signified the legal perspective devoid of any practical implications. A second survey concerning the reform of public administration was held in 1914, but the topics remained the same: the function of the noble county, the election and appointment of public servants, and the issue of municipal autonomy versus centralization in district and county administration.²¹ Organized by the Hungarian Law Association (Jogászegylet) the 1914 survey concentrated again on legal-theoretical issues and became rather a political discussion that did not treat questions of administrative technicalities. The composition of experts clearly explains the stance of the survey: out of ten participants, six were university professors in public law and the rest were senior public servants.

From the very beginning, the simplification law was portrayed as a technical adjustment of administrative procedures that represented a preliminary step in the comprehensive reform of public administration. Like Lajos Návay above, the public used alternately the terms »reform« and »adjustment« to talk about the simplification law. Yet, it was clearly distinguished from *the* comprehensive reform that addressed the very principles of the system. Károly Némethy, executive clerk of the law drafting department at the Ministry of Interior, labeled the law as the »simplification operation« – »egyszerűsítési akció« – and put a stark contrast between the law that addressed the defects of administrative proceedings and the comprehensive administrative reform. The former was to remedy deficiencies in administrative formalities and practices,

while the latter was to create new institutions and authorities that would profit from the proposed changes in administrative technicalities.²² The political bias against the concept of reform forced Némethy to avoid denoting simplification as a type of reform. Némethy thus used the terms »operation,« »movement,« and »principles« to talk about the proposed law and the changes that followed.²³

The context closest to the Hungarian case is found, of course, in the Austrian part of the Habsburg Monarchy. A commission to work out and propose a comprehensive Verwaltungsreform was established in 1911 to study the organization, the cost-effectiveness, rules of procedures, and appointment policies in Cisleithanian public administration.²⁴ Here, members of the commission conceptualized »reform« as including larger issues and tried to solve the problems of the state through administrative reform. For instance, Erwin von Schwarzenau even suggested that the Verwaltungsreform should have to »fashion out a new Wohlfahrtsstaat.«²⁵ The Cisleithanian commission thus did not only address the area of technical efficiency—the mere ratio of output to input—but also endeavored to change the very structure and purpose of administration as the likes of Guido von Haerdtl, Josef Redlich, and Edmund Bernatzik proposed to.²⁶ Therein lies the major difference between the simplification law and the work of the Verwaltungsreform commission. The latter could not be implemented, because, as Karl Brockhausen argued in 1916, »on matters involving nationality – as opposed to technical administrative reforms per se – the commission’s consensus usually fell apart.«²⁷ The commission’s work was inhibited because it failed to depoliticize the question of reform and Verwaltung.

Contemporary observers did not use the concept of innovation to describe the simplification law, and the Latin term was not current in the public sphere either. Instead, the Hungarian term »novelty« – »újítás« – was used in public discourse. Both the 1895 edition of the »Pallas Encyclopedia« and the 1914 edition of the »Révai Lexicon« only referred to the term »innovatio« as renewal, the Latin meaning of the term, which signified the new shoots of perennial plants.²⁸ Despite this, the concept of innovation could provide an analytical perspective to understand the story of the simplification law, and also, even without

using the term, the contemporary narrative of the law fitted the sociological understanding of innovation. The introduction of this volume defines innovation as a *new* process or practice, understood, problematized, and debated by contemporaries as such. Without doubt, the simplification law was understood as something *new* by contemporaries. Yet, there was no consensus on whether changes based on the law would have positive or negative effects; the law was not imagined unequivocally as progress. This ambivalence makes the case of the simplification law ideal to contribute to our understanding of innovation processes. The Hungarian case thus pinpoints how the concrete goals of the innovation in question connected with the actual results of the process, how its context—political context but the values and norms of our agents too—influenced the outcome of changes, and finally, how the scope of the debate and its participants were affected by the innovation process itself. The Hungarian »simplification movement« was not a product of organizational theory or research—unlike, for instance, contemporary American developments²⁹ or Fayolism—but it already contains a particular concept of efficiency.

Principles of the Simplification Law

The law on the »simplification of administrative procedures« (Act XX of 1901)³⁰ represented a caesura in the history of administrative reforms in Hungary, since it uniquely aimed at procedural changes in administration and was not supposed to alter or intervene in the structure and function of public administration per se. It exclusively addressed the technical efficiency of Hungarian public administration as an end in itself and in the pure sense of improving the input-output ratio of the system. For instance, Wildavsky argues that »technical efficiency does not tell you where to go, only that you should arrive there with the least possible effort,« and in a similar way, Dieasing claims that »[t]he criterion of efficiency is applicable only to means and not to ends.«³¹ In this vein, the simplification law intended to address the organizational inefficiency of Hungarian public administration: »the complete lack of legislation for centuries, and then the uncertainty, dysfunction,

and unsystematic manner of subsequent legislation.³² Public administration suffered from defects such as the huge mass of regulations, mazelike administrative procedures and their unsystematic nature, the overflow of formalities in writing, the superficiality of writing itself, and a complete lack of procedural uniformity. The main principles to be applied in public administration on all levels (county, district, municipal) could be summed up as unification, simplification, consistency, and a proper division of labor according to the law.³³ The catchword was ›simplification,‹ but the law itself intended to bring about changes in many aspects, often antonyms of simplification. For instance, the regulation of guardianship bureaus, enacted according to the principles of the law, became extremely detailed and longish after 1902. The 1877 regulation was a mere sixty-three-page document and contained nineteen forms. The 1902 regulations, in contrast, comprised 150 pages and 54 forms. The latter aimed at automatizing procedures in the guardianship bureau, but clerks complained that it was complicated and timewasting to follow instructions in every detail.³⁴

The simplification law itself only contained forty-four short paragraphs that formulated abstract principles and general directives focusing on procedures in county, municipal, and district administration. Although the law applied to the whole of public administration, its implementation—the development of new rules of procedures and regulations—was done later by the relevant ministries in the form of ministerial decrees. The first section of the law systematized rules concerning legal remedies (deadlines and appeals);³⁵ the second and third created the system of police criminal justice and regulated violation penalties.³⁶ These provisions created the most intense discussions in the public sphere and the parliament. They were portrayed as undemocratic measures and alien to Hungarian legal traditions. The fourth introduced the system of delivering administrative decisions and correspondence by the postal services (which replaced the individual delivery departments of public bureaus) as well as prescribing a more thorough reliance on the telephone system between administrative authorities.³⁷ The fifth section authorized the government to issue revised regulations in county, municipal, and district administration.³⁸ The revision of the guardianship bureau regulations was

instructed by this section of the law. The sixth part of the law was to create a uniform system of accounting and intended to systematically regulate financial departments on all administrative levels.³⁹ The novelty of these provisions was to abolish in-house cash registers and entrust the – state-owned – postal savings banks with the management of daily cash flow through the check and clearing system.⁴⁰ Systematization was the first and most important general principle in these provisions. For instance, lawmakers wanted to create a uniform system of legal appeals and deadlines. It previously resulted in confusion that different appeals and deadlines were in practice in finances, tax affairs, criminal justice, and so forth.⁴¹ The same urge for systematization was prevalent in the preparation of new regulations for county and municipal administration in 1902 and 1903. Here, the main issue was that counties and cities with autonomous jurisdiction had the right to enact their own administrative regulations and thus produced significantly different practices. The new regulations were meant to be simpler and to promote faster administrative processes. For instance, the official goal of launching the practice of police criminal justice was to relieve the incumbent burden of courts that spent valuable time with minor violations, often both in lower and higher courts.⁴²

Kálmán Széll emphasized the distinction between executive and legislative power to justify the provisions of the simplification law. *The comprehensive reform of Hungarian public administration was imminent, but the law did not intend to delay or shape it. Its impact should only consist in bettering the functioning of executive power, that is, to make the implementation of subsequent laws and the reform more effective. The goal was to change administrative procedures and not to change their content:*

This conviction [the need to remedy the problems of public administration] led me to work toward the simplification and improvement of administrative procedures in the whole country. These efforts will address and remedy the lack of legal unity, will eliminate the unnecessary waste of manpower and working time, will improve the speed and reliability of administrative proceedings, and will reduce the overburdening of authorities. Simplification can be

*achieved without prejudice to public interest, the essential administrative orderliness, and the exercise of right and duty of supervision and control in public administration. All the more, these will be achieved to a higher standard without ever influencing the imminent systemic reforms of public administration or delaying the making and implementation of these reforms.*⁴³

Széll's comment was directed at deputies who challenged the real purpose of the law, which was, in their eyes, centralization and the nationalization of county and district administration. Károly Szalay, for instance, described the law as a first step towards the elimination of self-government. »This act starts the operation, in which the dog's tail is cut in bits, so that the whole procedure does not hurt that much,« claimed the independence party deputy.⁴⁴ Széll's reply to these concerns was univocal:

*I understand centralization as a process in which someone tries to concentrate power in their own hands by controlling the jurisdiction, power, and scope of lower-level authorities, and I do not understand it vice versa.*⁴⁵

Széll's strategy was thus to detach the reform of administrative procedures from the idea of a political reform of administration. Despite the opposition's efforts, Széll well succeeded with this strategy and the simplification law was depoliticized. For instance, the »Pesti Hírlap« reported that the parliamentary proceedings of the simplification law were only delayed by longish discussions, such as Szalay's comments, to postpone the parliamentary hearing of a more significant reform concerning the nationalization of county finances, a law deemed of important political consequences.⁴⁶

Bureaucratic Procedures: The Case of the Guardianship Bureau

The above principles of the simplification law were implemented through a series of newly enacted ministerial regulations that addressed most public

bureaus and institutions on the county and district level, one of which was the guardianship bureau. Guardianship authority was regulated by the guardianship law—Act XX of 1877—on the county level, in cities with municipal autonomy, and on the district level.⁴⁷ Independent bureaus were created on the county level as well as in cities with municipal autonomy, while district level guardianship authority was exercised by local officials.⁴⁸ The organization of guardianship authority in Hungary radically differed from that in other European countries, since guardianship authority was most often exercised by the juridical branch of public administration, as in the Austrian half of the Monarchy. The German term »Waisenstuhl« refers to this specific Hungarian construct, that literally meant the »orphan-chair.« According to the 1877 law, the main goal of the guardianship bureau was to protect and promote the mental and economic well-being of wards, minor orphans, and incapacitated adults.⁴⁹ The most common guardianship procedures were connected to inheritance, the management of inherited property, education, economic undertakings, and marriage.⁵⁰

The Minister of Interior applied two principles to revise existing regulations. The urge to simplify, unify, and introduce a proper division of labor was stated by the simplification law itself. In addition, the lawmaker tried to implement a healthy relationship between public administration and »practical life.« The former was often accused of piling up papers and being lost in bureaucratic proceedings without concentrating on the case itself. New regulations should thus create a »direct administration of life« instead of the »paper-administration« of the past.⁵¹ The guardianship bureau was more at fault in this regard: clerks in the county hall were accused of losing all connection with their subjects in nearby towns and villages.⁵² Overall, the 1902 regulations represented a more complex and more detailed piece of legislation that contained a few steps toward simplification in principle. At the expert meeting organized by the ministry to discuss the proposal in June 1902, senior clerks expressed their contentment with, for example, the provisions concerning documents that were no longer necessary to be registered or instructions concerning documents to be discarded from the archive.⁵³ There was, however, a widespread discontent about some procedural

changes and technological novelties not included in the regulations. For instance, senior clerks found the need to purchase at least one typewriter per guardianship bureau to aid and improve, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the reproduction of documents.⁵⁴ At a period when reproduction machines and typewriters were widely used in private bureaus, the most common means of reproduction in the guardianship bureau was still the carbon paper, which produced a limited number of copies—usually five—with decreasing quality; the fourth and fifth were hardly legible, as archival documents can still attest.

Guardianship bureaus, according to the original 1877 regulations, were composed of a chairman (elnök, Präsident); at least two executive clerks (ülnök, Beisitzer); a notary (jegyző, Notäre); and a few assistant clerks according to the need of the local guardianship bureau.⁵⁵ The regulation defined the basic structure of the bureau that was composed of, additionally, the legal counselor, a registry, an accountancy, an expeditor, a records office, and the copyist. The core of administrative procedures at the guardianship bureau was the file, which was always connected to a person—the orphan, the deceased parent, or the ward—and consequently files could be administered for decades until all involved orphans and incapacitated persons reached legal majority or passed away. Files were composed of countless documents, issued by authorities or by the clients themselves.

The registry formed the backbone of all administrative activities. The registrar had to register documents upon arrival, gather them into separate files, index them in the relevant books, organize them into dockets, send the files to executive clerks, and deposit them in the archive for subsequent use. The smooth functioning of the registry was thus the guarantee for the efficiency of the whole guardianship bureau. Executive clerks relied on the registry to be able to locate hundreds of documents each day. Indexing and filing were also their task: if a document was poorly registered, it was almost impossible to find it again in the archive. The journey of the document and the file continued in the hands of the executive clerk: the latter's task was to draft a resolution, present the resolution to the legal consultant in case of ambiguity, and then have it approved by the guardianship council, which

was composed of the president of the guardianship bureau, all executive clerks, and the legal consultant. The approved resolution was sent to the client through the copyist and the expeditor.⁵⁶

The 1902 regulation preserved the main structure of the guardianship bureau, in accordance with the 1877 guardianship law; however, procedural technicalities were defined more in detail, and the 1902 regulation introduced several methodological innovations. The main tasks and responsibilities of clerks therefore did not change. The registrar, for instance, did not have the right to refuse the receipt of incoming documents, they were not entitled to record the oral communication of clients, and they were not allowed to leave their desk without registering all the documents that arrived until the end of office hours. These basic responsibilities remained unchanged. After receipt of a document, the registrar had to write the date of arrival and a registry number on the document. There were, however, changes in the methodology. Before 1902, the clerk decided where to write it on the document. After 1902, clerks had to use the registry stamp on the back page of the document or the last page on the top. The stamp contained the following information: the registry number of the document, the date of arrival, the registry number of the file, the clerk responsible for the file, and whether it needed urgent resolution or not (see Figs. 1 and 2.).⁵⁷ Subsequently, the registrar had to note the document in the registry book, had to find out the keyword of the file, and write it down in the index book as well. The keyword of the file, as mentioned earlier, was usually the name of the orphan or the guard. It was the task of the registrar to find out which clerk was responsible for the file and forward it to the relevant one. The 1902 regulations made a step toward the consolidation of the file: documents belonging to the same file were stored in one docket, and by this time the registrar did not need to write the registry number of all documents in the registry book but only the registry base number of each file.

The 1902 regulations contained a more detailed description of administrative processes in all parts of the bureau's functioning. For instance, the number of columns in the registry book increased to five (previously there were three) and the information to be filled in was more scrupulously defined. This restricted the freedom of clerks in developing their own way of filling

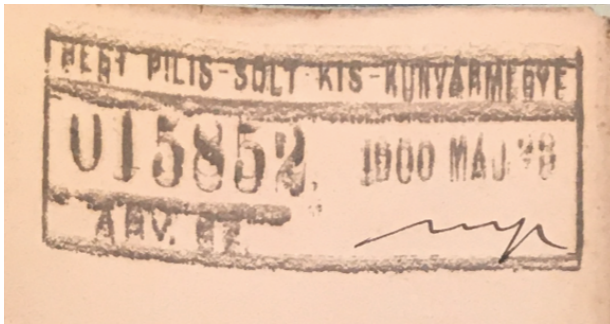


Figure 1: Registry stamp (1900)
Source: MNL-PML, IV. 410 c/1.



Figure 2: Registry stamp (1904)
Source: MNL-PML, IV. 410 c/1.

in forms, records, and books. The goal was to determine all administrative steps and arrive at a more uniform administration. This, however, had some repercussions as well. The tasks of clerks were defined very precisely to the point that clerks were incapable of keeping all the provisions. Executive clerks were supposed to know the whole file before drafting a resolution. The clerk should recover all previous documents from the archive and study them thoroughly.⁵⁸ This was impossible from a practical sense, as files sometimes were composed of hundreds of documents, impossible to survey for a clerk who usually made tens of resolutions each day. The same rigorous rule applied to the chairman of guardianship bureaus who was ordered to review all resolutions and thus became responsible for mistakes in resolutions approved by the council meeting. Commentators noted that the chairman did not have time to review all resolutions, since they amounted to

around 100 each day in large counties such as Pest-Pilis-Solt-Kiskun County.⁵⁹

The 1902 regulation contained a specific set of provisions on the resolution of cases that defined all the steps executive clerks had to follow, from taking over the case to sending out the resolution. Here, several clauses alluded to simplification. The executive clerk was supposed to survey all the documents of the file in question before writing a resolution—an immense work in itself—but the instructions commended them

*not to make any unnecessary administrative steps that serve only to increase the number of registered documents without contributing to the resolution of the case. Clerks should generally attempt to resolve the case the earliest and with the less possible intermediate steps.*⁶⁰

This is a clear attempt to regulate »technical efficiency« that does not interfere with the goals of the public bureau in question.

Simplicity applied to the language of the resolution as well. Clerks had to write the draft in a concise, clear, precise, and »Hungarian-ish« manner. They were ordered to avoid using foreign expressions, all unnecessary addresses – like *nagyméltóságú*, *méltóságos*, *nagyságos*, *tekintetes* – and all courtesy forms.⁶¹ To what extent these provisions did not succeed in changing office parlance is promptly described in László Rábel's book on the Hungarianness of official language. The great nuisance of linguistic practices in public office was the mimicking of Latin and German structures and vocabulary. As Rábel put it, »those who enter these offices should abandon all hope: you shall not hear pure Hungarian anymore.«⁶² Office parlance was mocked by »Borsszem Jankó«, a satiric weekly. It quoted an imaginary letter to the guardianship bureau: »Dear respected esteemed guardianship bureau! I respectfully respect the esteemed guardianship bureau with respectfully sending.«⁶³ *Borsszem Jankó* was not exaggerating. Letters were still addressed in 1904 as follows: »Dear Esteemed Guardianship Bureau of the Esteemed County« and so forth.⁶⁴ Manuals, however, published after 1902 became extremely cautious of using the word »*tekintetes*« (esteemed) and other courtesy formulas. In sample appeals and requests, authorities

were encouraged to leave out all unnecessary insertions and stick to the subject of the letter.⁶⁵

As the simplification law stipulated, the new regulations introduced modern means of management, such as the check and clearing system and the post, already in use in the private economy but still missing from public offices, including the guardianship bureau. The use of the former was introduced gradually in public offices prior to the 1901 legislation. The postal savings bank started its check and clearing business in 1889, based on the provisions of Act XXXIV of 1889, and it slowly began to assist the daily cash flow of public institutions and state-owned companies. By 1891, all sickness funds of industrial and commercial employees used check accounts at the postal savings bank to make payments. In 1900 the MÁV (State Railway Company), the largest employer in Hungary at the time, started to use check accounts in all business branches, and in 1901 the Magyar Királyi Posta (Hungarian Royal Post), the second largest state-owned company, also started to use a check account. By this time, several lower-level administrative bureaus and tax bureaus used check accounts by their own preference.⁶⁶ The process was, however, felt too slow by some commentators. An editorial in *Magyar Közigazgatás* expressed astonishment about the fact that a state-owned and state-guaranteed financial institution served the interests of private enterprises for more than a decade, and, yet, this useful service was not introduced to the sphere of public institutions.⁶⁷ The simplification law thus ordered all public offices to use the check and clearing system from that time.

The lord lieutenant of Kis-Küküllő County, János Sándor, provided a platform to test the functioning of the check and clearing system before the enactment of the law in 1900. The experience was successful, and Sándor suggested introducing the new method of payments in county-level administration. The system relieved public bureaus of the burdens of on-site cash management. By using the checkbooks and the deposit forms of the postal savings bank, county-level administration could manage its daily administrative work without handling cash payments and cash reserves on-site. All the more, clerks did not have to sum up the received cash, issue an acceptance form, and register the payment in the cash book. All these steps were replaced by the deposit and withdrawal forms of the postal savings

bank. Furthermore, the new provision relieved chief magistrates (főszolgabíró) from the burden of officially accepting and registering all incoming cash payments. For instance, a ministerial decree in 1883 ordered them to accept all cash payments in person, register them in the cash book, and ensure that all incoming cash would be deposited at the savings bank account in forty-eight hours. The chief magistrate had to repeat the process 300 times a month. This process included various steps like writing a receipt, sending a clerk to the post, counting the cash, noting the payment in the cash books, and putting, collecting, and guarding the money in the cash box. The whole procedure was repeated when the money was sent to the savings bank account. Using the services of the postal savings bank was a significant simplification, since bookkeeping remained the only on-site task of the chief magistrate.⁶⁸ The check and clearing system reduced the possibility of fraud and embezzlement, since there was no cash in the office. These advantages applied to the guardianship bureau as well. The costs of services at the postal savings bank were covered by the interest of funds deposited there, while larger sums could be wired to the savings bank account, which had better interest rates, as in the past.⁶⁹ The adoption of such organizational innovations proved to be a relative success in public offices.

Experts quickly criticized the new regulations because changes only resulted in the unification of procedures at the expense of efficiency and altogether failed to simplify procedures. László Rábel, executive clerk at the guardianship bureau in Sopron County, denounced the simplification law in 1904, declaring that it did not simplify administrative procedures, and its only outcome was the unification of administrative procedures. For Rábel, the centralization of the accounting and financial departments was the only »novelty« (újítás in Hungarian),⁷⁰ and besides, administration became more complex and was not at all simplified. Gyula Nosz, a member of parliament, declared that the use of the telephone was not simplification but the application of a modern invention. The telephone was used in many county bureaus, so its overall utilization was a question of infrastructure and as a result financial investment. All the more, the deputy of the liberal party concluded that the services of the postal savings bank did not represent simplification but

a mere transfer of responsibility.⁷¹ Actually, the remarks of Nosz did not address the relevance and need of such innovations in public administration but lamented over their belated introduction to public bureaus. Dezső Márkus, a judge at the court of appeal, complained about the reform going astray on the question of bureaucratism. The problem can only be addressed via a decrease in the number of administrative personnel and a better selection of clerks. The main deficiency of public administration was that a huge number of clerks considered their office as a means to achieve a higher social status and were not dedicated to their work. This was also the reason private bureaus functioned more efficiently and with less manpower. Bureaucratism had become an end in itself and thus resulted in wasting resources.⁷² The simplification law did not and could not resolve this problem.

Displacing too much responsibility on clerks became a critical problem for observers. A case in point was the use of telephone services in internal communication. Clerks had to collect information from other public bureaus on the phone, but nothing guaranteed the accuracy of information gathered in that way without writing it down, as they noted with suspicion. When a resolution based on false information resulted in damage to the public, who was responsible for the mistake if there was no written evidence? Rábel's sarcastic solution was to grab a »secret phonograph« and record all conversations in the bureau.⁷³ A notary criticized the use of the telephone in a peculiar way: it is difficult to carry out administrative work because »while I am standing at the telephone, I cannot carry out other paperwork, but I cannot do everything at the phone.« In this interpretation, the telephone can be effective in private bureaus only because there the workforce is not composed of a single man but comprises as many as needed for the job.⁷⁴ Regulations, though, precisely determined the use of the telephone: it was necessary to note a summary of the conversation—questions asked and replies received—either on the document or on a separate note; a notebook was always kept next to the telephone. Regulations proposed a solution to the problem as follows: »conversations on the phone had to be repeated by recitation in order to avoid all mistakes and possible misunderstanding in important cases.«⁷⁵ It also had to be noted on the file if the information was

repeated during the telephone conversation as deemed important.

In »The Politics of Backwardness in Hungary« Andrew Janos claimed that »in Hungary, the bureaucracy and the apparatus of the modern state were imposed on a backward economy« that constituted »the reversal of the historical experiences of the West.«⁷⁶ The problem with infrastructural innovations such as the check and clearing system, the postal services, and the telephone is value-based. What is at stake in the eyes of bureaucrats is not the efficiency of the office but their own power invested in the written word of the bureaucrat and their personal authority. The example of the simplification law, however, adds a layer to the image of Hungarian modernity described by Janos. For him, the main problem is that the »modern state took shape before the modern economy; it came into being not as a product, but as a potential instrument of social change.«⁷⁷ Yet, this instrument of social change first had to be effective within its own jurisdiction before the Great War.

Bureaucrats in Action: Practices at the Guardianship Bureau

The last part of my paper provides an account of how administrative practices changed in guardianship bureaus based on the management of the registry, including the introduction of the registry base number (the *alapszám*), and based on the introduction of the case sheet (the *előadói ív*) an effort to systematize the handling of cases. The 1902 regulations significantly altered how incoming documents had to be registered. Its rationale was to create a unified registry system in all county-level administration. The system of registry base number was already employed with great efficiency in county administration, and this was the reason the guardianship bureau had to adopt it as well. Beforehand, the archival number (*irattári szám*) was independent of the registry number of documents stored in a given file. The 1877 regulations created the file that encompassed all the documents belonging to the same ward or orphan and the folder that encompassed files by numerical order. The archival number was a unique number assigned to the file when the first document arrived to the guardianship bureau, and this number remained the

same even if the file was managed for years or decades (see Fig. 3).⁷⁸ Figure 3 shows the system at the registry before 1902. Files, here, kept the registry number over years. In this particular case, the registry number of the file remained 3 until it was permanently closed and sent to the archive. The advantage of the system was that files from previous years could be easily found and clerks knew from memory the archival number of most files in their purview.

The 1902 regulations, however, introduced the system of registry base numbers.⁷⁹ This system connected the identification number of files—called registry base number—to the registry number of the documents within the file. The registry number marked on the first document of a file received in the calendar year became the registry base number of the file itself throughout the year. Yet, if the file was managed for more than one year, it was assigned a new registry base number the next year and so on (see Fig. 4). This caused confusion because the number on the file had to be crossed out and a new number written each year. The system quickly became a subject of complaints as clerks felt that the management of files was now more complicated and time-consuming.⁸⁰ For instance, even »Magyar Közigazgatás« acknowledged the problem and proposed a system of introducing an additional identification number that would remain constant throughout the lifespan of the file.⁸¹

The guardianship bureau of Torontál County began a campaign in 1908 to undo the system of registry base number, and a few other bureaus joined the petition to the Minister of Interior requesting to reintroduce the former system. The minister, however, refused the request declaring that based on the feedback of other guardianship bureaus, there was no mutual agreement on the issue. The minister advised dissatisfied clerks to use additional auxiliary books to facilitate finding documents and files in the records office.⁸² Similar advice was given in »Magyar Közigazgatás«: clerks should use additional index books that connect calendar years and thus facilitate tracking down all the documents of a file. »Magyar Közigazgatás« also pointed out the advantages of the new system: the use of registry base numbers *automatically* selected the »living files« from the »dead material« in the course of the year. In that way, the system of registry base numbers separated the records and the

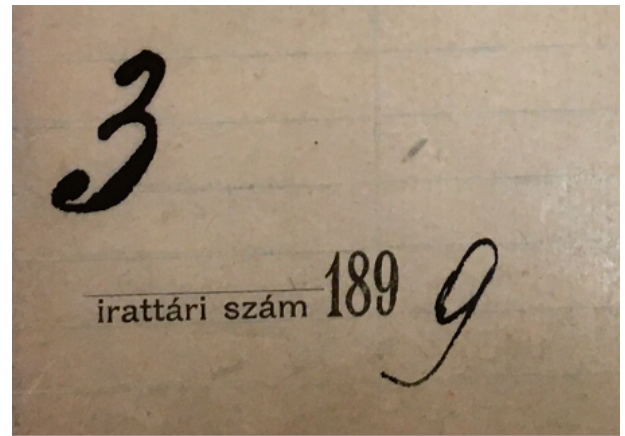


Figure 3: Registry number (1899)

Source: MNL-PML, IV. 410 c/1, box 634, file 3/1899.

archives of the guardianship bureau and decreased the time necessary to manage the archive.⁸³ The registry base number remained in use without any modification in the period under scrutiny and, for example, the guardianship bureau of Pest-Pilis-Solt-Kiskun County did not have recourse to additional auxiliary books and just became accustomed to the new system.

The 1902 regulations introduced other changes in the registry of documents, including a registry stamp that contained more detailed information than the previous stamps used at guardianship bureaus. Figure 1 shows the registry stamp used by the guardianship bureau prior to the 1902 regulations. It is a variant of the registry stamp used in Pest-Pilis-Solt-Kis-Kun County administration bureaus. On the stamp, there was only place for the name of the bureau, date of arrival, registry number, and the signature of the clerk. Figure 2 shows the registry stamp of guardianship bureaus after 1902. This stamp gave more detail concerning the file and the document: date of arrival, registry number, the registry number of the preliminary document, the clerk responsible for the file, and the number of attachments. In this particular case, the weight of attachments was 1020 grams. The change, in practice, turned out to be futile: the registrar often did not stamp to the spot prescribed by the regulation, the top left corner of the document, and did not fill in all the information prescribed by the regulations (see Fig. 5). This was not a unique case of disobedience. Clerks at the guardianship bureau did not follow

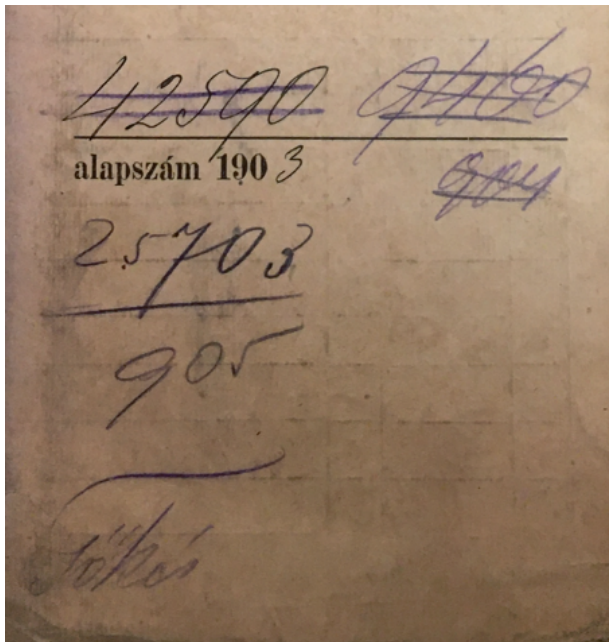


Figure 4: Base registry number (1905)

Source: MNL-PML, IV. 410 c/1, 1905 box 68, file 25703/1905.

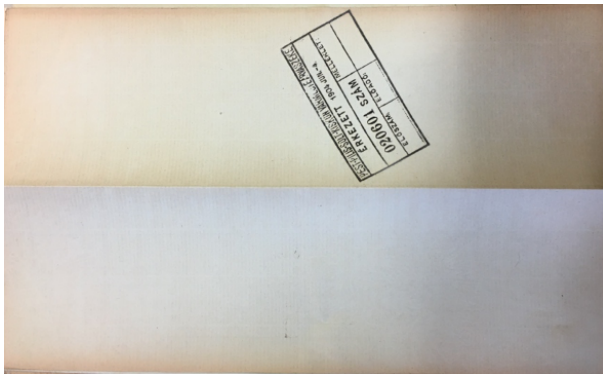


Figure 5: Registry stamp (1904)

Source: MNL-PML, IV. 410 c/1.

instructions on many other occasions. The minutes of council meetings at the guardianship bureau did not use the forms prescribed,⁸⁴ official forms were not ordered in a print format but clerks themselves drew them on blank paper,⁸⁵ and, finally, registry books were unfilled and again drawn by hand instead of using the official printed forms.⁸⁶ Clerks needed to become an active agent in the implementation of reforms but regulations often represented only a desirable direction, and they

modified instructions to make them commensurate with their own administrative practices.

A novelty of the 1902 regulations was the introduction of the case sheet (*előadói ív*) that provided a form on which the executive clerk had to write the resolution of the case. This was an A3 sheet folded in two; the first page contained the registry number and other relevant information on the resolution (see Fig. 6); the second page had to be left blank for further comments, and the clerk had to write the resolution on the third page of the case sheet.⁸⁷ It was problematic that the case sheet substantially altered the division of labor between registrar and executive clerks. The executive clerk had to look for and write down all the deadlines mentioned in different documents of the same file, a task that was previously done by the registrar. Another problem stemmed from the fact that documents of a file were often separated and sent to different bureaus for revision, and therefore the executive clerk was not able to access all the documents at any moment.⁸⁸ Executive clerks were charged with the tasks of the registrar and, in the long term, guardianship bureaus had to hire additional clerks to carry out all the work. Rábel promptly described the consequences:

This type of messy sketching consumes too much time. Each time after using carbon paper and iron gall ink clerks have to wash their hand unless they make their uniform, cuff, and so forth extremely filthy. Thus, each time they grab a file that needs this type of noting, they have to wash themselves just like the pious Muslim who does it at the command of the Koran.⁸⁹

Executive clerks faced other obstacles too. New regulations made them responsible for the thorough knowledge of the file.⁹⁰ It was their duty to unfold, run across all documents of the file at all instances of decision; this was simply impractical and impossible to carry out. Yet, if a clerk responsible for the file in the past made a mistake and the executive clerk did not notice, they became responsible for past mistakes. Rábel correctly predicted the need for additional workforce as a result of new regulations.⁹¹ The guardianship bureau in Pest-Pilis-Solt-Kiskun County employed six executive clerks from 1880 until 1905, and that number only

Figure 6: The case sheet (1904)
Source: MNL-PML, IV. 410 c/1.

increased to seven clerks in 1906 and to eight clerks in 1909.⁹²

Rábel pointed out that some headings on the case sheet were unnecessary, and others caused a great trouble for the clerk to fill in. In practice, however, clerks willingly adapted regulations to their own liking and left blank the unnecessary headings. This practice was already noted in the case of the registry stamp, and the case sheet was interpreted by clerks in a similar way. The practice of Gyula Tőkés, a clerk at the guardianship bureau of Pest-Pilis-Solt-Kiskun County, is a case in point. Tőkés was one of the most senior clerks by the time the simplification law was enacted. He graduated in law at the University of Budapest and became a notary (jegyző, Notar) at the guardianship bureau of Pest-Pilis-Solt-Kiskun County in 1880. He was elected as executive clerk in 1890 (árvaszéki ülnök, Beisitzer), and after a failed attempt in 1906, he finally became the chair (árvaszéki elnök, Präsident) of the guardianship bureau in 1915. He was pensioned in 1923 and died at the age of 78 in 1929.⁹³ This was not an unusual career in county administration: most of his colleagues served for decades, and there was a considerable continuity and stability in the workforce of the bureau. Based on the case sheets and resolutions signed by Tőkés between 1890 and 1905, the long-term executive clerk often interpreted rules to fit his own practice. Case sheets signed by Tőkés thus often left unfilled the headings of the two different deadlines, the registry number of preliminary documents, and the list of annexed documents, even though there were clearly documents attached to the resolution.⁹⁴ The case of the guardianship bureau demonstrates how ›simplification‹ resulted in a more complicated and less efficient system, even though its principles resembled to or could be interpreted as a precursor for modern scientific management. In addition, there seems to be consensus about the bad effects of the law beyond the experience of the guardianship bureau, namely, that the amount of ›scribbling and doodling‹ doubled shortly after the implementation of the law in public bureaus,⁹⁵ or that the ›sonorous title‹ of the law was meaningless besides the fact that administration was ›not simplified,‹⁹⁶ and that simplification brought about a rise in the personnel of public bureaus in Pest County, because the clerks ›could not withstand this great simplification.‹⁹⁷

Concluding Remarks

The simplification law represented a turning point in thinking about administrative reform in Hungary. In public discourse, lawmakers started to differentiate the question of administrative technicalities from the idea of a comprehensive reform of public administration, the latter being a highly politicized issue. In the Hungarian context, simplification became the buzzword for changes in administrative technicalities that addressed the unification of procedures—the homogenization of the system—as well as endeavored to increase the efficiency of administrative procedures. Simplification thus meant improving the functioning of public administration and its technical efficiency in general without touching upon structural, and more political, issues. It was to approach the Weberian ideal type of modern bureaucracy in the sense that the technical rules of procedure⁹⁸ became more strictly defined and restricted the individual initiatives of clerks. It had no intention of taking into account the fact, so fervently defended by Dwight Waldo, that efficiency should be conceptualized as a subordinate value that always functions in a comprehensive system of values.⁹⁹ In other words, administrative instruments are efficient for a given purpose and may not be for a different one. The simplification law did not mean to alter the values that also represented the yardstick for the efficiency of the system.

In the discourse of lawmakers and senior clerks, administrative procedures themselves became dissociated from their content and function in the system. Károly Némethy, head of the department at the Ministry of Interior that prepared the simplification law, claimed in the House of Lords in 1933 that the ›movement‹ was not called ›rationalization‹ at the time, but ›this ordinary name, simplification, was identical to nowadays rationalization in terms of means, goals, and effects.‹¹⁰⁰ 1901 was the moment when bureaucratic efficiency, as Zoltán Magyary put it later, became a benchmark to assess the good functioning of administration.¹⁰¹ Magyary was a clerk at the ministry of religion and education after 1910, and the experience had a lasting impact on his studies on the rationalization of public administration. His analytical framework of efficiency and rationalization

was process-oriented, just like Taylorism. Magyary's rationalization model contained references on how to analyze administrative steps prescribed to resolve ideal-typical cases. The main complaints against public administration in Hungary stated that procedures were slow, too complicated, consumed too much manpower, and therefore became too expensive. The solution was rationalization: lawmakers had to assess the worth of all administrative steps, whether they were necessary or superfluous, whether they could be done by fewer people, and so forth.¹⁰²

The simplification law represents a step towards the scientific management of bureaucratic procedures through concentrating on administrative technicalities; it is about ›technical efficiency‹ in public bureaucracy at its best. The 1877 guardianship regulations were still oriented towards the bureaucrat and the different departments in the guardianship bureau that carried out administrative tasks. However, the 1902 regulations were a lot more process-oriented: they contained detailed descriptions of tasks to be performed step by step by the bureaucrat. The very structure of regulations was modified accordingly. The 1877 regulations were structured according to the personnel of the bureau; each section described the procedural rules and function of each different position. However, the 1902 regulations concentrated on the tasks and steps performed by the clerks to reach a certain goal. The headings were thus called ›registry,‹ ›resolution of a case,‹ or ›annual reports,‹ instead of the previous ›president,‹ ›registrar,‹ ›executive clerk,‹ and so forth. In that sense, the urge to unify procedures at the turn of the century made it easier for the likes of Magyary to rationalize them at a second attempt in the interwar period.

›Simplification‹ was, however, only an emblem for the changes that the law altogether encompassed. From its very conception, the simplification law endeavored more to unify, homogenize, and regulate procedures, and at the same time, to introduce a few technical innovations in public bureaus like the check and clearing system and the telephone. Unification included a more tightened state control of bureaucratic processes at the lowest level. Individual civil servants were stripped of their previous freedom in conducting administrative procedures, and the particular regulations of counties were homogenized. Regulations after 1901 were

significantly longer, more detailed, and more complex than before, and instead of simplifying bureaucratic work, they made processes more time-consuming. Some even complained that regulations transformed clerks into robots and slaves.¹⁰³ The downside of unification was completely antagonistic to the idea of simplification and caused distress among clerks. Yet, this attitude was not unequivocal. Others complained that the new – and numerous – forms were not equipped with sufficient examples and detailed explanations, and clerks could still fill in forms at their own discretion.¹⁰⁴ The experience of the guardianship bureau in Pest-Pilis-Solt-Kiskun County demonstrates that the latter attitude was equally relevant. Clerks at guardianship bureaus could indeed alter and influence bureaucratic practices, even in the face of tightening regulations, while old habits could survive. Clerks had to adapt to technological innovations such as the telephone, the postal services, and the check and clearing system, but their influence remained significant in questions of administrative procedures like the filling in of forms and the use of the registry stamp.

The simplification law was not portrayed as an administrative reform for political reasons. It did not touch upon the underlying structure and function of public administration, for it was supposed to evade political conflicts. This was a major difference in comparison to the Verwaltungsreform commission in Cisleithania, and that is the reason the Hungarian law could be implemented in public administration. The changes that it brought to public administration entailed new principles and new techniques that qualified it as a reform in the contemporary sense and an innovation in the modern understanding. The idea that administration should function more efficiently was not challenged by the lawmakers nor by civil servants. However, it was only one layer in the overall innovation potential of the law. A second layer was the introduction of technological innovation in public administration that was already in use in private bureaus at the time. These provisions—the post, the telephone, and the check and clearing system—were quickly adapted by civil servants and were rarely questioned. The only notable challenge was raised because the telephone was antithetical to the eminence of the written word in bureaucratic work. The last layer of this innovation potential concerned

the micropractices of civil servants that were tightly connected to the materiality of their work, in this case, the use of various forms and stamps. Civil servants expressed their unwillingness to implement changes on this level. In some cases, their opposition was openly expressed, and they acted upon it, but it was more often in practice only – presumably without the knowledge of superiors and lawmakers – that the resistance of civil servants was articulated and materialized.

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- 57 Gyámügyi ügyviteli szabályzat az árvászekék részére, p. 1500; Ügyrend az árvászekék részére, p. 667.
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Abstract

The present paper analyzes the implementation of the simplification law in Hungarian public administration between 1900 and 1910. The law was enacted in 1901 in a bid to »simplify, facilitate, and speed up« administrative processes and mitigate encounters between different administrative units. The law created an extended debate on the possible directions of simplification and resulted in a mixed reception, including an oftentimes contested implementation. The paper investigates the logic behind the reform both in terms of the legal and practical formulation of revised regulations and in terms of the actual implementation of the directives on the local level. I argue that “simplification” was a buzzword for the homogenization and rationalization of public administration that was considered inept to accommodate the new and expanding tasks of the state by the turn of the century. »Simplification,« hence, resulted in a more complicated system, an oxymoron quickly flagged by contemporaries. The simplification law is understood in the present paper as a case of innovation, and the paper thus contributes to our understanding of innovation processes in public administration. The paper asks how the simplification law was implemented based on the micropractices of administrators, what were the practical consequences of the law in relation to the purposes of lawmakers, who were the main agents that influenced the process, and how they could press their own agendas in the process. These questions are approached through the lens of the materiality of public administration, in which people, objects, and material processes can explain the outcome of innovation initiatives, as in the case of the implementation of the simplification law.

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