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ADAPTIVE COMPLIANCE IN POLICY IMPLEMENTATION: WHEN COMPLIANCE BECOMES PERFORMANCE AND WHAT CAN BE DONE

Nikša Alfirević
Faculty of Economics, Business and Tourism, University of Split, Croatia
nalf@efst.hr

Abstract

This paper is a conceptual synthesis that introduces adaptive compliance as a distinct policy implementation regime. Adaptive compliance is defined as a system-level implementation regime in which administrators, operating under politicized discretion and formalistic monitoring pressure, redirect effort from substantive policy outcomes toward formally defensible procedural performance. The paper specifies a hierarchy of public administration roles (power brokers, procedural gatekeepers, and frontline implementers) and analyzes their interactions within the implementation process. Building on the literature of performative governance, neopatrimonialism, informal institutions, and audit-society dynamics, the paper develops research propositions that specify the conditions under which adaptive compliance replaces rule-based governance and administrative professionalism. The theoretical contribution lies in integrating different literature traditions into a single mechanism, specifying the boundaries of adaptive compliance as distinct from neighboring constructs (symbolic compliance, decoupling, ordinary red tape), and identifying the role structure through which the regime is reproduced and sustained. The propositions serve as guidelines for future comparative empirical research, addressing both the internal dynamics of adaptive compliance systems and the external monitoring regimes that unintentionally reinforce performativity. Drawing on the Western Balkans as a high-contrast benchmark of institutional erosion, strategic ambiguity, and external conditionality, this framework also offers implications for democratic resilience and administrative reform.

Keywords: *Adaptive compliance, Policy implementation, Public administration capacity, Western Balkans, Politicization*

This article is dedicated to the memory of Professor Ivica Zdrilić, whose insights and discussions contributed to the development of the ideas explored in this work.

1 INTRODUCTION

Generic organizational governance, but especially the governance of public administration, responds to its environment. It is not surprising that strong external monitoring and resource dependence elicit a strong organizational response (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) aimed at organizational survival. A focus on formal procedures and compliance is logical and is further reinforced by the ambitions of internal actors to seek legitimacy and appear professional and socialized into the average institutional patterns (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

While procedural compliance might be in place, policy outcomes may remain weak, since the political elites of post-communist and competitive-authoritarian regimes do not focus on substantive outcomes anyway (Aliyev, 2015; Laštro & Bieber, 2021).

It could be considered safe to attribute these patterns to the lower maturity of the institutions or cultural specificities of the environment. However, I argue that a specific combination of internal incentives and external monitoring structures leads to a generalizable institutional equilibrium, which I call *adaptive compliance.* The Western Balkans is a useful and highly informative case, as its historical and institutional context has been conducive to the creation of patterns of politicized discretion, fragmented institutions, and limited professional protection (Brković, 2017; Meyer-Sahling et al., 2018; Bieber, 2020).

When the processes of Europeanization and weak external monitoring (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004) are added to the already existing mix of politicized discretion and weak professional protection, adaptive compliance fully forms as a governance mechanism.

The Western Balkans is a high-contrast case that illustrates the mechanism and its functioning. I propose that its logic is portable to any institutional environment characterized by structural conditions similar to those observed in this region. Environments and institutions in countries under democratic pressure (Ding, 2020; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004) are the first obvious candidates for empirical confirmation of the adaptive compliance concept.

However, wherever documentation and procedures are preferred over substantive results (Power, 1997; Bevan & Hood, 2006), political elites are actively signaling their preferences, and a low level of professional protection exists, administrators will fortify their positions and defend them by reverting to formal procedures (May & Winter, 2009). This is a rational response to the internal challenges and incentives, which can be disturbed by an external monitoring regime, focused on substantive outcomes of public policies and institutional functioning. However, if the external monitoring stays weak and formalistic, which has happened during the regional EU accession (Dimitrova, 2010; Mendez & Bachtler, 2011), the internal equilibrium remains focused on procedures and formalities.

Once again, I am referring to the history of the Western Balkans region. This time, I show how the historical individual response to the corrupted institutional system, focused on *coping (snalaženje,* as in the regionally comprehensible term *"snađi se, druže",* or *cope, Comrade)*[1]*,* stabilizes into a governance system, described by the proposed concept of *adaptive compliance*. I also developed a new hierarchy of actors and their roles, consisting of power brokers, procedural gatekeepers, and frontline implementers. This paper discusses their incentives to maintain the regime (Lipsky, 1980; Matland, 1995).

My arguments are laid out in the form of a conceptual synthesis that brings together the extant literature on policy implementation theory, performative governance, neopatrimonialism, and the audit society. I specify the building blocks of the proposed mechanisms, drawing on each of the literature traditions, and define the boundary conditions, which are portable across structurally similar political and institutional environments (Stone, 2012). I also provide six testable empirical propositions that guide future research and the potential verification of my portability claims.

2 CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

2.1 Positioning Adaptive Compliance within Policy Research

Policy implementation, involving multiple actors, creates structural conditions characterized by overlapping formal responsibilities, ambiguous procedures, and contested authority (Matland, 1995; O'Toole, 2000). In the specific case of adaptive compliance, I show that the policy outcomes are likely to shift toward the production of formalistic reports and other essentially meaningless audit trails, rather than focusing on intended policy outcomes (Mendez & Bachtler, 2011; Power, 2021).

Within the internally and externally bounded conditions, I demonstrate how the responses of the three actor groups within the policy implementation staff lead to public cynicism, dissatisfaction, and resentment toward the system (Christensen et al., 2020). Public attitudes are reinforced by a tangible lack of implementation capacity (Shore & Wright, 2015), increased administrative burden (Moynihan et al., 2015), and adverse administrative outcomes (Wu et al., 2015). While the EU public policies and the monitoring regime might contribute to breaking away from the adaptive compliance equilibrium, this is prevented by the nature of the European rules. Unfortunately, they function as procedurally complete but substantively hollow instruments in post-communist member states (Dimitrova, 2010).

[1] The term *snalaženje* (verb: *snađi se*) resists clean translation into English. 'Coping' captures the adaptive dimension but loses the improvisational resourcefulness the term implies. 'Making do', 'muddling through', 'figuring it out', and 'managing' each capture part of the meaning without being complete equivalents. This irreducibility is itself analytically meaningful: the term encodes a mode of adaptive agency under institutional ambiguity that Western administrative vocabularies do not have a single word for.

The theoretical positioning of this argument across four traditions within the policy literature is presented in Section 5 of the paper.

2.2 Scope and Methods

This paper builds on the extant literature on governance informality under high ambiguity and the limitations of external policy monitoring to specify a model of adaptive compliance. Following conceptualization guidance (Jaakkola, 2020; Goertz, 2006; Whetten, 1989), characteristics of the administrative regime are described. Previous related research on managing ambiguity and risk, signaling through procedures, and informality in governance is synthesized, and adaptive compliance is differentiated from similar concepts of 'coping' and dynamic adaptation to circumstances. Using the Western Balkans as an analytically sound, high-contrast benchmark, it is proposed that the concept and its dimensions are portable across environments characterized by high ambiguity and the need for coordination among multiple actors, subject to structural conditions specified in Section 4 of the paper.

I have created a literature base using bibliometric searches of Scopus and Web of Science reference databases, to identify the literature across four fields:

- policy implementation under high ambiguity and conflict,
- external audit of policy outcomes in international and multi-actor settings,
- informal influence on policy and institutional functioning, and
- illiberal or informal political settings and their effects on policy.

I have used conventional recommendations for conceptual synthesis (Whetten, 1989; Goertz, 2006; Jaakkola, 2020) to describe the characteristics and theoretical dimensions of adaptive compliance. I have also described the differences between the proposed mechanism and neighboring theoretical concepts and formulated propositions for comparative empirical research.

3 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

3.1 From Self-Management to Managed Ambiguity

The Western Balkan roots of 'coping' can be traced to the radical idea of decentralized, working-class-led governance introduced by the late Yugoslav ideologue Edvard Kardelj in the 1950s under the notion of 'self-management' ('*samoupravljanje'*). After the ideological split with Stalin's USSR in 1948, Yugoslav theorists needed to defend the country's unique path to socialism. Kardelj's solution followed the traditional Marxist recipe of the 'withering away' of the state, with the self-managing working class taking over administrative functions from the central state administration (Kardelj, 1976). In practice, however, self-management was constrained by the Party's control over key staff appointments and policy choices (Rusinow, 1977; Woodward, 1995), with 'worker councils' reduced to legitimizing rather than decision-making bodies.

This historical episode is analytically relevant because it set a template: formal institutions that legitimized decisions, while substantive choices were made informally. The former Yugoslavia operated under dual constraints — maintaining access to both major socio-political blocs while preserving ideological autonomy (Rajak, 2014). Using external legitimization through the non-alignment concept rather than bloc discipline produced an early version of the performative logic that would later adapt to 'Europeanization' conditionality. The state policies of self-management and non-alignment relied on decentralized improvisation (Suvin, 2016), representing a pattern that proved durable across regime change.

Both strategies degraded during the pre-transition economic challenges of the 1980s and the transition period of the 1990s. As global socialism collapsed, institutional credibility declined while performative compliance persisted. The archetypal Balkan '*veza'* (informal connection) transfigured the personality of a highly placed Party official into that of a conservative political leader, the 'nation father-figure', while still being represented by obedient public servants and public company managers. As such, *'veza'* becomes a universal mechanism for managing ambiguity in a weak state with dysfunctional institutions (Brković, 2017).

Continuous improvisation remains, though without the ideological purpose of self-management. Now, it functions as a mechanism of discretionary decision-making and resource allocation (Efendic & Ledeneva, 2020). Citizens still need to rely on informal exchanges ('snalaženje') to address gaps in public services. Administrative roles became patrimonial across political groups and national states (Bieber, 2020). Elites also exploit regional conflicts to create a sense of external threat and to demand public loyalty (Bojičić-Dželilović, 2015).

The analytical value of this history lies in tracing how adaptive compliance, as a specific structural pattern, survived transitions of multiple regimes and institutionalized itself as a stable equilibrium.

3.2 The Adaptive Compliance Concept and Mechanism

Adaptive compliance is a policy implementation regime, which motivates administrators to focus on procedural performance, instead of substantive policy outcomes.

Some aspects of the proposed concept of adaptive compliance have already been discussed in the extant literature. The context of complex coordination and performance responsibility under external control leads to discretion and bargaining (Sabatier, 1986; Barrett & Hill, 1984). Thus, the limitations of professional practice, introduced by internal contradictions and institutional constraints, undermine its very idea and invite reinterpretation. The concept of what it means to be and behave like a professional is perceived in terms of routine administrative practices that are legally defensible and of responding to political realities and internal managerial signals (May & Winter, 2009). Such behavior focuses administrative effort toward formalistic audit trails, producing a paradox of performativity (Bevan & Hood, 2006; van Thiel & Leeuw, 2002). Despite improvements in formal compliance, policy outcomes are not achieved, and auditability and procedure remain focal points (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007).

Still, this concept is different from the neighboring constructs, which can be described as follows:

- *Symbolic compliance* – surface adoption of rules sustained by unclear role structures (Taheriruh & Moshtari, 2024) and non-conforming administrative behavior aimed at complying with external conditionalities (Batory, 2016),
- *Performative governance* – the state's theatrical and performative signals to external actors (Ding, 2020), such as the EU institutions, while the internal administrative routines are divorced from the required policy outcomes and regulatory success (Ashworth et al., 2002),
- *Decoupling* – separation of formal structure from actual practice (Meyer & Rowan, 1977),
- *Red tape* – structural over-proceduralization not necessarily tied to political structuring of discretion, and therefore not predictive of the specific actor dynamics described here,
- *Street-level discretion* – frontline decision-making within rule frameworks,
- *Corruption* – involves illegal appropriation of resources, which is analytically distinct from adaptive compliance, and may coexist with it.

The regime is constituted by several elements, which are mutually reinforcing and operate as a causal system:

- *Politicized discretion* – rules stay ambiguous and are enforced selectively, so administrators remain exposed to informal pressure,
- *Audit-focused monitoring* – auditors reward paperwork over outcomes, so that administrators prioritize documentation over substantive outcomes,
- *Strategic ambiguity* – shifting procedures create dependence on local gatekeepers and make formal compliance perpetually negotiable,
- *Risk-minimizing adaptation* – actors focus on visible, auditable work rather than policy results and push ambiguous decisions up the hierarchy,
- *Role differentiation* – distinct roles across the hierarchy reproduce the regime, so power brokers, gatekeepers, and frontline implementers sustain it in different ways,
- *Anticipatory obedience (moralized signaling)* – actors adjust in advance to perceived elite preferences, so compliance is framed as professional, loyal, and morally appropriate,

- *Outcome-procedure decoupling and capability erosion* – procedural performance takes precedence over substance, and the ability to manage substantive tasks declines.

Coping ("snalaženje") and adaptive compliance are related, but analytically distinct. *Coping* refers to the personal toolkit of improvisational strategies through which actors navigate unclear, inadequately resourced situations. It is a behavioral response to structural constraints. Adaptive compliance emerges as a system-level response when such coping is institutionally rewarded, repeatedly performed, and structurally reproduced.

While coping is an individual-level behavior, *adaptive compliance* is the stable equilibrium that represents the system's generic response under the described conditions. The transition from the individual to the collective level happens as individual improvisation becomes a collective routine. Once routinization occurs, procedural compliance and performative work stop being individual ways of coping and become full-time administrative jobs. This pattern of behavior does not need to be pushed from above; it can form bottom-up, through administrators' observation of political realities and individuals' adaptation to rewarded behaviors. The process starts with observing informal feedback and rewards (promotions). Once employees confirm that the pattern of using defensible procedures works better than insisting on substantive outcomes, they learn the preferred behaviors, even without receiving formal instructions from top administrators or political actors (May & Winter, 2009; Snyder, 2017). From that point, the anticipatory obedience to informal expectations starts shaping administrative behavior. Actors begin to presume what the elites might want from them and shape their behavior accordingly. This leads toward the routinization of behavior in formal roles and the normalization of compliance. Obedience becomes habitual, moral deliberation is suppressed, and compliance is framed as professionalism and realism (Bandura, 1999). The described process is further institutionalized by negative selection: administrators who cannot cope with "the system" exit or are pushed to the margins. Conformance is reinforced through rewards and promotions (Meyer-Sahling et al., 2018), while the incentive structure and the rational adaptation of administrators to the perceived political reality further push for the recruitment and selection of new compliant employees.

3.3 Adaptive Compliance Dimensions

The adaptive compliance regime operates across three hierarchical levels, each corresponding to a specific role played by actors. At the macro level, *power brokers* define the regime's political parameters. At the meso level, *procedural gatekeepers* turn informal priorities into clear procedures. At the micro level, *frontline implementers* deliver public services within the procedural constraints established by gatekeepers. The three levels are causally connected: macro-political signals influence meso-level rulemaking, which, in turn, shapes what frontline implementers can deliver. The regime reproduces itself because each level has incentives to maintain, rather than disrupt, the existing allocation of formal compliance work.

This tripartite structure echoes Lipsky's (1980) street-level bureaucracy and principal-agent models of administrative hierarchy. The adaptive compliance architecture implies how incentives push actors to comply, process information asymmetrically, and interact with other actors and clients:

- *Power brokers* deliberately maintain strategic ambiguity as a governance resource, benefiting from plausible deniability.
- *Gatekeepers* occupy an intermediary position that turns informal cues into official rules, thereby making their role a constitutive element of the regime.
- *Frontline actors* experience simultaneous vulnerability to client hostility and to relational dependence on gatekeepers, which leads to the adoption of rigid procedures.

3.3.1 Power Brokers (Macro Level)

Meyer-Sahling et al. (2018) show that negative selection stabilizes elite control, since selection criteria often prioritize loyalty over technical competence (Kopecký et al., 2016). This aligns with research on neopatrimonialism (Erdmann & Engel, 2007) and per-

formative governance (Ding, 2020), as well as with recent commentary on governance practices in the Western Balkans (Tipurić, 2025).

When polity drifts toward promoting politically loyal over technically competent administrators, individuals begin to accept such a regime, even if they privately assess it as inappropriate, out of fear of social isolation, stigmatization, or informal sanctions (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). In such circumstances, overt power and coercion need not be the primary governance instrument. Power brokers have multiple reasons to prefer indirect signaling of priorities (Carson & Yarhi-Milo, 2017) and to modify the moral frames of mid-level administrators rather than to display authority directly. The absence of direct compulsion helps maintain the appearance of normal functioning while providing plausible deniability for politically damaging decisions (Poznansky, 2022). Delegation of policy initiatives to mid-level administrators signals both capacity and loyalty, thereby also serving as a selection and promotion mechanism.

The mechanism of negative recruitment and selection is at the heart of this dynamic (Meyer-Sahling et al., 2018). Since the least competent individuals are most likely to embrace the status quo and serve elite patrons, they represent the preferred choice for filling administrative positions. Removal of competence can be achieved through institutional restructuring (Drechsler, 2003), under the guise of de-ideologization or cost-efficiency rationalization. A perfectly rational-legal reform narrative can thus be applied to reducing administrative capacity and accelerating the exit of unwanted professionals. The exit of dissenting professionals reduces internal conflicts and stabilizes elite control (Hirschman, 1970), and elites can create incentives for such exits to occur (Michel et al., 2023).

There is an institutional hollowing as a result, with symbolic statehood (Frantz, 2025) without the capacity to devise independent policies or remain accountable for their outcomes, leading to extensive outsourcing of public support to nonprofit agencies or private contractors (Milward & Provan, 2000). In the Western Balkans, this hollowing is partially displaced by extensive reliance on EU conditionality, funds, and rulebooks (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2008; Zweers et al., 2022), with a significant role for domestic patronage networks in implementing EU-financed projects. Thus, EU interventions may unintentionally support the neopatrimonial exercise of power, based on personal networks and patronage-based allocation (Eisenstadt, 1973; Zhllima et al., 2020).

A system under such pressures survives by using performative governance, which refers to the "theatrical dimension of state behavior" (Ding, 2020, p. 531) in a low-capacity, high-scrutiny scenario. While performative governance signals to external publics, adaptive compliance is the internal mechanism that sustains the structure and functioning of this system. Public administrators need to adopt a Janus-faced identity that simultaneously satisfies the performative demands of international compliance while attending to the resource-extractive incentives of domestic patronage networks. Following the corruption normalization logic of Takács Haynes and Rašković (2021), there is an internal conflict between administrators' need to uphold procedural legality and professionalism and their use of moral disengagement to normalize the pressure to conform.

3.3.2 Procedural Gatekeepers (Meso Level)

The concept of anticipatory obedience has already been described as an individual's adaptation to the perceived priorities of powerful actors, even without explicit instruction (Snyder, 2017). Anticipatory obedience shapes the central role within the administrative regime — the procedural gatekeeper, who occupies a position comparable to Lipsky's (1980) street-level bureaucrat, but operates in a politicized environment. The gatekeeper's role is to resolve the inherent conflict between external legitimation needs and the internal drive to feed the patronage network. This is done by translating power brokers' informal expectations into formal procedures and converting informal interests into actual administrative tasks — including the production of official documents that signal external legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) and the design of internal procedures adapted to the political objectives of power brokers (Moynihan et al., 2015).

Gatekeepers may superficially resemble the personification of administrative harm (Balfour et al., 2020), appearing to perform socially destructive

actions through institutional translation of power brokers' interests into seemingly rational and transparent procedures (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). However, it is argued that the gatekeeping role is deliberately produced by an implementation mechanism based on strategic vagueness. Operational procedures have deliberate gaps that require gatekeepers' subjective coping *("snalaženje")*. Following Ledeneva (2013), this is a substantive part of the governance system that creates widespread procedural vulnerability by making most administrative rules and procedures complex to follow and open to multiple interpretations.

Professional norms and identity still play a significant role in administrators' coping strategies (May & Winter, 2009; Tummers & Bekkers, 2014). Adaptive compliance systematically downplays professionalism through the politicized ambiguity of rules and the moralizing authority of top actors — a dynamic distinct from rule-based administrative discretion (Hill & Hupe, 2021). Participation in the administrative system increases perceived legal and disciplinary risks under ambiguous rules and, consequently, requires implicit complicity and personal loyalty (Egorov & Sonin, 2011). Paternalistic systems frame authority as morality (Cheng et al., 2004), and paternalistic leaders as guardians of traditional values (Blakkisrud & Kolstø, 2025). Power brokers are thus perceived as moralizing agents, while gatekeepers experience self-imposed moral silencing (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004) and view questioning administrative omissions as acts of moral betrayal (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Errors are admitted and corrected only under acute institutional pressure.

3.3.3 Frontline Implementers (Micro Level)

The lowest level is held by early-career professionals, technical experts, and frontline administrators who represent the face of policy implementation to citizens and external stakeholders. These frontline implementers use proceduralization and responsibility deflection as coping mechanisms (Weaver, 1986; Hood, 2011), resulting in routinized interactions with clients and the regular escalation of more complex cases to higher administrative levels. The government fails to show a human face without references to fairness or substantive problem-solving (Zacka, 2017). Clients need to address the increased administrative burden and ongoing uncertainty (Moynihan et al., 2015) and, consequently, experience the system as unfair, politicized, and arbitrary.

Frontline actors themselves face comparable risks. While experiencing continuous vulnerability, they face both client hostility and relational dependence from higher-ranked gatekeepers, which makes them prone to error-avoidance and procedural self-protection rather than substantive judgment. Their professional identities remain relatively open to subjective reinterpretation, since the system is saturated with procedures, committee meetings, and symbolic purpose. Their survival depends on rational adaptation to the structural determinants of coping governance and the constantly shifting moral and procedural signals.

3.4 Empirical Identification of Adaptive Compliance

Adaptive compliance can be empirically distinguished from adjacent phenomena by focusing on three observable patterns:

- *Audit-trail production as primary administrative output*: the proportion of administrative effort invested in document generation, procedural recording, and certification processes relative to direct service delivery or substantive policy activity. This pattern is distinguishable from ordinary administrative workload by its temporal correlation with external reporting cycles and audit events rather than with service demand.
- *Risk-management proceduralism*: systematic reliance on committee-based decision-making for operational matters, routine escalation of decisions that technically fall within role competence, and documented evidence of procedural cover-seeking. This is distinguishable from legitimate collegial decision-making by its deployment in low-complexity, routine cases.
- *Outcome-procedure gap*: the measurable divergence between formal compliance indicators (audit pass rates, documentation completeness) and substantive policy outputs (service quality, delivery timeliness, citizen satisfaction).

These three patterns differentiate adaptive compliance from:

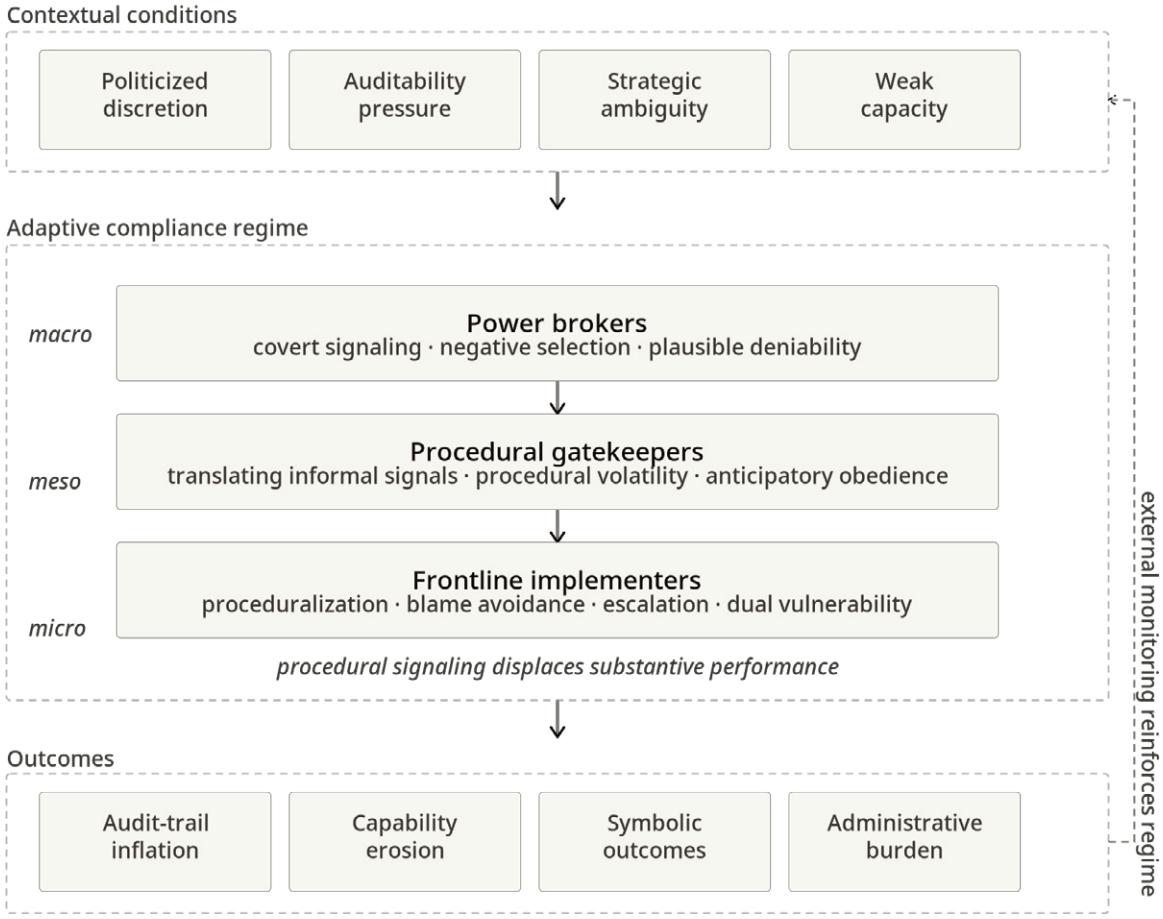
- *"Red tape"* – the structural condition not necessarily correlated with the political structuring of discretion;
- *Defensive bureaucracy* – an actor-level risk strategy, which does not necessarily need to be embedded in a politicized role hierarchy;
- *Decoupling* – a structural separation of formal and informal practice, without specifying the mechanism or actor-level dynamics that reproduce the separation.

Adaptive compliance exhibits all three observable patterns simultaneously, and these patterns are causally connected to the role hierarchy (see Figure 1).

4 RESEARCH PROPOSITIONS

The six propositions below are organized by their position in the causal sequence rather than as a thematic list. Propositions 1 and 2 address the structural and cultural preconditions that push administrators toward adaptive compliance. Proposition 3 identifies how the regime is maintained at the meso level through the gatekeeping function. Proposition 4 describes what happens to administrative capacity once the regime stabilizes. Proposition 5 specifies where adaptive compliance can be expected to appear outside the Western Balkans benchmark. Proposition 6 examines how the regime spreads across policy domains when monitoring fails to distinguish between procedure and substance.

Figure 1: Adaptive compliance: contextual conditions, mechanisms, and outcomes



The Western Balkans region is just an empirical case, exhibiting high levels of relevant structural characteristics, including competitive authoritarianism (Laštro & Bieber, 2021), contested institutional legitimacy and eroded public trust (Regional Cooperation Council, 2025), strong external conditionality from Europeanization (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004), and pervasive informality that substitutes the hollowed-out administrative capacity (Meyer-Sahling & Mikkelsen, 2016; Meyer-Sahling et al., 2018).

Proposition 1 (Structural preconditions): High levels of politicization and low autonomy for professional administrators, especially regarding the perceived fairness of rules and their implementation, will generate adaptive compliance strategies.

Selective enforcement of formal rules, combined with weak merit-based protection, removes the conditions under which administrators can afford to prioritize substantive outcomes. Where rules are applied consistently and professional autonomy is institutionally protected, individual coping does not lead to a stabilized regime.

Proposition 2 (Moralized signaling): When policy is legitimized through moralizing rhetoric and claims of national or collective interest, mid-level administrators are more likely to adjust their interpretive frames and further consolidate adaptive compliance.

When compliance is framed as a civic duty or national loyalty, dissent carries a moral cost in addition to an organizational one. Mid-level administrators respond by adjusting before they are asked, since the anticipatory obedience replaces deliberate judgment. Therefore, this proposition is more relevant for environments in which governance is moralized rather than openly transactional, focusing on visible and resistible pressure.

Proposition 3 (Gatekeeping function): In administrative settings with high adaptive compliance and frequent volatility in procedural policy tools, changes in the administrative regime (rules, procedures, and documentation requirements) are associated with shifts in political elites' priorities.

Procedures are vague because this condition serves the interests of political elites. The power brokers provide an interpretation of their informal intentions, which is further clarified by the procedural gatekeepers. Shifts in the priorities of elites are the essential signal within the system, and their disappearance could disrupt the gatekeeping function.

Proposition 4 (Capacity erosion): Administrators and administrative bodies with high adaptive compliance will yield symbolic outcomes in policy implementation. While formal documents and procedures showcase the system's stability, the administrative capacity and tangible system performance will decline.

As procedural reality drifts away from the system's intended outcomes, negative selection makes it difficult, or even impossible, to close this gap. The falling administrative capacity leads to additional reliance on empty procedures and meaningless documents, with a vicious circle effect kicking in.

Proposition 5 (Portability via structural and functional equivalence): Adaptive compliance is portable to other governance systems across a range of post-conflict and competitive-authoritarian contexts structurally and functionally comparable to those of the Western Balkans.

There are three dimensions, which define the level of portability: (a) how much the evaluation systems are externally conditioned and formalistic; (b) what is the level of institutional fragmentation, followed by ambiguous procedures and intensive coordination among actors, and (c) what are the levels of administrative capacity and informality.

Once the structural differences become smaller, adaptive compliance no longer represents a stable regime, and other patterns may emerge. Those include selective non-compliance, bureaucratic resistance, or genuine capacity-building. Surface cultural similarities, such as labels like jeitinho or wasta (Duarte, 2006; Ali & Weir, 2020), are not enough. What matters is whether the same structural conditions are present simultaneously.

The mapping between portability conditions and constitutive elements is direct. External conditionality and formalistic monitoring activate politicized discretion and audit-focused monitoring. Fragmented authority and procedural ambiguity produce strategic ambiguity and drive risk-minimiz-

ing adaptation. Limited capacity and informality enable role differentiation and anticipatory obedience. Outcome-procedure decoupling and capability erosion are the products of the stabilized regime — they emerge once the other six are in operation.

Proposition 6 (Spillover among policy implementation domains): Adaptive compliance spills over from simple, low-risk administrative procedures to critical policy domains, such as healthcare, education, and climate governance. It is further amplified if external policy monitoring fails to weed out performativity.

Audits put pressure on administrators, and incentives push them to apply procedures in highly visible domains. Over time, routines are developed, and decisions are made strictly based on checklists of actions deemed safe. Thus, practices developed in low-risk administrative settings become the default response in high-visibility domains. This suggests that the social costs of adaptive compliance depend on monitoring design. If evaluations focus on outcomes rather than procedures, the spread of checklist-driven practices would be interrupted.

5 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The paper makes three theoretical contributions: *integration, specification, and extension* of the extant theory.

5.1 Integration

Four research traditions have each captured part of the phenomenon this paper theorizes, but none has produced the full mechanism.

The policy implementation literature suggests that formal decisions need not have a substantive impact (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973) and identifies ambiguity and conflict as structural drivers of implementation failure (Matland, 1995; O'Toole, 2000). However, it does not recognize that formalistic external monitoring can be coupled with political discretion to yield a stable governance regime.

Research on the audit society shows that formalistic monitoring leads to distorted incentives and to a focus on easily measurable proxies that replace the evaluation of substantive policy outcomes and impacts (Power, 1997; Bevan & Hood, 2006). Nevertheless, the concept of adaptive compliance moves beyond measurement design issues and warns that coupling political discretion with administrative incentives results in sustained performativity and a focus on external stakeholders. This research has left the internal actor structure that sustains the performance largely unspecified.

Neopatrimonialism and informality scholarship explained the persistence of informal authority beneath formal institutional covers (Eisenstadt, 1973; Erdmann & Engel, 2007; Aliyev, 2015). Still, this literature does not look at how informal authority shapes the specific dynamics of policy implementation under external conditionality.

Research on performative governance has shown the theatrical aspect of the public sector, when the orientation toward the external stakeholders prevails (Ding, 2020). This part of extant literature focuses on signaling compliance to the international community and "masking" what actually happens within the country. However, the extant research does not specify the internal actor structure that sustains the system and its performative functioning.

In this paper, I integrate the four extant literature streams by specifying a single mechanism that connects contextual conditions, actor incentives, role structures, and outcomes of failed policy implementation under described circumstances.

5.2 Specification

Naming the mechanism matters because it allows the three observable patterns to be predicted simultaneously and tested independently. This paper defines specific forms of administrative behavior that neighboring theoretical notions, including symbolic compliance, decoupling, red tape, street-level discretion, and corruption, have not addressed fully. The proposed mechanism covers both the symbolic adoption of administrative rules and the processes that lead to public policy outcomes.

I also specify the three groups of actors and roles within the system, characterized by decoupling

and symbolic compliance, and show how their interaction leads to the system stabilization. I argue that red tape is a structural condition, while street-level discretion is limited to describing the frontline decision-making within rule frameworks.

My proposal for the adaptive compliance concept and mechanism is distinct because it exhibits a specific combination of empirically verifiable patterns, including the inflation of audit trails, risk-management proceduralism, and a gap between procedures and outcomes. All of those can be connected to the role hierarchy (see Section 3.3), while none of the neighboring concepts describe the observable administrative processes and their outcomes.

5.3 Extension

I have developed two specific claims, which extend the extant literature. Firstly, after observing the effects of the existing EU conditionality frameworks, I argue that they currently unwillingly contribute to the stabilization of the adaptive compliance regime, as they focus on formal documentation and procedural clarity, and do not focus on substantive policy outcomes (Zweers et al., 2022; Mendez & Bachtler, 2011). This problem cannot be reduced to measurement issues, as it creates an institutional reality that shapes the performativity of work in public administration and sets incorrect organizational and managerial benchmarks in affected societies. This leads to a very uncomfortable implication: when accountability instruments are well designed and applied to environments with historical and institutional reliance on informality and coping, they create the wrong incentives and stabilize inefficient and unethical administrative regimes.

My definition of the role structure within the adaptive compliance regime does not simply relabel the existing concepts. Principal-agent models describe hierarchy but do not explain why power brokers benefit from maintaining strategic ambiguity rather than resolving it (Carson & Yarhi-Milo, 2017; Poznansky, 2022). Street-level bureaucracy theory describes frontline discretion but does not account for the dual and simultaneous vulnerability of frontline implementers to client hostility and to gatekeeper dependence (Lipsky, 1980; Weaver, 1986; Hood, 2011; Zacka, 2017). Thus, the frontline administrative focus on procedures can be explained as a rational agent response rather than blamed on unidentified pathologies.

In addition, I specify that the regime is self-sustaining and, even, expanding to additional administrative and social domains, due to informational asymmetries and incentive structures. Adaptive compliance does not decay under its own weight because each level of the hierarchy has structural reasons to reproduce it.

6 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

While this study is focused on the theoretical and empirical aspects of adaptive compliance regimes, it has practical implications for the functioning of public administrations and the external evaluation mechanisms that interact with them. Adaptive compliance is a human system that shapes the practices of public servants who must also maintain the moral integrity of their behavior (Shiff, 2024). Under high ambiguity and formalistic compliance pressure, their work with citizens is increasingly experienced through dynamics of trust and blame in citizen–bureaucrat encounters (Liu & Wang, 2026) and inadvertently contributes to adverse effects on democratic resilience.

As citizens experience the government as morally and substantively absent — with the administration focusing on legally defensible and legitimizing procedures — they become cynical and oriented toward private coping mechanisms (*'snađi se'*) (Christensen et al., 2020). This results in a vicious circle of adaptive compliance, in which underperforming institutions lead to cynicism, politicization, and private coping, as unintended policy implementation feedback effects (Sievert & Bruder, 2024). Empirical research supports this claim: even anticipation of routinized administrative procedures raises citizens' experience of administrative burden (Bækgaard & Madsen, 2024) and may further motivate civic coping practices. Those civic practices further motivate public servants to focus on performativity and procedurality, as administrators respond to their contested expertise (Christensen, 2024).

To successfully reform the adaptive compliance regime, simultaneous changes are required in monitoring, formal procedures, and the selection and promotion procedures. If reform addresses a single component of such a regime, for example, by adding more compliance checks or more training of frontline administrators, the regime will probably absorb it without significant changes. This can also be tested in future comparative research.

Future interventions need to equip administrators with strategies of bounded moral integrity to resist informal pressure, document decisions, resolve ambiguity through proper escalation, and develop public service motivation (Ripoll & Schott, 2024). Without a deliberate effort to escape the vicious circle of adaptive compliance, senior administrators will continue to signal informally to their workforce that moral withdrawal, cynicism, and defensiveness are the 'right' way of professional functioning. Empirical research shows that even under adverse conditions, public servants can respond to unethical leadership with moral compensation and more ethical behavior (Schuster et al., 2024). Breaking the cycle of adverse selection and reframing external evaluation should become focal points for disrupting adaptive compliance regimes.

This lesson needs to be delivered to external actors across EU institutions and the international policy community. The current reform support mechanisms may not work if formalistic adoption replaces transformation, with an implied goal of 'stability-first' (Zweers et al., 2022). Withdrawing from support and reform mechanisms should not be a strategic choice; external conditionality could work if reframed to disrupt, rather than inadvertently reinforce, adaptive compliance regimes — specifically by shifting monitoring toward outcome-sensitive rather than document-sensitive performance criteria.

7 FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

There are several directions for future research that follow from the introduction of the adaptive compliance regime and mechanism. Since I argue that the regime and its functioning are portable to structurally similar political environments, future research should establish whether this proposition holds. The candidate environments could use the settings within the European semi-peripheral regions, Latin American competitive-authoritarian countries, and hybrid regimes in the Global South. It would also be highly important to use longitudinal research to determine whether Western Balkan public administration institutions exhibit the additional loss of institutional capacity suggested by the research propositions. In addition, researchers might wish to use quasi-experimental designs to empirically identify the effects of external monitoring reforms, with a focus on substantive outcomes and impacts of public policies. It is not clear that such a reform would disrupt the adaptive compliance regime, as it could simply generate a new layer of compliance performance. However, this remains to be tested by future research.

Each of the previously recommended future research directions is grounded in the propositions and theoretically identified components of the adaptive compliance regime. The framework was built to guide intervention research and not only to diagnose.

8 CONCLUSION

Adaptive compliance is not fate. It is a product of wrong incentives, externally focused and formalistic monitoring, and rational administrators' response. Equilibria can be disrupted by changing the parameters that sustain them, even when those parameters have been stable for a long time.

Still, professionals can retain agency, even under high ambiguity and discretion. They can choose to weaken the existing regime if they focus their work at least a little on achieving substantive policy outcomes and impacts. Redesign of the external monitoring procedures might help, but the choice remains, and it depends on whether a professional chooses to keep their head down or to resist and contribute to the unmaking of the adaptive compliance regime.

EXTENDED SUMMARY/IZVLEČEK

Ta članek predstavlja konceptualno sintezo, ki uvaja adaptivno skladnost kot samostojen režim izvajanja politik. Adaptivna skladnost je opredeljena kot implementacijski režim na ravni sistema, v katerem administratorji, ki delujejo pod pogoji politizirane diskrecije in pritiska formalističnega nadzora, svoje napore preusmerjajo od doseganja vsebinskih učinkov politik k postopkovni uspešnosti, ki jo je mogoče formalno zagovarjati. Članek opredeljuje hierarhijo vlog v javni upravi, nosilce moči, varuhe postopkov in izvajalce na prvi liniji, ter analizira njihove medsebojne interakcije v procesu izvajanja politik. Ob opiranju na literaturo o performativnem upravljanju, neopatrimonializmu, neformalnih institucijah in dinamiki revizijske družbe članek razvija raziskovalne propozicije, ki določajo pogoje, pod katerimi adaptivna skladnost nadomesti upravljanje, utemeljeno na pravilih, in administrativni profesionalizem. Teoretični prispevek članka je v tem, da povezuje različne literaturne tradicije v enoten mehanizem, jasno opredeljuje meje adaptivne skladnosti v razmerju do sorodnih konceptov (simbolna skladnost, razklapljanje, običajni birokratski formalizem) ter identificira strukturo vlog, prek katere se ta režim reproducira in ohranja. Predlagane propozicije služijo kot usmeritve za prihodnje primerjalne empirične raziskave, ki bi obravnavale tako notranjo dinamiko sistemov adaptivne skladnosti kot zunanje nadzorne režime, ki performativnost nehote krepijo. Ob uporabi Zahodnega Balkana kot izrazito kontrastnega primera institucionalne erozije, strateške dvoumnosti in zunanje pogojenosti ta konceptualni okvir ponuja tudi pomembne implikacije za demokratično odpornost in reformo javne uprave.

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