CRITICAL PAPER

Being Empowered or Feeling Like a Pawn?

How Ministerial Reorganization Affects the Work Motivation of Top-Level Bureaucrats

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Abstract Governments often reallocate administrative units among ministries to meet parties' office and policy demands or to increase political control over the bureaucracy. How do such reforms affect the work motivation and performance of ministerial bureaucrats? Based on self-determination theory, this paper expects detrimental effects on bureaucrats' ability to meet the basic psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness, which should reduce work motivation. This negative effect should be weaker when bureaucrats perceive a substantive rationale and long-term benefits of the reform compared to changes perceived as driven solely by party-political goals. We find support for these expectations in interviews with top-level ministerial bureaucrats in Germany working in two policy areas (public construction and consumer protection) that were frequently reallocated between ministries. The study shows that organizational change also affects work motivation among top-level bureaucrats and has broader implications for understanding civil servants' motivations and performance as well as unintended consequences of public sector reforms.

Keywords Institutional reform · Ministerial bureaucracy · Self-determination theory · Interviews · Germany

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Machtgewinnung oder Bauer auf dem Schachbrett?
Der Effekt von Ministerienreorganisation auf die Arbeitsmotivation von Spitzenbeamten

Zusammenfassung Regierungen schneiden häufig die Zuständigkeiten und Struktur von Ministerien neu zu, um die Ämter- und Policy-Ziele der Regierungsparteien umzusetzen oder die politische Kontrolle über die Bürokratie zu erhöhen. Aber welche Auswirkungen haben derartige Reformen auf die Arbeitsmotivation und Performanz in der Ministerialbürokratie? Auf Basis der Selbstbestimmungstheorie („self-determination theory") ist zu erwarten, dass Reformen die Möglichkeit von Bürokrat*innen reduzieren, ihre grundlegenden psychologischen Bedürfnisse nach Kompetenz, Autonomie und sozialer Eingebundenheit zu befriedigen, was ihre Arbeitsmotivation reduzieren sollte. Dieser negative Effekt sollte schwächer ausfallen, wenn Bürokrat*innen die Reform als substanziell gerechtfertigt und langfristig vorteilhaft ansehen im Vergleich zu Reformen, die als ausschließlich machtpolitisch motiviert wahrgenommen werden. Diese theoretischen Erwartungen bestätigen sich in Interviews mit deutschen Spitzenbeamt*innen in zwei Politikfeldern (Bauwesen und Verbraucherschutz), die in jüngerer Vergangenheit wiederholt zwischen Ministerien verschoben wurden. Der Aufsatz zeigt, dass organisatorischer Wandel selbst bei Spitzenbeamt*innen Auswirkungen auf die Arbeitsmotivation hat. Diese Befunde haben weiterreichende Implikationen für unser Verständnis der Motivation und Performanz von Bürokrat*innen sowie der unbeabsichtigten Nebenwirkungen von Verwaltungsreformen.

Schlüsselwörter Institutionenreform · Ministerialbürokratie · Self-determination theory · Interviews · Deutschland

1 Introduction

The most recent German cabinet formation in December 2021 led to major changes in ministerial structures. In addition to creating a new Ministry for Housing, Urban Development and Building, eight of the remaining 15 ministries (including the Chancellor's Office) gained and/or lost competencies from/to other ministries. Such a government reorganization is not extraordinary. Political actors in European democracies reform the structure of ministerial bureaucracies frequently by shifting jurisdictions and associated administrative units between ministries. Several studies show that such reforms can help politicians achieve their policy, office, and vote goals (Davis et al. 1999; Derlien 1996; Klüser 2020, 2022; Kuipers et al. 2020; Mortensen and Green-Pedersen 2015; Pollitt 1984; Sieberer et al. 2021; Sieberer 2015). Political actors as principals can use such institutional changes to increase their control over bureaucratic agents and thus reduce agency loss (Dewan and Hortala-Vallve 2011; Epstein and O'Halloran 1999; Huber and Shipan 2002), make administrations more efficient, and improve service delivery (Dunleavy and Hood

1994). While reforms of the ministerial structure are thus attractive from the view of political actors, we know much less about their effects on ministerial bureaucrats.[1]

This paper argues that reforming ministerial structures entails underestimated negative side effects for the motivation of civil servants and indirectly for policy-making, at least in the short run. Reforms that shift administrative units to new ministries force bureaucrats to adapt to a new working environment and produce severe transaction costs, especially if they are instituted for party-political reasons and implemented in an ad hoc fashion (White and Dunleavy 2010). While an ample body of research has studied the motivational effects of organizational changes on front-line bureaucrats and public sector employees (see Kuipers et al. 2014 and Vandenabeele et al. 2014 for reviews), we know little about how the higher echelons in the ministerial bureaucracy react to such reforms.

Motivational effects of ministerial reforms are worth studying for two reasons. First, the motivation of bureaucrats has received a lot of attention in public administration research, often focusing on the question of whether bureaucrats pursue egoistic goals (e.g., maximizing their budget and minimizing their workload) or altruistic goals ("public service motivation"). In either case, changes in ministerial organization can affect the motivation and subsequently the behavior of bureaucrats. Second, the motivation and behavior of civil servants, especially top-level ministerial bureaucrats, has implications for policy processes. The ministerial bureaucracy with its vast resources and expertise is essential for designing and implementing policy initiatives on behalf of the political leadership, coordinating policy across different areas, and autonomously managing day-to-day policy-making in less salient policy areas (e.g., Schnapp 2004). However, the functioning of the bureaucracy critically depends on the actions of its top-level members, who are usually working under high time pressure and extreme demands. In this situation, decreased motivation and transaction costs emerging from ministerial reforms can reduce the work output of the ministerial bureaucracy and thus make the policy process slower and less effective. Thus, motivational effects of ministerial reforms are not only relevant from the employees' perspective but can influence the functioning and the policy outputs of the political system more broadly.

In studying motivational effects of ministerial reforms, we start from the assumption that top-level bureaucrats have a keen interest in affecting public policy and display high levels of public service motivation (PSM). We draw on self-determination theory (SDT), which demonstrates how the structure of the workplace and changes therein can affect the motivation and subsequently the performance of employees (e.g., Deci and Ryan 2014; Gagné and Deci 2005). We argue that reforms influence (usually negatively) civil servants' ability to meet the three basic needs identified by SDT: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. We argue that these effects will be particularly strong if bureaucrats perceive reforms as driven by party-political motives rather than substantive concerns that are expected to facilitate or improve administrative performance in the long run.

We investigate this theoretical claim in a comparative case study of two policy areas in Germany—public construction and consumer protection—that were repeat-

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[1] Throughout the paper, we use the terms "bureaucrat" and "civil servant" interchangeably.

edly reallocated to different ministries but differ with regard to the perceived drivers of reform. While affected bureaucrats perceived the changes in the public construction sector as purely politically motivated, civil servants in consumer protection agree that their shifts also had a substantive background.

Empirical evidence from in-depth interviews with top-level bureaucrats in both sectors shows that civil servants experienced negative consequences with regard to all three basic psychological needs. While the basic patterns are similar in both sectors, civil servants in consumer protection were less negative about the change because they sensed larger influence for their policy area when moved to a more powerful ministry, which indicates that a substantive logic behind a reform can attenuate some of the motivational costs of organizational change. In addition, we detect side effects of ministerial reforms such as setup costs in new ministries and reduced levels of trust and information flow that should negatively affect work outputs and thus policy-making. As we discuss in more detail in the conclusion, our case selection makes us confident that these findings can be generalized beyond the German case and the specific policy areas studied here.

2 Theoretical Framework: Self-Determination Theory, Work Motivation, and Ministerial Reorganization

How does the reallocation of administrative units between ministries affect the work motivation of civil servants? A theoretical answer requires addressing three sequential questions: What motivates top-level civil servants in general? How does the organizational context of the ministry affect this motivation? And, finally, what are the effects of changes in ministerial organization?

Extant work in public administration and political science makes diverse assumptions on the general motivation of bureaucrats. While rational-choice approaches in political science often highlight self-interested monetary and budgetary incentives (e.g., Downs 1967; Niskanen 1971; Rose-Ackerman 1986), many public administration scholars emphasize value-driven concerns. In particular, work in the PSM tradition argues that civil servants are motivated by altruistic goals such as serving the public interest and improving public policy (Vandenabeele 2007; Vandenabeele et al. 2014; for reviews, e.g., Ritz et al. 2016). In this view, individuals choose a career in the civil service and invest effort on the job because they want to affect public policy rather than having an instrumental desire to maximize their personal income (monetary incentives) or minimize the amount of effort required (slacking).

We assume that our target group—high-level civil servants in the ministerial bureaucracy—is at least partially driven by PSM, in particular a desire to shape public policy to solve problems and achieve desired societal outcomes. As highly qualified professionals, top-level civil servants could usually earn higher wages in the private sector, suggesting that they did not choose public sector employment for monetary reasons. Furthermore, administrative elite surveys in Germany show that many of them agree that their role involves initiating projects and solving problems, and almost all of them state that they enjoy the political aspects of their job (Schwanke and Ebinger 2006). Thus, top-level ministerial bureaucrats are aware

of and actively embrace their dual role between administration and policy-making. Accordingly, there is high potential for intrinsic motivation as an important driver of their activity.

How does the organizational context of the workplace—in our case, the ministry—affect this type of motivation? A huge literature in psychology has addressed this question both theoretically and in applied research in the public as well as private sector (for reviews, see, e.g., Deci and Ryan 2014; Heckhausen and Heckhausen 2018). We focus on SDT, which has been used prominently in recent theorizing on the motivational bases of public administrations (e.g., Vandenabeele 2007). The theory identifies three main psychological needs that motivate individuals: the needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. The need for competence implies that employees draw satisfaction and work motivation from being able to fulfill demanding tasks and expand their capabilities. The need for autonomy captures the desire to act according to one's own interests, values, and beliefs, without external restriction. Finally, the need for relatedness refers to motivation drawn from a sense of involvement, good relations, and belonging to a social group, here the group of professional peers (Niemiec et al. 2010, pp. 174 ff.; Gagné and Deci 2005). If these needs are met, individuals develop higher intrinsic (in SDT terminology, "autonomous") work motivation. Thus, they pursue their jobs and invest effort in order to achieve goals they personally care about irrespective of extrinsic motivations such as monetary incentives or further career prospects. This intrinsic motivation in turn promotes better work performance (Deci and Ryan 2014, pp. 16 ff.).

While originating in psychology, SDT is broadly used in neighboring disciplines to study the link between individual motivation and human behavior. In political science research on public administrations, SDT has been proposed as the motivational basis for a comprehensive theory of public service motivation, treating PSM as one type of autonomous motivation identified by SDT. According to Vandenabeele (2007), SDT provides microlevel mechanisms to explain how the institutional context of public administrations fosters the internalization of public service values by individual civil servants. If public sector organizations—in our case, ministerial bureaucracies—are organized to allow civil servants to meet their basic psychological needs, they enhance PSM among them (in addition to the self-selection effect of attracting publicly minded persons in the first place), which ultimately leads to better work outputs.

It is highly plausible to expect that civil servants value all three psychological needs, in particular the need for competence (i.e., the ability to fulfill meaningful tasks) and autonomy (i.e., the ability to affect public policy in line with their own substantive beliefs).[2] High intrinsic motivation is particularly important among ministerial bureaucrats who have to meet higher demands with regard to workload and creativity than most street-level civil servants and, given inflexible payment

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[2] It is debatable to what extent bureaucrats can independently affect policy in line with their own preferences. In theory, the hierarchical structure of the bureaucracy should closely tie bureaucratic action to the policy goals of the minister, i.e., the political leadership. In practice, however, political attention is limited, leaving bureaucrats some freedom to maneuver, both in preparing policy proposals and in ultimately implementing them (e.g., Schnapp 2004). Empirical research shows that top-level bureaucrats in Germany acknowledge and treasure these more political aspects of their jobs (Schwanke and Ebinger 2006).

schemes in the German public sector, can hardly be motivated by monetary rewards as extrinsic incentives.

Shifting working units between ministries can affect civil servants' ability to satisfy all three basic needs identified by SDT. In theory, these effects can be positive or negative. Reforms can provide better conditions for civil servants to achieve their goals by making the allocation of jurisdictions more efficient but can also impede everyday work due to the associated reorganizations and costs of transformation. They can facilitate or impede the need for competence and autonomy by improving or weakening the position of units in the ministerial hierarchy as well as budgetary and staff resources. Bureaucrats' needs for relatedness can be damaged by disruptions of existing social relations and the necessity of integrating into a new work environment with a potentially different organizational culture; on the other hand, such changes can also be perceived as beneficial if employees experienced problems in their previous organization. Finally, civil servants can gain with regard to their motivation if reorganization elevates them to a more powerful ministry, whereas moves in the opposite direction impede their ability to fulfill their needs for competence and autonomy.

Analytically, it is useful to distinguish further between short-term and long-term effects of reforms. In the short run, reorganization mainly produces costs, as it disrupts established routines and personal bonds, creates uncertainty (which many people experience as demotivating), and requires additional effort to integrate into a new environment. These short-term costs are particularly high if reorganization occurs in an ad hoc fashion without careful planning and preparation, as is often the case for reallocations of ministerial units (White and Dunleavy 2010; Davis et al. 1999; Sieberer et al. 2021).

In the long run, however, the balance between positive and negative effects of ministerial reorganization, especially with regard to the needs for competence and autonomy, should differ depending on the reasons for reform. If reforms address substantive shortcomings that hinder policy-making and administrative work (e.g., a split of functionally linked jurisdictions between different ministries or placement of a unit in a ministry that is weak or has other policy priorities; see Hegele 2020), civil servants should see them as beneficial for meeting their competence and autonomy needs. By contrast, reforms that are driven by party-political concerns unrelated to policy-making (e.g., pursuing office goals of specific parties or ministers or vote-seeking behavior of parties) lack such positive effects and may instead decrease motivation because civil servants feel treated like powerless pawns in a political game.[3]

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[3] There is a certain gray area between substantive (i.e., policy-oriented) and party-political (i.e., primarily office- or vote-oriented) concerns because political actors may alter ministerial organization to pursue party-specific policy goals. For example, a party may strengthen the organizational standing of a topic that is highly salient for its voters in order to bolster its electoral chances. Such a reform may improve policy-making from the perspective of bureaucrats, even though the political motivation behind the reform is mostly a reaction to party-political voting (and possibly office) goals. We expect that civil servants see such a reform more positively than a reform that only serves a party's office goals without any policy effects. On the general distinction between parties' policy, office, and voting goals as well as the interdependencies between these goals, see, e.g., Strøm (1990).

This theoretical argument yields two sets of expectations that guide our empirical analysis. First, we expect that jurisdictional shifts between ministries negatively affect the motivation of civil servants in the short run because they impede meeting the fundamental needs identified by SDT. As we are dealing with higher echelons of bureaucrats in an overall loyal and determined public service, we do not expect that such motivational effects strongly inhibit the ability of ministries to fulfill their tasks. However, we still expect some detrimental short-term effect on motivation and work performance, both for civil servants and employees in lower positions (e.g., administrative support staff).

Second, we expect that these negative effects of reforms will be weaker if civil servants foresee positive long-term consequences for their ability to meet their basic needs, especially with regard to the competence and autonomy motives. Thus, bureaucrats should react more positively and downplay the short-term costs if they perceive reforms to be driven by plausible substantive concerns related to policy-making and administrative efficiency rather than by purely party-political reasons.

3 Study Design and Methods

We investigate these expectations empirically with a comparative case study design using semistructured interviews with top-level civil servants working in two policy areas in the German ministerial bureaucracy: the public construction sector and consumer protection.

Our case selection is based on two considerations. First, both policy areas were reallocated between ministries repeatedly over the last decades, so affected bureaucrats have ample experience with the effects of such reforms. The construction sector, originally part of an independent Ministry of Regional Planning, Building and Urban Development until 1998, was shifted as a division to the Ministry of Transportation in 1998, to the Ministry of the Environment in 2013, and to the Ministry of the Interior in 2018. The area of consumer protection, which originally consisted of two separate working units on health-related consumer protection and economic consumer protection in the Ministries of Health and of Economic Affairs, respectively, was upgraded to two divisions in the Ministry of Consumer Protection and Agriculture in 2001. It was split again when the division on economic consumer protection was moved to the Ministry of Justice in 2013. Both policy areas were shifted to new ministries again with the formation of the Scholz cabinet in December 2021. The construction sector became part of a reestablished independent Ministry for Housing, Urban Development and Building. Consumer protection (both its economic and health-related aspects) was shifted to the Ministry for the Environment. These very recent shifts are not included in our analysis.

The underlying driver of reform—our core explanatory variable—varies between the two cases according to both civil servants and political actors. Throughout our interviews, civil servants considered the reallocation of the construction sector as driven by purely political concerns, and this assessment was confirmed by top-level politicians who participated in the coalition negotiations in which these decisions were made. Referring to the 2018 reform, one politician told us, "That was very

much driven by the Minister of the Interior's thirst for power" (Interview 12).[4] Our interview partners also explained previous shifts of the construction sector as driven by party-political needs rather than substantive policy concerns (see below, Sect. 4.1.1).

By contrast, the reform of the consumer protection sector in 2001 was triggered by a substantive problem, i.e., a major food safety scandal about the import of cattle infected with bovine spongiform encephalopathy ("mad cow disease"). According to the interviewed civil servants, the shift of economic consumer protection to the Ministry of Justice in 2013 was also meant to increase administrative efficiency and effectiveness because that ministry was already responsible for many legislative projects concerning consumer protection. Thus, the comparison of the two cases allows us to assess our expectation that the cause of reform moderates the motivational effects on bureaucrats.

We interviewed high-level civil servants (heads of working units or higher[5]) who had experienced at least one shift between ministries; some of our interview partners had even participated in all the shifts that occurred since 1998.[6] At least in the cases studied here, most high-level bureaucrats changed ministries along with "their" topics, i.e., did not stay behind in the old ministry. Potential interview partners were identified from the organizational charts of the relevant ministries at different points in time. Besides bureaucrats, we also conducted three interviews with politicians who participated in coalition negotiations to gain insights into the political dynamics of portfolio design reforms. The interviews were semistructured based on a question guide covering various topics, including motivational effects of the reforms on civil servants.[7] The interviews were conducted in the period 2018–2020 either in person or on the phone, were recorded with the consent of all interview partners, and lasted about 45 min on average. Overall, we interviewed six civil servants in the public construction sector and five civil servants in consumer protection. The number of

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[4] All verbatim quotes were translated by the authors. The original wording in German is provided in the Appendix.

[5] We interviewed four heads of working units (Referatsleiter), three heads of subdivisions (Unterabteilungsleiter), and four heads of divisions (Abteilungsleiter) or state secretaries (Staatssekretäre, which is the highest administrative position in a German ministry).

[6] Relying on current interviews to study the effects of past reforms raises the danger of recollection bias. We cannot exclude the possibility that our interview partners have some false memories or interpret events differently today than they did in the past. However, our interview partners were very considerate and at times stated that they do not remember details. Furthermore, the statements obtained from different interview partners are very similar. Both points make us confident that memory distortions do not bias our findings strongly.

[7] We did not use a formal questionnaire to measure the different motivations identified by SDT but reconstructed them from answers to open interview questions. Pertinent questions for this paper include "How did the staff deal with the reform?," "How do superiors keep them motivated?," and "How did the shift between ministries affect your work in practice?"

We chose this procedure because motivational effects were only one part of our research interest and should not take up too much time. To reconstruct the motivations, we sorted through answers and assigned them to the three basic needs on a case-by-case basis. Statements that could fit with multiple needs were discussed intensively among the authors. Nonetheless, it was difficult to disentangle fully the needs for competence and autonomy because respondents often referred to them jointly. For this reason, we discuss these two needs together in the empirical section.

interviews is relatively small due to the low number of ministerial units in these sectors and our focus on high-level bureaucrats with long careers within the respective units. However, the answers proved to be rather homogeneous, with few new points arising in later interviews. Thus, we are confident that we reached empirical saturation and did not miss major points.[8]

4 Empirical Analysis: The Effect of Reallocation on the Motivation of German Top-Level Ministerial Bureaucrats

The empirical analysis proceeds in two steps. First, we describe the effects of reallocations on the work motivation of civil servants in the two policy areas along the basic needs identified by SDT. We discuss the needs for competence and autonomy together because interviewees often referred to these needs at the same time. In a second step, we assess our theoretical expectations about commonalities and differences between the two cases.

Throughout the discussion, we summarize the statements of our interviewees and illustrate them with selected verbatim quotes. Most interview partners used very diplomatic and careful language, which is hardly surprising for top-level bureaucrats. Thus, concerns were often stated in mild rather than blunt terms, but the message to be conveyed was obvious (and was often confirmed in response to explicit queries).

4.1 Public Construction

4.1.1 Need for Autonomy and Competence

Our interviewees clearly stated that a reallocation to a new ministry greatly affected their everyday work. Overall, we identified six factors related to employees' motivation based on the needs for autonomy and competence: (1) a lack of information on upcoming reforms, (2) feelings of powerlessness, (3) uncertainty about future shifts, (4) a sense of frustration during the transition period, (5) fear of disadvantages for career prospects, and (6) a perceived weakening of the construction sector's standing in the ministerial bureaucracy.

First, *the information flow regarding reforms* was mentioned in all interviews. The interviewees emphasized that they did not participate in the decision-making process on reallocations and had no knowledge about how the changes came about. Most of them learned about the reforms from the media and were caught completely unprepared (Interviews 1, 2, 4, 5). The reallocation to the Ministry of the Interior in 2018 in particular was a surprise for all interview partners. Most of them criticized the information flow via the media as demotivating.

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[8] Note that the problems mentioned by our respondents are quite similar to those obtained in a study that investigated the consequences of ministerial reforms on top-level bureaucrats in the United Kingdom (White and Dunleavy 2010, pp. 32–42).

That came as a surprise. Well, I would have thought that after just 4 years in the Ministry of the Environment, this would continue for a while. [...] As I said, it was a bit strange having to hear it on the radio. (Interview 2)

This indirect flow of information left civil servants with a *feeling of powerlessness* and having no voice in the decision. Furthermore, learning about reforms from the media rather than the respective minister or their administrative superiors was perceived as a lack of appreciation. Several interview partners stated feeling like a "challenge cup" ["*Wanderpokal*"] (Interviews 1, 3, 5) that could be attached to any ministry for party-political reasons, with a substantive justification being constructed by political actors after the fact. All interviewees were convinced that the reallocation to the Ministry of the Interior in 2018 was solely due to political power games and not to any recommendation by senior ministry officials. Very few thought that this reform made any sense from a policy-making perspective. Such judgements reinforce the feeling of powerlessness and, thus, have a negative impact on the individuals' need for autonomy.

[This was] typically politics. It had nothing to do with substantive considerations. (Interview 5)

Third, the frequent reallocations made civil servants feel *uncertain about future shifts*. Since none of the interviewees had expected to move to the Ministry of the Interior, they did not dare make predictions about how long they would actually stay there. However, all interviewees doubted that their division would remain in the Ministry permanently, and some expected to be reallocated to a new ministry again after the 2021 elections that were upcoming (Interviews 1–5, 13).[9] This uncertainty has a negative effect on integration in the Ministry of the Interior, as high effort may not be worth it from the perspective of employees (see also the discussion of the need for relatedness below). Consequently, the division does not perceive itself as a full part of the ministry, with many employees feeling replaceable and concerned about their professional future in case of another reallocation.

[...] with administrative staff there is a lot of fear associated with it, yes. Because they simply think, "Am I getting left behind here?" [...] and this insecurity is reflected in the work, in the atmosphere; that's not good. (Interview 2)

While the aforementioned aspects mainly referred to bureaucrats' need for autonomy, we identified three additional factors that are more closely related to the need for competence. First, our interview partners mentioned *frustration during the transition period* based on two different problems. First, all interviewees stated that a shift to a new ministry initially requires major organizational effort that impedes their ability to do their everyday work. Challenges include minor problems such as changing telephone numbers and e-mail addresses, which hampers employees' availability, as well as major organizational issues such as moving to a new building or lacking technical equipment (Interviews 1–5, 13). Second, employees have to get

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[9] Several interview partners told us that their favored scenario was an independent ministry of housing, which actually was established in December 2021.

used to new processes, rules, customs, and unspoken habits in the new ministry. This includes, for example, different procedures for staff evaluations or vacation regulations. Most interviewees agreed that this transitional period produces a lot of friction and lasts at least one year. Because these mundane tasks detract energy from bureaucrats' main duties, they frustrate the need for competence.

> There's a lot of friction loss. Such organizational change, and this is the third one I'm involved in, [...] you can really say, takes a good year to get everything up and running again. (Interview 5)

Second, employees fear being *disadvantaged in their career prospects*. The interviewees stated repeatedly that a new member of a ministry has to get back in line when it comes to promotions (Interviews 3, 4, 5). This is perceived as particularly upsetting and demotivating because the civil servants themselves are not involved in the decision to change ministries. In contrast to the affected employees in consumer protection (see below), the employees from the construction sector did not get the chance to avoid the reallocation by changing jobs within the prior ministry.

Finally, reallocations not only affect individual career chances but also lead to a perceived *weakening of the construction sector's standing within the ministerial bureaucracy* in general. Civil servants take the frequent shifts as indication that their work and the construction sector in general do not rank highly in political priorities (Interviews 1, 2, 13). As a result, they do not feel taken seriously and believe that their position in negotiations with other parts of the ministerial bureaucracy is weakened, which negatively affects their ability to pursuit their objectives.

> So I think that the image of the construction sector has been badly harmed over all these years. And also the significance of what we do here. (Interview 2)

Overall, the interviews demonstrate that the ministerial reallocations of the last two decades reduced the ability of bureaucrats in the construction sector to meet their needs for autonomy and competence, with demotivating effects on work satisfaction. All interviewees stated that the shifts made their daily work more difficult for at least one year. They also acknowledged that the situation improves after a period of transition. However, this makes starting all over again after a new reallocation a few years later even more frustrating.

4.1.2 Need for Relatedness

Based on the interviews, we can identify three aspects of ministerial reallocation that negatively affect civil servants' need for relatedness and positive social relationships in the workplace: (1) a lack of trust from new colleagues, (2) a diminished sense of belonging to the new ministry, and (3) tensions due to competing objectives compared to other units in a ministry.

First, many interview partners referred to a *lack of trust* between the reallocated units and the rest of the ministry and stated that building trust takes time. A lack of trust can impede the information flow, especially with regard to sensitive information, and can affect teamwork negatively (Interview 4). Building up trust is further complicated by the fact that new units often do not work in the same lo-

cation initially, leading to limited personal contact with other parts of the ministry (Interview 2). Most interviewees emphasized that it takes at least one 4-year electoral period for a more trusting cooperation to emerge. According to one interview partner, it took even 8 years of intensive cooperation for trust to prevail between the various divisions after the public construction sector was reallocated to the Ministry of Transportation in 1998.

> They worked intensively together in four legislative periods, and only in the third legislative period, only in the third—so after 8 years—was there slowly a more trusting cooperation between these different work areas. (Interview 4)

Second, due to past and potentially future reallocations, civil servants in the public construction sector do *not feel that they belong* to the respective ministries. This lack of a sense of belonging undermines integration into the new ministry (Interview 13). Integration is a nontrivial task because ministries are characterized by different organizational cultures. After about 15 years in the Ministry of Transportation, the employees of the construction division had adapted to its culture and felt a certain sense of belonging to this ministry. In 2013, they had to adjust to new cultures in the Ministry of Environment and only 4 years later to that of the Ministry of the Interior. These numerous shifts made them feel uprooted:

> We came from the Ministry of Transport and were sent to the Ministry of Environment. We came from the Ministry of the Environment and were sent to the Ministry of the Interior, which makes you think of yourself as an appendix. (Interview 13)

Finally, positive social relationships in the workplace are sometimes impeded by tensions that arise from *competing objectives between different divisions in a ministry*. (This factor also negatively affects the need for autonomy, i.e., the ability to reach one's substantive aims.) Many interviewees pointed to this problem when the construction sector was moved to the Ministry of the Environment because the objectives of the construction division often conflicted with environmental aims advocated by other parts of the ministry. Our interview partners generally felt that environmental issues were given more weight in solving such internal conflicts, which led to feelings of neglect and negative effects on cooperation within the ministry (e.g., Interviews 4 and 13).

> The environmentalists in the ministry usually prevailed and more or less hindered the construction sector by imposing conditions that were not compatible with my building policy. (Interview 13)[10]

Overall, the interviews produced clear indications that civil servants in the construction sector felt a lack of trust and belonging in their new ministries and sometimes clashed with colleagues pursuing competing substantive objectives in their

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[10] Note that the construction sector was placed on the same hierarchical level (Abteilung) as the environmental units and had its own state secretary. Thus, its problems to prevail compared to other interests in the ministry were not due to hierarchical differences or the lack of an own representative at the top level of the ministry.

work. These aspects negatively affect the prospect for integration in the new working environment and suggest a decrease in work motivation based on the need for relatedness.

4.2 Consumer Protection

4.2.1 Need for Autonomy and Competence

The interviews with five civil servants from the area of consumer protection yield similar findings for four out of the six factors we identified in the case of public construction. We discuss these factors only briefly.

First, interviewees also criticized *the flow of information* when they were reallocated to the Ministry of Justice in 2013. As their colleagues in the construction sector, civil servants were surprised by the decision, played no role in the decision process, and thus could not prepare for the transition.

Second, nonparticipation in the decision-making process again caused a *feeling of powerlessness*, thereby impeding the need for autonomy. All interviewees stated that the reallocation was decided by political actors during coalition negotiations without any input from the affected bureaucratic units. Some interviewees also pointed to a second dimension of powerlessness by stating that they had less say in setting priorities within the Ministry of Justice than they had had previously in the Ministry of Agriculture and were in a weaker position to exert substantive influence (i.e., to meet their needs for autonomy and competence) (Interview 7).

> I have experienced the Ministry of Agriculture in such a way that it gave the individual actors greater scope for action. (Interview 7)

Third, civil servants in consumer protection agreed that ministerial reallocations create uncertainty about their own *career prospects*. Many of the consumer protection staff decided to stay in the Ministry of Agriculture and take up new positions in other divisions within that ministry instead of making the transition to the Ministry of Justice, which illustrates the concerns that the reallocation caused for employees (Interviews 6–10). All interviewees confirmed that some colleagues (not only support staff but also high-level civil servants leading working units) refused to take part in the reallocation.

> It was particularly the case with the heads of unit that the conservatively structured part tended to stay in the old ministry because they expected better opportunities there and also felt more at home in their own culture. (Interview 9)

Fourth, our interview partners reported organizational problems due to the reallocation, e.g., clarifying which parts of the ministry would be involved in the transition and finding offices for new staff, leading to *frustration in the transition phase* (Interviews 6–10).

Beyond these similarities, the differences compared to the construction sector are particularly revealing. First, our interview partners in consumer protection did not refer to *uncertainty about future changes* as a problem. They were convinced that economic consumer protection is reasonably affiliated with the Ministry of Justice

and did not have the impression that another change was imminent.[11] These civil servants had never felt that they fit well into the Ministry of Agriculture, which had led to internal conflicts in the past. Therefore, the reallocation to the new ministry was expected to result in improvements (Interview 9).

> I regarded this as fundamentally positive for consumer policy because it got out of a certain niche. (Interview 9)

Second, the interviewees did not have the impression that the *image of consumer protection* was damaged by the reform. To the contrary, they were convinced that their position was significantly strengthened because they felt that the Ministry of Justice was more powerful overall than the Ministry of Agriculture (Interview 6).

4.2.2 Need for Relatedness

The previous section showed that detrimental effects on the needs for autonomy and competence were weaker for the area of consumer protection compared with the construction sector. With regard to the need for relatedness, the picture is reversed. All interviewees emphasized that the *cultural differences* between the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Justice are striking. These cultural differences led to three major problems: *lack of trust, no feeling of belonging*, and *condescending treatment by colleagues* (Interviews 6–10).

Most of the interview partners stated that they did not feel welcome in the new ministry initially. Because the Ministry of Justice predominantly employs lawyers, it was particularly difficult for the employees from the consumer protection division, most of whom have different professional backgrounds, to find acceptance. In the view of our interview partners, lawyers in the Ministry of Justice share a specific self-conception, seeing their top priority as protecting the constitution (among other things, the ministry is responsible for reviewing the constitutionality of all draft bills prior to the parliamentary stage) (Interview 9). With this background, many of them find it difficult to trust new colleagues without legal training. This lack of trust was felt by civil servants in the consumer protection division and made them feel unwelcome, not belonging to the new ministry, and even outright rejected at first.

> Yes, it is sometimes the case that lawyers can be a bit arrogant, so I would say it is also a question of what kind of welcome culture employees are then greeted with. (Interview 10)
> And there [were remarks] too, [like] "Oh well, here come the farmers"[12], in quotation marks. So that was very bad. (Interview 11)

Overcoming such cultural differences takes time. The interviewees confirmed that this process requires a lot of attention and has not yet been completed—even 7 years after the reallocation. Full integration into the ministry is further complicated

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[11] This expectation turned out to be wrong, with the shift of consumer protection to the newly designed Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Nuclear Safety and Consumer Protection in December 2021.

[12] In this context, the German term "Bauer" (farmer) can have a strongly derogatory connotation.

by the fact that the consumer protection division is located in a separate building, leading to limited personal contacts with other units of the ministry (Interview 6, 8). Overall, satisfying the need for relatedness within the Ministry of Justice is a major obstacle for civil servants in the consumer protection division and can therefore have demotivating effects (Interview 6).

4.3 Comparative Assessment of Theoretical Expectations

What conclusions can we draw from the comparative analysis of the two policy areas with regard to our theoretical expectations? First, both cases clearly support the expectation that jurisdictional shifts produce negative short-term consequences for employees. In both cases, we found evidence that reallocation to a new ministry decreased the ability of top-level civil servants as well as other staff to meet the basic needs identified by SDT, and our interviewees acknowledged that this had negative effects on motivation. These negative consequences were more serious in the construction sector that was repeatedly reallocated for party-political reasons without any obvious substantive motivation.

Second, the evidence also provides support for our theoretical expectation that the foreseeable positive long-term consequences dampen the negative short-term effect of reallocations. While the interviewees from the public construction sector could not see any future benefit and felt like a "challenge cup" to be passed on for party-political reasons, civil servants from the field of consumer protection expected positive long-term prospects from the reform due to efficiency gains and a more powerful position of their new ministry. All interviewees confirmed that they had to cooperate with the Ministry of Justice on a regular basis when they were still located at the Ministry of Agriculture (Interview 6–10) and thus considered pooling jurisdictions in one ministry useful. In the long run, this merger was expected to strengthen the position of consumer protection policy and thus improve the ability of civil servants in this field to fulfill their competence and autonomy needs.

> I believe that this professional expertise [...] is one aspect which has, I think, strengthened the impact of consumer policy as a whole. (Interview 10)

These prospects do not eliminate the negative short-term effects of the reallocation, especially with regard to the issue of relatedness mentioned above. However, according to our interview evidence, they are one reason why civil servants in the consumer protection division feel less negative and demotivated by the reallocation of their units than their colleagues in the construction sector.[13]

4.4 Potential Effects on Policy-Making and Policy Outputs

Our empirical analysis focused on the motivational effects of ministerial reforms. While these effects are important in their own right, we can also analyze the impli-

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[13] Given recent developments, it would be interesting to investigate whether the unexpected shift of the consumer protection units to a less powerful ministry after the 2021 elections has a negative motivational effect.

cations of these effects (as well as other aspects of changing ministerial structures) on the policy process. While this is not the focus of the current paper, our interview evidence suggests that the policy-making process and its ultimate outcomes may be affected by changes in ministerial structures in three respects.

First, such reforms can affect policy coordination within and between ministries. Several interviewees stated that shifting units between ministries negatively affects the information flow because new workflows have to be installed and the necessary trust to share sensitive information may be missing. Furthermore, such shifts can hinder policy coordination if units within a ministry have competing policy agendas, as was, for example, the case for the public construction sector after its shift to the Ministry of the Environment. While cooperation was hindered in this instance, we can, of course, also think of reforms that reallocate units to a ministry where they fit better, thus improving policy coordination. To some extent, this was the case for consumer protection, and many reforms of ministerial responsibilities are justified with the claim that they concentrate related jurisdictions in a single ministry to improve coordination (see also Derlien 1996, p. 570). While we should take such statements with a grain of salt given the power-political background of many reforms, there are certainly cases in which pooling jurisdictions facilitated far-reaching policy reforms. Probably the clearest recent example in Germany was the fusion of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and large sections of the Ministry of Labour during the second Schröder government (2002–2005). This "super-ministry" was at least partly created to enable major welfare and labor market reforms that required reconciling competing interests that were previously enshrined organizationally in the two ministries and thus threatened to block each other.[14]

Second, shifting units between ministries produces transaction costs that reduce efficiency and can slow down the policy-making process (see also White and Dunleavy 2010). Several interview partners pointed to "friction loss" in the transition phase that binds energy and detracts from everyday work. They also indicated that this transition phase takes about a year, which is a considerable share of a typical 4-year legislative period.

Third, such reforms can strengthen or weaken the influence of policy areas within the ministerial bureaucracy. We found evidence for both directions. Civil servants in the public construction sector perceived a loss of power for their policy area due to repeated shifts between ministries. By contrast, the standing of consumer protection was seen as improving with the shift to the more powerful Ministry of Justice. While the perception of civil servants may diverge from the actual influence of different policy areas, ministerial structures do provide hints of the relative importance that governments ascribe to different policy areas (Mortensen and Green-Pedersen 2015; Klüser 2020; Derlien 1996). Systematically measuring how changes in ministerial structures affect the relative weight of policy areas and testing whether such changes

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[14] For example, Manfred G. Schmidt claims "most likely, Hartz IV [one of the main elements of the welfare state reform, the authors] would have been worn down in the process of interministerial coordination between the Ministry of Economic Affairs and the old Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. With the new design of ministries responsible for economic policy and social policy, the conditions for achieving a reform that cut deeply into previously vested rights and domains were much more favorable." (Schmidt 2007, p. 306, translation by the authors).

have observable effects on government policy output is an important avenue for future research.

5 Conclusion and Discussion

How do reallocations of organizational units between ministries affect the work motivation of ministerial bureaucrats in these units? Based on self-determination theory, we expected that such reallocations would decrease civil servants' ability to satisfy their basic psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness in the short run, leading to reduced work motivation. Furthermore, we argued that this effect is mediated by expected long-term benefits of reform: Civil servants anticipating to profit substantively from the reform in the future should feel less negatively affected by short-term reform costs than civil servants who are shifted between ministries for purely party-political reasons not related to their substantive tasks.

Our comparative analysis of two policy areas that were repeatedly reallocated between different German ministries provides clear support for these arguments. Based on in-depth interviews with top-level bureaucrats, we showed that organizational changes led to clear short-term costs for civil servants, decreasing their ability to reach all three basic needs and negatively affecting work motivation. We also found that this negative reaction was weaker in the area of consumer protection, where civil servants perceived the reform as motivated by a substantive concern that could improve their position in the long run. By contrast, bureaucrats in the public construction sector largely felt as victims of a political power game, with strongly demotivating effects. Furthermore, our interview evidence along with previous research suggests that ministerial reforms can affect policy-making and policy outputs.

These findings are novel because previous research on motivational effects of public sector reform has focused on lower-level bureaucrats and public service institutions rather than the ministerial bureaucracy (Kuipers et al. 2014; Vandenabeele et al. 2014). At the same time, our analysis is limited to two policy areas in a single country, raising the question of generalizability. Several arguments make us confident that the results reported here are not restricted to the cases studied. Self-determination theory is a general theory based on universal human needs and has produced consistent patterns across countries and different working environments (see Deci and Ryan 2014). Empirically, we know that reallocations between ministries are frequent throughout established democracies, with Germany showing a medium level of reform frequency compared to other Western European democracies (Sieberer et al. 2021). Within the German case, the two policy areas covered are quite different, while the problems identified by civil servants are generic rather than tied to country-specific or policy-specific factors. Thus, we expect that our argument should travel well across countries and policy areas; investigating this claim empirically is an obvious task for future research.

In closing, we discuss three broader implications of our findings for future research on the motivational effects of organizational change in the public sector. First,

this paper is one of the first to study these effects at the top level of the ministerial bureaucracy. Among other things, the ministerial bureaucracy differs from lower-level bureaucratic organizations by the self-image of top-level bureaucrats as working at the intersection of politics and administration with a relevant scope for independent action (Aberbach et al. 1981; Schwanke and Ebinger 2006). Thus, it is plausible to assume that top-level civil servants value the basic needs of competence and autonomy even more highly than bureaucrats at lower levels do. Given this difference, it is reassuring that our findings resonate well with work concerning lower-level civil servants and public sector staff, e.g., regarding the detrimental effects of insufficient change communication on employees' motivation (van der Voet et al. 2016) and of frequent structural reforms on the innovation orientation in public organizations (Wynen et al. 2017, 2020). Future research should address such parallels as well as potential differences directly by studying the motivational effects of organizational change comparatively across different levels of bureaucracy.

Second, our findings raise general questions about the motivations of top-level bureaucrats. Our argument is based on the assumption that these civil servants are at least partially motivated by altruistic, value-driven PSM, in particular the goal to influence public policy. Our interview evidence as well as surveys of administrative elites support this view. At the same time, rational choice scholarship argues that bureaucrats, especially in high positions, act rationally and strategically in pursuit of their personal goals (e.g., Brehm and Gates 1999; Epstein and O'Halloran 1999; Huber and Shipan 2002). Some of the evidence discussed in this paper can also be read as supporting this rationalist view, e.g., the finding that civil servants consider how reforms affect their ability to implement their favored policies within their ministry and the executive branch more broadly.

This highlights a general conceptual question: Should we think of altruistic behavior based on PSM and rational, strategic choice as competing or compatible accounts of bureaucratic behavior? While much of the existing literature follows the first approach, other work indicates that PSM may at least partly emerge from rational behavior by bureaucrats and politicians (Gailmard 2010; Gailmard and Patty 2007). Bureaucratic organizations that grant civil servants leeway in designing and implementing policies systematically attract intrinsically policy-motivated individuals who draw personal utility from pursuing policy goals in their official capacity. Policy motivation is often based on ideological visions for society and is thus to some extent altruistic. Accordingly, arguments based on PSM and rational choice may produce observationally equivalent predictions on bureaucratic behavior even though they differ with regard to the underlying mechanism (value-driven behavior vs. rational calculation). Furthermore, on the ontological level, one may well argue that bureaucrats themselves, especially ministerial bureaucrats working at the intersection of politics and administration, engage in a mixture of calculating and value-driven behavior. Thus, exploring linkages between these supposedly competing explanations is a worthwhile avenue for future theoretical and empirical work on bureaucratic behavior.

Finally, our findings highlight unintended consequences of structural reforms in the ministerial bureaucracy. While reshuffles of jurisdictions may increase politicians' control over bureaucrats and thus avoid agency loss through bureaucratic drift

(Dewan and Hortala-Vallve 2011), the same reform may have detrimental effects on bureaucrats' work motivation. Going one step further, there is also evidence that such reforms affect policy-making and policy outputs—sometimes in line with political actors' goals but sometimes also in other directions. While academic observers have pointed to the monetary costs of restructuring the ministerial bureaucracy (e.g., White and Dunleavy 2010), these indirect costs for work motivation and, ultimately, performance should receive more attention in future research.

6 Interviews

- Interview 1—civil servant, construction sector—conducted November 26, 2018.
- Interview 2—civil servant, construction sector—conducted November 26, 2018.
- Interview 3—civil servant, construction sector—conducted December 13, 2018.
- Interview 4—civil servant, construction sector—conducted December 18, 2018.
- Interview 5—civil servant, construction sector—conducted February 4, 2019.
- Interview 6—civil servant, consumer protection—conducted April 17, 2019.
- Interview 7—civil servant, consumer protection—conducted May 29, 2019.
- Interview 8—civil servant, consumer protection—conducted June 12, 2019.
- Interview 9—civil servant, consumer protection—conducted June 13, 2019.
- Interview 10—civil servant, consumer protection—conducted June 24, 2019.
- Interview 11—politician who participated in the 2013 coalition negotiations—conducted November 13, 2019.
- Interview 12—politician who participated in the 2013 and 2017 coalition negotiations—conducted February 2, 2019.
- Interview 13—civil servant, construction sector—conducted July 22, 2020.
- Interview 14—politician who participated in the coalition negotiations 1998, 2002, 2005—conducted February 26, 2020.

7 Appendix

7.1 Original Verbatim Quotes in German

Page 17: Das war sehr getrieben vom Machthunger des Innenministers (Interview 12).

Page 22: Das kam überraschend. Also, ich hätte gedacht, nachdem wir nun gerade erst vier Jahre im Umweltministerium waren, würde das auch noch eine Zeit lang fortgesetzt. [...] wie gesagt, das war schon ein bisschen komisch, das einfach aus dem Radio vernehmen zu müssen (Interview 2).

Page 23: [...] typisch Politik. Das hatte mit fachlichen Erwägungen gar nichts zu tun (Interview 5).

Page 24: [...] bei Sachbearbeitern ist da schon viel auch teilweise Angst verbunden damit, ja. Weil sie sich einfach denken: "Bleib ich jetzt hier auf der Strecke?" [...]

und diese Unsicherheit, das schlägt sich nieder auf die Arbeit, auf die Atmosphäre, das ist nicht gut (Interview 2).

Page 25: Es gibt eine ganze Menge Reibungsverlust. So eine Organisationsänderung, und das ist ja jetzt die dritte, die ich mitmache, die, da kann man auch wirklich sagen, das dauert gut ein Jahr bis das alles so sich wieder eingespielt hat (Interview 5).

Page 26: Also ich glaube, dass man dem Image des Bauministeriums stark geschadet hat über diese vielen Jahre. Auch dem Stellenwert dessen, was wir leisten hier (Interview 2).

Page 27: Also sie haben quasi vier Legislaturen intensiv zusammengearbeitet und erst in der dritten Legislatur, erst in der dritten! Also nach acht Jahren! Kam es so langsam zwischen diesen verschiedenen Arbeitsbereichen zu einer vertrauensvolleren Zusammenarbeit (Interview 4).

Page 28: Wir kamen aus dem Verkehrsministerium und wurden ins Umweltministerium geschickt. Wir kamen aus dem Umweltministerium und wurden ins Innenministerium geschickt, da nimmt man sich selber erstmal als Anhängsel wahr (Interview 13).

Page 28: Da haben sich die Klimaschützer im Ministerium meistens durchgesetzt und haben das Bauwesen mehr oder minder gegängelt, indem da Auflagen gemacht worden sind, die mit meiner Baupolitik nicht vereinbar waren (Interview 13).

Page 30: Das Agrarministerium habe ich so erlebt, dass es den einzelnen Akteuren größere Handlungsspielräume gegeben hat (Interview 7).

Page 31: Gerade bei den Referatsleitern war es schon so, dass der konservativ strukturierte Teil eher im alten Haus geblieben ist, weil sie sich da bessere Chancen versprachen und sich in ihrer eigenen Kultur auch wohler fühlten (Interview 9).

Page 32: Ich habe das grundsätzlich für die Verbraucherpolitik als positiv gesehen, weil man aus einer bestimmten Nische herauskam (Interview 9).

Page 33: Ja es ist ja auch manchmal so, dass Juristen ein wenig dünkelhaft sein können, also ich sag mal, es ist ja auch die Frage mit welcher Willkommenskultur Mitarbeiterinnen und Mitarbeiter dann willkommen geheißen werden (Interview 10).

Page 33: Und auch dort gab es dann so, "achso, jetzt kommen die Bauern", in Anführungszeichen. Also das war sehr ungut (Interview 11).

Page 35: Diese Fachlichkeit [...] ist glaube ich ein Aspekt, der dann aber der Verbraucherpolitik insgesamt glaube ich auch mehr Durchschlagskraft verliehen hat (Interview 10).

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