

STRATEGIC PROJECT MANAGEMENT IN CENTRAL GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION: DILEMMAS OF INSTITUTIONALISATION

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Purpose: The article identifies the key institutional dilemmas that emerged during the implementation of the project-based approach in Polish central government administration and draws lessons relevant to the design of future mechanisms for implementing state strategy.

Design/methodology/approach: The article takes the form of a qualitative case study of the Strategic Project Monitoring System (*System Monitorowania Projektów Strategicznych*, SMPS), implemented between 2015 and 2023, and contributes to the tradition of practice-based/practice-informed research. The analysis draws on six years of expert-level professional experience in the development and implementation of the SMPS, a review of the relevant literature, primary source documents, reports of the Supreme Audit Office, and an unpublished internal research report produced by the Government Project Monitoring Office. The interpretive perspective incorporates Flyvbjerg's phronetic approach to organisational research.

Findings: The analysis identifies four categories of institutional dilemmas: the role of strategic documents in day-to-day state governance, including the functioning of the strategic projects portfolio; the definition of projects and the question of who implements them; the ambiguity of the concept of programme in public administration; and the conditions for meaningful implementation of the project-based approach. The absence of shared conceptual and organisational resolutions impedes the use of project monitoring as an effective management instrument.

Research limitations/implications: The findings reflect a single national case and the author's interpretive perspective as a reflective practitioner, mitigated through data triangulation.

Practical implications: Before formalising the project-based approach, administrators should reflect on the key conceptual questions regarding projects, programmes, and portfolios. Clear resolutions are desirable but not always achievable; what matters is awareness of these dilemmas. The strategic projects portfolio should be designed as a dynamic management instrument, not merely an annex to a strategic document.

Originality/value: The article offers a practice-informed institutional analysis of a concluded attempt to institutionalise the project-based approach in central government administration, providing a knowledge base for subsequent attempts at metagovernance of state strategy implementation. It is addressed to researchers in public administration and to practitioners responsible for designing strategic management systems in government.

Keywords: project-based approach, strategic project management, public administration, institutionalisation, metagovernance.

Category of the paper: Case study / Viewpoint.

1. Introduction¹

An important element of strategic state governance is meta-governance, understood as "an attempt to modify the institutional conditions that provide the framework for addressing particular types of social problems, undertaken in situations where existing conditions prove inadequate or dysfunctional" (Strumińska-Kutra, 2012). Well-designed institutions exert a decisive influence on the development of societies (Acemoglu, Robinson, 2014). In the case of Poland, however, analysts have identified "the limited significance of innovation in the management of public organisations, which constrains processes of change and development" (Wiatrak, 2017, p. 233). One such innovation may be the wider adoption of the project-based approach in public administration (Wiatrak, 2017, p. 236). In various countries, this approach has been associated both with reforms inspired by New Public Management – emphasising efficiency and accountability for results – and with later conceptions of good governance, which stress coordination, cooperation, and the capacity of the state to address complex problems. It is, on the one hand, a technique for organising work and, on the other, an element of broader institutional design: the creation of procedures, structures, roles, coordination mechanisms, and learning processes that enable the implementation of complex public interventions.

The project-based approach is reflected in Polish strategic documents. For example, the *National Development Strategy to 2020*, published in 2012, identified "increasing the effectiveness of public institutions" as one of its priorities, to be pursued through "the introduction of a managerial model of public governance, characterised inter alia by a citizen-centred orientation" and "a focus on the control of outcomes rather than procedures" (Strategia rozwoju kraju 2020, 2012, p. 34). The *Strategy for Responsible Development* (SRD), adopted on 14 February 2017 and superseding the aforementioned document, linked state efficiency to, among other things, "increasing the effectiveness of public institutions" (Strategia na rzecz Odpowiedzialnego Rozwoju, 2017, p. 225)². Among the instruments of implementation, the strategy listed project management, the building of inter-ministerial thematic teams, management by objectives, and e-government solutions. The SRD was to be "implemented using the project-based approach" characteristic of contemporary management concepts (Strategia na rzecz Odpowiedzialnego Rozwoju, 2017, p. 385). One of its aims was to move away from public policy conducted primarily through the successive enactment of legal regulations (cf. Zybala, 2012, p. 355).

¹ AI-assisted language correction and editing tools were used solely for linguistic correction and editing in the final stages of preparing this article. The article was translated into English with the assistance of AI tools.

² The SRD links managerial competence development mainly to the private sector.

The Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy (*Ministerstwo Funduszy i Polityki Regionalnej*, MFiPR) is currently developing a new medium-term national development strategy³. Regardless of any substantive assessment of that document, the effective implementation of the concepts it contains should be aided by drawing on experience gained during the implementation of the SRD. The continuity of administrative work is partly ensured by staff continuity within the ministry responsible for regional development. It may be assumed, however, that in central government offices – including the Chancellery of the Prime Minister (*Kancelaria Prezesa Rady Ministrów*, KPRM) – the personnel continuity of teams responsible for the operational monitoring of projects arising from the SRD is limited (cf. Zybala, 2012, p. 211). Meanwhile, the MFiPR website states that the document under preparation includes an action plan together with key projects to be implemented in the years 2026-2029 (Ministerstwo Funduszy i Polityki Regionalnej, 2026). Alongside the analytical, strategic, and editorial work, central government administration also carries out numerous projects on a day-to-day basis, for which the war in Ukraine, international security instability, and initiatives such as the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (*Krajowy Plan Odbudowy*, KPO) and SAFE constitute additional points of reference (Ziemacki, 2021).

The question therefore arises of what the institutional foundations for implementing projects in central government administration are, and whether the lessons learned from successive implementations are being collected, analysed, and applied in the design of new development strategies. Despite the presence of the project-based approach in the state's strategic documents, the mechanisms that support or undermine the implementation of strategic projects in government administration remain relatively poorly understood. This is particularly significant when one considers that project management – owing to its dynamic and diverse development – is sometimes described as a field that is "unformed and disorganised", still "in an early stage of development (*in statu nascendi*)", in which "even the most basic assumptions and principles (...) are not uniform" (Lichtarski, 2016). As a result, paradoxes and antinomies form an inherent part of the project-based approach, embedded, as it were, in the very nature of this field (Lichtarski, 2016). The aim of this article is therefore to review and systematise the experience of government administration between 2015 and 2023 with regard to the project-based implementation of state strategy⁴. On that basis, it asks what the key dilemmas of project management are and how they manifested themselves in a concluded attempt at implementation, the Strategic Project Monitoring System (*System Monitorowania Projektów Strategicznych*, SMPS), so as to draw lessons for the government administration responsible for implementing new strategic documents.

³ In late 2024, the government announced plans to adopt the medium-term national development strategy by mid-2025. (TVP Kraków, 2024).

⁴ The period under analysis begins in 2015 because the preparatory work on the SRD that year, including the call for project proposals submitted by ministries (cf. Section 4.2), already shaped the institutional logic within which the SMPS subsequently operated.

The article demonstrates that the experience of SMPS makes it possible to identify the fundamental challenges of institutionalising the project-based approach in government administration. The problem is not reducible solely to the need for stronger formal grounding of the system, as postulated by the Supreme Audit Office (Informacja o wynikach kontroli SMPS, 2022). Equally significant are the unresolved institutional dilemmas concerning the relationships between strategy, portfolio, programme, and project; between political and administrative accountability; and between mechanisms of organisational learning. The experience of the SMPS should therefore be treated not merely as a concluded chapter of the previous government's activities, but also as a resource of knowledge for subsequent attempts at meta-governance of state strategy implementation.

The precise questions raised in this article – what constitutes a strategy, what constitutes a project, what constitutes a programme, and what does the implementation of the project-based approach actually require – may appear elementary. Returning to them may at times give the impression of redundancy, as though one were explaining concepts taken for granted. In the practice of public management, however, overlooking them leads to significant misunderstandings. The analysis conducted in this article aims to expose the hidden assumptions and ambiguities that shape administrative practice. Understood in this way, the redundancy of knowledge – in Nonaka and Takeuchi's sense of intentional informational overlap – is not superfluous repetition, but a precondition for organisational learning and a source of potential institutional innovation (Nonaka, Takeuchi, 2000, p. 107).

2. Research Methodology

Henry Mintzberg described management as a process of "collective learning by managers" (Mintzberg et al., 1998, cited in Jemielniak, Koźmiński, 2012, p. 86). It is likewise emphasised within public management that "the sphere of producing feedback knowledge on the outcomes of public actions is key to the effectiveness of policies" (Zybała, 2012, p. 355). The article was produced within the field of political science and public administration, in the context of institutional studies on public management, and contributes to the tradition of practice-based/practice-informed recommendations (Weber et al., 2014). It constitutes a record, of sorts, of the lessons learned from the process of implementing the project-based approach in administration between 2015 and 2023. The point of departure for the reflections undertaken here was the assumption that, since governance bears the characteristics of an experiment, a key element of that process should be reflection on its course and the capacity to undertake

corrective action where necessary (Strumińska-Kutra, 2012)⁵. In the case under examination, the reference point for the experiment thus understood was the concept of project, programme, and portfolio management. The accumulated experience positions the article at the intersection of institutional research and practical reflection, incorporating stakeholder knowledge in the diagnosis of organisational problems (Strumińska-Kutra, 2012). The perspective adopted is interpretive in character: its cognitive value lies in the possibility of verbalising experience and formulating potential recommendations that may serve as a starting point for further research in the field of metagovernance (Strumińska-Kutra, 2012).

An important theoretical reference for the reflections undertaken here is also the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*, as adapted to the study of public management by Bent Flyvbjerg (Flyvbjerg, 2006). This approach emphasises the significance of practical wisdom, contextuality, and the analysis of power relations and values in decision-making processes. It enables the examined reality to be viewed not only through the lens of formal procedures and structures, but also through that of practical judgements, values, power relations, and the institutional context within which decisions were made.

The article takes the form of a qualitative case study. The analysis draws on the interpretation of practical experience, primary source materials, and secondary data, conducted iteratively using an interpretive approach. The identification of the dilemmas presented in this article was grounded in, among other things, six years of expert-level professional experience (2016-2022) in the development and implementation of the Strategic Project Monitoring System (SMPS).

Issues were treated as analytically significant if they recurred across those years of professional experience, remained conceptually unresolved despite institutional attempts to address them, and found independent confirmation in the documents examined in this article. Episodic or idiosyncratic difficulties were not. The conclusions formulated are the result of accumulated observations concerning the functioning of public institutions, recurring operational challenges, and informal organisational dynamics that frequently fall outside the scope of formal analyses. In this sense, the article draws on the perspective of the reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983), in which professional experience becomes a source of analytical knowledge and a basis for formulating recommendations. The present text goes beyond the level of individual reflection, however, in that it focuses – drawing on the relevant literature – on institutional processes and the formulation of systemic recommendations.

The analysis also draws on empirical materials that have hitherto featured only to a limited extent in the academic literature. These include a report of the Supreme Audit Office (*Najwyższa Izba Kontroli*, NIK) and an unpublished internal research report prepared by the Government Project Monitoring Office (*Rządowe Biuro Monitorowania Projektów*, RBMP;

⁵ "In this process, the key capacity proves to be the ability to reflect on the course of the experiment that is the implementation of designed solutions, and the ability to undertake corrective action when planned activities fail to produce the intended effects. Changes occurring in administration constitute precisely such an experiment".

KPRM, 2023)⁶. The study, conducted in 2023, aimed to diagnose the state of implementation of the system under examination within government administration. The system was analysed across six functional areas (Council, people, guidelines, organisation, portfolio, system) using a triangulation of research methods encompassing data analysis, survey questionnaire (N = 154, comprising 76.6% Project Leaders, 12.3% Programme Managers, and 11.1% representatives of Project Monitoring Offices), and four focus group interviews.⁷ The focus groups were conducted between 10 and 22 August 2023, in two-hour sessions with a total of 17 representatives – one from each Project Monitoring Office⁸ – using a standardised interview scenario. The level of System advancement was measured using a composite index based on twelve factual questions concerning strategic projects, grouped into key and important factors (e.g., whether an up-to-date budget, product list, and goal list had been defined for a given project), which together produced the 24-point scale reported in Section 3. The findings made it possible to identify both achievements and gaps in the implementation of the system, as well as to determine the directions and needs for its further development.

The perspective adopted in the article is consistent with the postulate of increasing the weight accorded to qualitative research in the analysis of public management processes (Hendren et al., 2022). At the same time, it entails certain limitations, chief among them the risk of subjectivity arising from participation in the processes under examination. This risk was mitigated through the application of data source triangulation, consisting in the cross-referencing of observations with the analysis of primary source documents and a review of the relevant literature. The aim of the article is not to present a universal model for implementing the project-based approach in administration, but to identify the dilemmas that emerged in a specific institutional case. The conclusions are therefore analytical and recommendation-oriented, and may serve as a starting point for further comparative research and the design of subsequent institutional solutions.

⁶ The report was obtained on 24 March 2025 in response to a request submitted to the KPRM under the procedure for access to public information.

⁷ The design of the expert analyses, the survey questionnaire, and the interview scenario was supported by the Working Group for Expert Support in the Development of the Strategic Project Monitoring System. The composition of the Working Group, listed in the annex to the research report, was as follows: Chair of the Working Group: Błażej Olek, PhD (Government Analysis Centre, KPRM); Mateusz Juchniewicz, Habilitated PhD, Professor of SGH Warsaw School of Economics; Bogdan Lent, Habilitated PhD, Professor of Bydgoszcz University of Science and Technology; Jacek Strojny, Habilitated PhD, Professor of Rzeszów University of Technology; Paweł Wyróżewski, Habilitated PhD, Professor of SGH Warsaw School of Economics; Piotr Charchuta (RBMP, KPRM); Monika Malocco (RBMP, KPRM); Tomasz Ugryn (RBMP, KPRM).

⁸ The KPRM and one ministry without currently registered strategic projects were excluded from this part of the study.

3. The Strategic Project Monitoring System

The Strategic Project Monitoring System represented an attempt to institutionalise the project-based approach at the centre of government administration. Its emergence should be understood both as a response to the earlier implementation deficits of Polish strategic documents and as part of the projectification of contemporary public management, also referred to as the development of the project economy (Midler, 1995). Industry reports emphasise that the capacity for project management is becoming one of the conditions for the effective achievement of strategic objectives, and that project competences are counted among the core skills of contemporary organisations (Nieto-Rodriguez, 2021). Projectification is extensively discussed both in the academic literature and in practitioner-oriented publications (Jacobsson, Jaloča, 2021).

The implementation dimension of the SRD was particularly significant given the previously superficial treatment of implementation in Polish strategic documents (cf. Płoskonka et al., 2012, p. 63). Earlier diagnoses had pointed to a "weakness in the implementation of programme documents" and inadequate inter-ministerial coordination (Grosse, 2006). The ex ante evaluators of both the Efficient State Strategy and the Medium-Term National Development Strategy similarly criticised the lack of detail given to implementation instruments and implementing bodies (Raport ex ante SOR, 2016). In the language of administrative practitioners, the SRD's aim was to break with the practice of adopting documents dismissed as "fiction" or "shelf-warmers", replacing it with a culture of "delivering commitments" – finalising projects and achieving assumed indicators (Kędzierski, 2022, p. 5). As the Supreme Audit Office later noted, prior to 2017 strategic projects had typically been implemented without an organised management and monitoring system or integrated management information enabling the optimisation of resources (Informacja o wynikach kontroli SMPS, 2022; cf. Zybala, 2012, pp. 259-260).

The provisions of the SRD concerning project management corresponded to the conclusions of an administrative capacity-building project conducted by the Head of the Civil Service in 2011-2015. A 2015 PwC report summarising this project found that, among the 168 participating offices, "no systemic activities aimed at professionalising project management" had been observed (Procesy, cele, kompetencje..., 2015, pp. 72, 104-105). The report recommended adopting established project management methodologies and systematically deepening staff knowledge in the field (Procesy, cele, kompetencje..., 2015, p. 104).

The absence of professional integrated management information tools is illustrated – albeit anecdotally – by the expression "Kaczyński's notebooks", which circulated in journalistic commentary (Rokita). This referred to the practice of the Prime Minister – during his 2006-2007 term of office – manually recording the status of matters and commitments undertaken by members of the government. Regardless of the anecdotal nature of this example, it illustrates well that the need for current information on the state of implementation of government priorities existed earlier, but was not supported by a permanent organisational system, uniform reporting standards, or a tool enabling the aggregation of data from different ministries.

Precise research would be required to estimate the costs arising from the absence of professional project management mechanisms in public administration. Expert commentary has included estimates that increasing project efficiency could yield savings of several billion zloty annually for Poland⁹.

The diagnosis and objectives set out in the SRD were thus accompanied by concepts for specific means of implementation. An integral part of the strategy was a list of so-called strategic projects. Its creation entailed the need to establish a team and tools enabling the ongoing monitoring of project implementation. Initially, these tasks were carried out within the then Ministry of Development by two departments: the Department of Development Strategy (*Departament Strategii Rozwoju*, DSR), coordinating work on the strategy, and the newly established Department of Project Management (*Departament Zarządzania Projektami*, DZP). Following the change of Prime Minister in December 2017, and in connection with the need to monitor projects implemented across all ministries, the DZP team was transferred to the Chancellery of the Prime Minister. Within the KPRM, the Government Project Monitoring Office (*Rządowe Biuro Monitorowania Projektów*, RBMP) was established on its basis. The activities conducted by the RBMP subsequently took the form of the Strategic Project Monitoring System (SMPS).

The SMPS framework, developed by the entire RBMP team, was presented in publications by Tomasz Janka, Director of the RBMP from 2017 to 2019; it is also explained on the government website dedicated to project management, which remains accessible, and in popularising publications¹⁰. The present article presents the logic of the system through a summary table and a diagram of institutional responsibility, discussed below.

⁹ In 2022, Professor Bogdan Lent estimated that Poland could save as much as PLN 3.5 billion annually by increasing project efficiency (Polska Wielki Projekt).

¹⁰ The doctoral dissertation defence of Tomasz Janka took place on 18 March 2026. Retrieved from: <https://www.bip.pw.edu.pl/Postepowania-w-sprawie-nadania-stopnia-naukowego/Doktoraty/Wszczete-po-30-kwietnia-2019-r/Rada-Naukowa-Dyscypliny-Nauki-o-Zarzadzaniu-i-Jakosci/mgr-inz.-Tomasz-Janka,22.05.2026>. Cf. also: <https://www.gov.pl/web/zarzadzanie-projektami>, 22.05.2026.

Responsibility for portfolio management rested with the newly established Strategic Projects Portfolio Monitoring Council (Rada Monitorowania Portfela Projektów Strategicznych), composed of constitutional ministers (Order No. 58 of the Prime Minister, 2018). The Portfolio area concerned the definition of project scopes, their inclusion in and exclusion from the portfolio, and ongoing monitoring and reporting. Data collection was carried out through a dedicated, incrementally developed IT system – "MonALiZa" – within the System area, which also covered the development of specifications and consultation and cooperation with contractors. Organisation was the component of the SMPS encompassing the network of project monitoring offices – counterparts of the DZP – within individual ministries. Within the Guidelines area, project monitoring processes were developed, along with recommendations concerning the management of projects, programmes, and portfolios. In parallel, dedicated training courses were launched at the National School of Public Administration, and regular training and networking meetings for project implementers were organised within the People area. Table 1 summarises these six areas and the dependencies between them.

Table 1.

Components of the Strategic Project Monitoring System and their mutual dependencies

Component	Function	Interdependencies with other components
Strategic Projects Portfolio Monitoring Council	Decisions on opening/closing projects, prioritisation	Decides on the basis of data from the Portfolio and MonALiZa; authority constrained by the non-binding status of the Guidelines and by the fact that the most consequential decisions on government priorities were taken in other forums
Portfolio	Defining project scope, inclusion in/exclusion from the portfolio	Dependent on Council decisions; formally constrained by its link to the strategic document (SRD); fed with data from MonALiZa
System	Data collection and aggregation	Data entered by the BMPs; data quality dependent on the Guidelines and competences developed under the People area; partly duplicates strategic reporting (DSR)
Organisation (network of BMPs)	Implementing project management within ministries	Operates according to Guidelines lacking binding status; uneven maturity across offices
Guidelines	Standards, terminology, monitoring process	Not formally adopted by the Council; limited influence on Organisation; agile-based guidelines for selected project types remained to be developed
People	Training, community of practitioners	Strengthens data quality in MonALiZa and the implementation of the Guidelines, but no formal mechanism links these effects to the evaluation of BMPs

The diagram below (Figure 1) presents the principal bodies of the system together with their responsibilities.

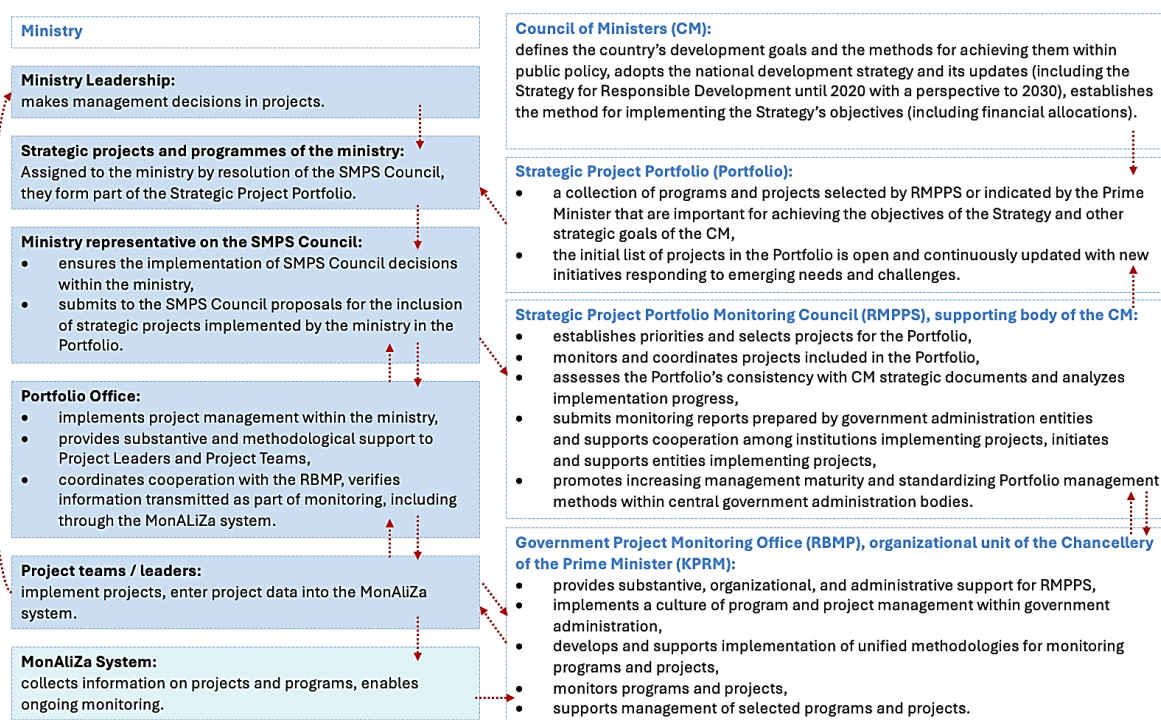


Figure 1. Structure of the Strategic Project Monitoring System.

Source: own elaboration based on Informacja o wynikach kontroli SMPS, 2022.

Figure 1 confirms that the SMPS rested not on a single tool but on an interlocking chain of institutional responsibility, from the Council of Ministers down to individual project teams.

The report produced by the RBMP research study conducted in 2023 noted "a high level of System advancement (average score of 20 points on a 24-point scale), alongside considerable variation across individual ministries (standard deviation of 3.9 points)" (KPRM, 2023). Among the achievements identified, the report highlighted – alongside the functioning of the SMPS Council – the existence of the inter-ministerial structure of the system: a Project Monitoring Office (*Biuro Monitorowania Projektów*, BMP) operated within each ministry and within the KPRM. These offices oversaw projects and programmes managed by more than 30 Programme Managers (*Kierownicy Programów*, KP) and 140 Project Leaders (*Liderzy Projektów*, LP). The report also noted the widespread application of governing principles, including a project management standard and a uniform terminology for strategic projects (KPRM, 2023). Among survey respondents, 74% confirmed the existence of project management principles within their organisations, and more than 72% declared that they applied them in the implementation of their projects (KPRM, 2023). The areas requiring further development concerned primarily: the legal grounding of project management in government administration, the strengthening of inter-ministerial cooperation, the improvement of decision-making processes, the clarification of principles for the prioritisation and selection of strategic projects, the equalisation of project structure maturity levels across offices, the strengthening of the roles of the RBMP and the BMPs, the enhancement of the competences and responsibilities of project leaders, and the further development of the project community, training provision, and the IT system (KPRM, 2023).

The Polish SMPS was not an isolated phenomenon. Comparable reflection on the projectification of public administration was taking place elsewhere in Europe during the same period. In 2017, the German Federal Office of Administration and the German Project Management Association launched the programme "Shaping Germany's Future through Projects" (Aktionsprogramm). At events resembling the Polish "Breakfasts with MonALiZa", German (Aktionsprogramm 2017) administration representatives cited public projects running as much as 73% over budget, with the nine-year delay and 250% cost overrun of Berlin Airport offered as a cautionary case (Wagner et al., 2022). Similar activity and research took place in the Nordic countries and in Ukraine (Wald et al., 2025; Jørgensen et al., 2023; Makarenko et al.).

Following the parliamentary elections of autumn 2023, the Strategic Projects Portfolio Monitoring Council was dissolved by order of the Prime Minister (Order No. 15 of the Prime Minister, 2024). The activities of the RBMP came to an end with the dissolution of the Government Analysis Centre, of which the Office was by then a part (Act of 15 May 2024). That the system could be dismantled through two administrative orders, without legislative involvement, illustrates institutionally what the Supreme Audit Office had identified as its central weakness: the absence of a statutory foundation left the entire mechanism dependent on political continuity rather than law. From the perspective of this article, this means that the SMPS constitutes a concluded – though relatively recent – case of an attempt to institutionalise the project-based approach in government administration. The conclusion of this phase should serve as an impetus for institutional learning: the systematisation of experience from the years 2015-2023, the identification of key dilemmas, and the application of the lessons drawn from them to the design of subsequent mechanisms for implementing state strategy.

4. Key Dilemmas of Institutionalising the Project-Based Approach

Portfolio, programmes, and projects constitute some of the fundamental tools for operationalising strategic plans. Information published by the MFiPR indicates that the new medium-term national development strategy is likewise to include an action plan together with projects. Tomasz Janka, drawing on Ika and Hodgson in his discussion of experience with implementing the project-based approach in the public sector, identified several typical pitfalls of this process (Ika, Hodgson, 2014, cited in Janka, 2024). Risks may arise when business solutions are implemented without accounting for the specific characteristics of the public sector, when quick results are expected, when managerial competences are insufficient (which would correspond to the provisions of the National Development Strategy to 2020), and when the specificities of local culture are not taken into account.

The pitfalls identified are extremely important, but they concern primarily the manner in which the project-based approach is implemented. The experience of the SMPS demonstrates, however, that equally significant are deeper institutional dilemmas concerning the manner of defining projects and programmes, the relationship between strategy and the day-to-day governance of the state, the legal grounding of the portfolio, the positioning of the monitoring body, and the integration of the project-based approach with existing administrative processes. Failure to resolve these dilemmas – or at least a lack of awareness of their existence – may lead to a reduction in the effectiveness of the system: limited utility of monitoring data, a decline in the quality of management decisions, and the formalisation of activities at the expense of their real impact on project implementation. The effectiveness of the project-based approach depends not only on its formal institutional construction, but also on the manner in which fundamental categories are defined, the quality of data, the relationships between actors, the allocation of responsibility, and the capacity of the administration to learn from experience. The subject outlined is extraordinarily multifaceted and requires in-depth study; the subsequent analysis therefore focuses on the following dilemmas:

- the role of strategic documents in the process of day-to-day state governance,
- the definition of a project, including the question of whether projects refer exclusively to activities implemented outside the ministry – that is, delivered to external beneficiaries – or also to undertakings conducted internally within ministries,
- the definition of a programme and its relationship to strategy, projects, and programme documents,
- the significance of implementing the project-based approach in government administration.

Other issues identified above – such as the legal grounding of the portfolio or the positioning of the monitoring body – appear in the article to the extent necessary for the discussion of these four dilemmas. Outside the scope of the present text, however, remains the necessary analysis of the linkages between the project-based approach and the budgetary process, the legislative process, management control, the risk management system, and personnel policy. This applies equally to classical principal-agent problems arising from the divergence between institutional objectives and the individual motivations of organisational participants (Szczepańska, 2017, p. 166).

4.1. What are strategies and who is responsible for their coordination?

There is no universally accepted definition of strategy in the literature. Existing definitions may be grouped into those that, first, equate strategy with a set of objectives, methods, and means; second, emphasise the importance of strategic differentiation; and third, relate to the overall functioning of an organisation (Szumowski, 2023, p. 146). In public administration too, the concept of strategy is not entirely unambiguous. In Poland, as Andrzej Zybała noted in

2012, "the concept of strategy in public administration has never acquired a settled meaning or a consistently applied definition" (Zybała, 2012, pp. 251-252). The experience associated with the SRD appears to confirm this thesis. The document introduced new elements into the understanding of governmental strategy and, through its emphasis on implementation, altered the prevailing logic of action. The ambiguity of the concept of strategy became all the more apparent when the document was expected not only to define the objectives and directions of state intervention, but also to serve as the basis for the ongoing monitoring and accountability of specific initiatives.

Historically, strategic management in Poland underwent significant change following the country's accession to the European Union.¹¹ The prospect of implementing structural funds provided a direct impetus for the creation of national strategies in accordance with the logic of "planning, programming, budgeting, identification, implementation, control and monitoring, and evaluation" (Szczepańska, 2017, p. 166). In 2006, the Ministry of Regional Development "counted 406 documents of a strategic character produced after 1989" (Zybała 2012, p. 251). The first key milestone in bringing order to the strategic management system was the Act of 6 December 2006 on the principles of development policy. The next government prepared a detailed document entitled *Assumptions of the Development Management System of Poland*, adopted by the Council of Ministers on 27 April 2009. It diagnosed the weakness of strategic programming mechanisms in Poland and proposed a framework comprising three categories of documents: a long-term national development strategy (a horizon of at least 15 years), a medium-term strategy (4-10 years), and nine so-called horizontal development strategies. The reform process was accompanied by, among other things, a handbook entitled *Strategic Management of Development* by Jarosław Górniak and Stanisław Mazur, published by the Ministry of Regional Development in 2012 (Górniak et al., 2012, p. 9).

Article 2 of the Act of 6 December 2006 defined development policy as "a set of interrelated actions undertaken and implemented with a view to ensuring the sustainable and balanced development of the country, socio-economic, regional and spatial cohesion, the enhancement of the competitiveness of the economy, and the creation of new jobs at the national, regional or local level". In accordance with Article 3a, it is "the minister competent for regional development who coordinates the preparation and implementation of development strategies co-financed from the state budget or from development funds originating from the European Union or other foreign sources".

Anchoring strategic responsibility within the ministry responsible for regional development strengthens the substantive character of the strategy and distances it from the day-to-day dynamics of politics. At the same time, this division remains blurred. As the authors of the MRR handbook write, "the administrative and political functions complement one another,

¹¹ Outside the scope of this article is the question of the role of strategy as an instrument through which European institutions may seek to limit "the room for manoeuvre and arbitrariness of political leaders representing member states." Cf. Cichocki et al., 2022, p. 18.

forming an integral whole" (Płoskonka et al., 2012, p. 62), operating within a single planning and implementation system aimed at improving living conditions in Poland. In practice, this means that action plans are developed on the basis of agreed strategic assumptions, but those strategic assumptions are themselves shaped by political choices. Successive governments bring their own diagnosis of the country's situation, their own hierarchy of objectives, and their own vision of the desired outcomes. The arrival of a new government with its own political programme therefore typically leads to a revision of strategic documents, so that they may serve as an instrument for implementing that programme. As the authors of *Strategic Management of Development* explain, development policy and specific public policies typically follow a cycle that begins with a political decision setting preliminary objectives, which are then elaborated through public deliberation before being translated into concrete strategies. Two things are established within this cycle: what a given public policy is meant to achieve, and how, by whom, and through what means those objectives are to be pursued (Płoskonka et al., 2012, pp. 73-74).

The tension between the formal status of the SRD and the expectations attached to its functions was already apparent to the authors of the ex ante evaluation. In their report, they noted that a significant factor influencing the process of drafting the Strategy – and in particular the prospects for its implementation – was the absence of a clear definition of the role, and especially the political role, that the SRD was to play. Formally, the Strategy constituted an update of the Medium-Term National Development Strategy; however, expectations emerged in the public debate that it should be treated as a direct plan for economic policy, or even as a governing programme (Raport ex ante SOR, 2016)¹². This ambiguity had consequences not only for the way in which the SRD was communicated, but also for the design of its implementation mechanisms. If the Strategy was to be treated primarily as a document within the development policy system, the natural focus became the monitoring of objectives, indicators, and directions of intervention. If, however, it was also to serve as a government action plan, it was necessary to track progress on specific projects, decisions, and commitments undertaken by individual ministries. In practice, this led to the coexistence of two monitoring logics: the strategic and the operational – that is, the project-based.

These tensions manifested themselves above all in the manner in which the strategic project portfolio was treated. It was the portfolio that was to constitute the practical mechanism for implementing the objectives and initiatives defined in the SRD. The experience of working on the SRD clearly demonstrates the need for deeper reflection on the portfolio's place within the administration – a topic that has also been relatively rarely addressed in the academic literature (Roberts et al., 2023). In management studies, a portfolio is understood as a collection of projects, programmes, and other activities grouped on the basis of their significance for the

¹² Andrzej Zybala distinguishes between documents produced on the basis of the Act on the principles of development policy and so-called strategic governing plans; cf. Zybala, 2012, pp. 272-273.

achievement of an organisation's strategic objectives¹³. The portfolio perspective enables the prioritisation of initiatives, the coordination of resources, the monitoring of progress, and decision-making regarding the launching, continuation, modification, or closure of undertakings. Understood in this way, the portfolio is thus an instrument for managing the relationship between strategy and its implementation¹⁴.

The difficulties associated with defining the relationship between the strategy and projects were already apparent at the ex ante evaluation stage of the SRD. The flagship projects were described in a manner the evaluator found "very general and laconic", which made it impossible to properly assess their likely effects (Raport ex ante SOR, 2016). Similarly, in the case of the so-called project fiches, the evaluator recommended a further assessment of whether their provisions remained consistent with the final version of the Strategy for Responsible Development (Raport ex ante SOR, 2016). At the present stage it is difficult to reconstruct the process of assessing the consistency of projects with the strategy, which should have been carried out between the preparation of the evaluation report and the adoption of the SRD¹⁵.

Despite the absence of this formal evaluation, the decision was taken to treat the list of projects as an annex to the strategy. This solution produced ambivalent consequences. On the one hand, it may have strengthened the pressure for the actual implementation of the initiatives proposed by the ministries. On the other hand, the adoption of the strategy together with the list of projects by resolution of the Council of Ministers meant that an instrument inherently dynamic in character lost part of its flexibility. Any change to the portfolio would require a process equivalent to updating a strategic document and a new resolution of the Council of Ministers.

The subsequent history of the portfolio illustrates well the unresolved dilemmas of strategic management in Polish government administration. The Act on the principles of development policy merely states that "the main public bodies participating within the government in the process of coordinating national development policy are: the Prime Minister and his advisory body, the Coordination Committee for Development Policy, the Minister for Regional Development, and other ministers, in particular the Minister of Finance" (Płoskonka et al., 2012, p. 76). Several tensions arising from this arrangement deserve attention.

First, from the perspective of monitoring strategic projects, the placement of the body responsible for the country's principal strategic document within one of the ministries means that two decision-making centres coexist within the government: the ministry responsible for regional development and the Chancellery of the Prime Minister. The KPRM is, after all,

¹³ Cf. *The Standard for Portfolio Management*. Project Management Institute; *Management of Portfolios*. AXELOS; ISO 21504:2015.

¹⁴ Handbooks published by the KPRM adopted a similar approach, defining a portfolio as "a collection of programmes and projects and other work selected according to specified criteria and grouped for the purpose of effective and efficient management and control." Cf. Ogonowski, Podkowińska, 2020.

¹⁵ The selection of projects always has a political dimension. The ex ante evaluation also called for verification of the consistency between project fiches and the final SRD (Raport ex ante SOR, 2016).

the body that provides administrative support to the Prime Minister and the Council of Ministers. Under Article 146 of the Constitution, it is the Council of Ministers that conducts the internal and foreign policy of the Republic of Poland, and under Article 146(4)(4) it coordinates and supervises the work of the organs of government administration (Constitution of the Republic of Poland, 1997, Art. 146). This tension was reflected both in the history of the monitoring team – which was transferred from the Ministry of Development (later the Ministry of Investment and Development) to the KPRM – and in the composition of the Strategic Projects Portfolio Monitoring Council. Its first chair was the Chair of the Coordination Committee for Development Policy. In this way, an attempt was made to preserve the unity of responsibility for coordinating the implementation of the strategy, while simultaneously locating the monitoring function within the KPRM, where the Prime Minister was, at least in theory, the natural recipient of information on project status.

Second, the equivalent of the portfolio updating process was to be the decisions taken by the Strategic Projects Portfolio Monitoring Council, which – on the basis of project charters and closure reports submitted by the ministries – decided respectively on the opening and closing of project initiatives. This mechanism partially restored to the portfolio the flexibility that had been constrained by its association with the strategic document. At the same time, it had significant limitations: the most important decisions concerning government priorities were naturally taken in other forums, primarily the Council of Ministers and government committees. The SMPS Council may therefore be regarded as having served a compensatory function: it organised information and formalised decisions concerning the status of projects, but did not resolve the problem of dispersed decision-making authority. During the course of the RBMP's activities, the idea emerged of potentially linking monitoring to the work of the Standing Committee of the Council of Ministers, but the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted reflection on this matter.

Third, the tension between the strategic and operational logics was reflected in the coexistence of strategic and project-based monitoring¹⁶. This division was grounded in the document *System of Development Management of Poland* (System zarządzania rozwojem Polski, 2018). However, the formal distinction of roles did not guarantee transparency or eliminate the duplication of activities. Strategic monitoring also encompassed data on ongoing initiatives, and the situation was further complicated by the assignment of some of these initiatives to individual sectoral strategies. After 2018, work was undertaken on extracting quarterly strategic reports collected by the DSR from the MonALiZa system; however, in practice a significant proportion of the reporting obligations of the ministries overlapped.

¹⁶ For the monitoring of key strategic indicators, the system at <https://strateg.stat.gov.pl/#/> is of significant importance.

The strategy-and-portfolio dilemma thus consisted in the tension between the need to anchor projects firmly within the state's strategic objectives and the necessity of preserving the flexibility appropriate to a management instrument. The experience of the SMPS demonstrates that the effective implementation of a strategy requires not only the adoption of a document and the identification of projects, but also a clear determination of who manages the portfolio, by what procedure it may be updated, what decisions are to follow from monitoring, and how responsibility is divided between the centre of government and the ministry responsible for development policy.

4.2. What are projects and who implements them?

The implementation of the project-based approach began as early as the stage of drafting the SRD. According to the ex ante evaluation report, a novelty in its preparation – compared with the Medium-Term National Development Strategy – was the solicitation of proposals for specific projects from the ministries (Raport ex ante SOR, 2016). Although, as the authors of the report maintain, the preparation of the SRD and the previous strategy followed a similar course, the exception was precisely "the proposed implementation system, which in the case of the SRD was accompanied by the preparation of project fiches, as well as the development of procedures related to project management and the preparation of a list of entities together with the detailed scope of responsibility of each of them in respect of the coordination and monitoring of the SRD" (Raport ex ante SOR, 2016). Drawing on good practices described in the PMBOK Guide, the fiches were to contain the data necessary for the launching of projects (Raport ex ante SOR, 2016).

The available materials do not make it possible to determine unambiguously whether the call for projects was accompanied by a definition of a project. The Strategy itself contained a broadly general distinction between types of initiatives rather than a definition of a project in the managerial sense: "Strategic projects constitute a bundle of undertakings of a varied character, or are targeted [punktowe] and are intended to stimulate other activities. Flagship projects, by contrast, are directed at the creation of specific products (tangible or intangible) or services with a view to enabling their emergence on the market and achieving a positive impact on the state of the Polish economy" (Strategia na rzecz Odpowiedzialnego Rozwoju, 2017, p. 16).

According to the definition given in the encyclopaedia of management, a project is a temporary, unique undertaking with a defined objective, a beginning and an end, aimed at producing a specific product, service, or result (Encyklopedia Zarządzania "Projekt" 2026). The responses to the call for projects issued by the then Ministry of Development to the ministries revealed considerable heterogeneity in the understanding of the concept of a project

within central administration¹⁷. It appears that by the time the Strategy was adopted, this heterogeneity had been reduced only partially. Even a cursory reading of the annex to the SRD and a comparison of the project table with the descriptions contained in the text of the Strategy demonstrate that a very diverse range of initiatives was brought together under the common label of "project." Alongside undertakings meeting the classical criteria of a project – such as "Common Ticket" – and large infrastructure ventures, such as "Intermodal Freight Terminal", the annex also included government documents, public programmes, and packages of sectoral measures. For example, the "Framework Plan of Action for Organic Food and Farming 2014-2020" was a programme document in character, while "Independent 2018" was a programme¹⁸. The project entitled "Academy for Innovation Managers" was described as "a programme addressed to enterprise managers", (Strategia na rzecz Odpowiedzialnego Rozwoju, 2017, p. 92) and "Efficient Healthcare" as "a package of programmes for the improvement of the situation in healthcare" (Strategia na rzecz Odpowiedzialnego Rozwoju, 2017, p. 284).

This problem was not purely terminological in nature. The manner in which a project was defined determined which initiatives could be included in the portfolio, what information needed to be collected about them, who should be responsible for their implementation, and according to what criteria progress and completion could be assessed. The absence of an unambiguous definition thus impeded not only the ordering of the project list, but also the construction of a coherent management information system, since it necessitated time-consuming work to establish, on a case-by-case basis, the scope of initiatives, their expected results, the allocation of responsibility, and the manner of their reporting. Moreover, not all civil servants were prepared to formulate concise management information.

The division of initiatives in the table into regulatory categories (e.g. "Concept for Changes to the Institutional and Regulatory Environment of Industry" and "Landscape Audits"), programme categories (e.g. "State Procurement Policy" and "Raw Materials for Industry"), and comprehensive categories (e.g. "Plant Breeding Support Programme in Poland" and "EXPO Exhibitions") may be interpreted as an attempt to address this challenge. These categories were, however, explained only superficially (Strategia na rzecz Odpowiedzialnego Rozwoju, 2017, p. 386). Intuitively, one might assume that regulatory projects concerned primarily changes to the law, programme projects the creation of policies or programmes, and comprehensive projects the implementation of complex packages of measures. Such a distinction did not, however, resolve the ambiguities. Particularly unclear was the meaning of the category "programme project," and an analysis of the names and descriptions of the projects points to considerable arbitrariness in the assignment of initiatives to particular types. For example,

¹⁷ The models presented by Płoskonka et al. (2012, p. 88) focused on policy monitoring and did not treat projects as a distinct management unit, which may have contributed to later difficulties in implementing the project-based approach.

¹⁸ In the SRD, the initiative is described as a programme aimed at building social capital and civic engagement around the centenary of Poland's independence (Strategia na rzecz Odpowiedzialnego Rozwoju, 2017, p. 288).

"Concept for Changes to the Institutional and Regulatory Environment of Industry" encompassed not only a regulatory component but also the preparation of an industrial support system (Strategia na rzecz Odpowiedzialnego Rozwoju, 2017, p. 82). Reducing a reform to legislative changes seems a considerable oversimplification. Similarly, "Landscape Audits" combined a legislative component with the actual identification and assessment of landscape resources (Strategia na rzecz Odpowiedzialnego Rozwoju, 2017, p. 349). It is also difficult to explain unambiguously why "State Procurement Policy" was classified as a programme project, while "Plant Breeding Support Programme in Poland" was classified as a comprehensive project.

The case of the SRD illustrates well the problem of projectification described in the literature, in which "project" becomes a word-in-use, employed to describe very different initiatives and for very different purposes (Jałocha, 2025). This ambiguity is reinforced by the polysemy of the term "project" in legal and administrative language. In legislation, "project" denotes both a draft legal act initiating the law-making procedure and technical documentation, an architectural or urban design, and – in the area of development policy and public finance – an undertaking implemented within a programme, often associated with a decision, contract, or funding from public sources, including European funds. As a result, the same word may refer to a proposed legal norm, documentation, an investment activity, a project funded from EU resources, or an element of a development programme.

Of particular significance is the Act on the principles of development policy, in which projects appear as an element of the implementation of programmes (operational and development). Such initiatives are treated "as the lowest element of the implementation framework of a given strategy. They are implemented on the basis of a decision or a concluded agreement" (Płoskonka et al., 2012, p. 76). The Public Finance Act of 27 August 2009 uses the concept of a project primarily in reference to undertakings financed from the state budget, such as research and development, educational, or infrastructure projects. The Act of 28 April 2022 on the principles of implementing tasks financed from European funds in the 2021-2027 financial perspective (Article 2(22)) defines a project as an undertaking aimed at achieving an assumed objective defined by indicators, with a specified beginning and end of implementation, submitted for or covered by EU funding from one of the structural funds, the Cohesion Fund, or the Just Transition Fund within a programme.

In this way, definitional ambiguity was combined with a second problem: the question of who, within public administration, is the appropriate implementer of a project. Public administration operates within a multi-level framework of institutions, subsystems, and dependencies with its environment. The results of its activity may therefore be considered at least at two levels: as results produced within administrative units, and as effects achieved in society or the economy through the aggregate of many activities, undertakings, and public interventions (cf. Płoskonka et al., 2012, p. 62). From the perspective of monitoring strategic projects, this distinction is of fundamental importance.

In one established understanding of public projects, the administration is not a direct implementer but rather an organiser, funder, commissioner, or regulator of activities carried out by other entities. In the understanding proper to development policy, public finance, and European funds, a project is often an undertaking implemented by a beneficiary or contractor, rather than directly by a ministry. Projects are then carried out through competitions, contracts, public procurement, public-private partnerships, or other forms of service contracting (Wiatrak, 2017, p. 238). This understanding is consistent with the logic of New Public Management, in which the administration sets objectives, provides resources, establishes rules, and accounts for outputs, but does not necessarily carry out all activities itself (Bratkowski, 2009, p. 131). In this sense, the implementers of projects are frequently entities applying for EU funds or other resources allocated by managing authorities or government agencies (Kędzierski, 2022).

A particular instance of this understanding of a project is that of projects financed from European funds. In their case, the literature draws attention to the risk of a shift in emphasis from the achievement of public outcomes to the formal expenditure and accounting of funds. Jerzy Bratkowski described the implementation of EU projects as a multi-level collective action problem, in which the primary task becomes the "processing" of the allocated resources (Bratkowski, 2009, pp. 151-152). In its most extreme form, this leads to a situation in which the closure and accounting of a project begins to be treated as a success regardless of the broader effect of the intervention.

At this point a fundamental dilemma emerges: what is the project-based approach in government administration actually supposed to concern? Is it about project management – understood as a set of techniques, tools, and methodologies serving the efficient conduct of a specific undertaking – or about managing by projects – understood as a broader organisational and strategic philosophy (Turner, 1993)? In the first conception, a project is primarily a unit for the implementation and accountability of activities. In the second, it becomes a way of organising the work of the state around priorities, results, responsibility, and learning. The answer to this question has practical consequences. If "project" denotes an external initiative financed or contracted by the administration, the system monitors primarily the implementation of policies through financial, regulatory, and organisational instruments. If "project" denotes an internal undertaking of a ministry, the system monitors the capacity of the administration to organise its own work. If "project" denotes an element of a strategy, the portfolio becomes an instrument of strategic state governance. If, however, "project" denotes any "topic to be delivered", the system risks conceptual inflation, an increase in reporting burdens, and a weakening of the decision-making function of monitoring. For this reason, the stronger legal grounding of the project-based approach postulated by the Supreme Audit Office should be preceded by an answer to the question of what is to be monitored, which meaning of the project-based approach is to be the subject of regulation and to what extent. Nevertheless, even if a single implementation methodology cannot be applied

uniformly across such diverse initiatives, all of them require continuous improvement in the quality of their management – particularly in terms of the clarity of responsibility, the reliability of management information, and the coherence of decision-making processes.

4.3. What are programmes?

The Strategy for Responsible Development indicated that the document constitutes "a point of reference for the construction of all policies, programmes, and implementation projects", while at the same time making repeated reference to "government programmes" (Strategia na rzecz Odpowiedzialnego Rozwoju, 2017, pp. 8, 68). This was not, however, accompanied by any consistent explanation of how a programme differs from a project, a public policy, a programme document, or a package of interventions. As a result, within the SRD the concept of a programme functioned simultaneously in several meanings: as an implementation document, a name for a public intervention, a collection of interrelated projects, and an element of political communication.

A visible manifestation of this inconsistency was the manner in which the so-called flagship projects (sic!) were presented (Strategia na rzecz Odpowiedzialnego Rozwoju, 2017, pp. 77-78). In their descriptions, the terms "project" and "programme" are used interchangeably. For example, "Modern Products of the Shipbuilding Industry" was presented as a programme encompassing the project "Batory", while "Programme Electromobility" was presented as a whole encompassing the projects "E-bus" and "Electric Car". At the same time, other initiatives of a similar character were classified differently: "Eco-Construction" was described as a programme, "Polish Furniture" as a project, and "Intelligent Mine" as a programme in the flagship project table.

The ambiguity was further deepened by the relationship between the description of flagship projects and the strategic project table. Although the names of flagship projects were in principle not repeated in the table, some entries concerned similar or related areas of intervention, without any clear explanation of their mutual relationship. For example, the strategic project table contained the "Electromobility Development Programme", which was to constitute a form of implementing the "Electromobility Development Plan" adopted by the Ministry of Energy, while in the flagship projects section the "Programme Electromobility" appeared separately, encompassing the projects "E-bus" and "Electric Car". Similarly, the initiative "Polish Medical Devices" appeared in the descriptive section as support for research, development, and commercialisation of medical devices, while in the strategic project table a similar subject reappeared as "Pharmaceutical and Medical Devices Policy" (Strategia na rzecz Odpowiedzialnego Rozwoju, 2017, pp. 77-78). At this point the vocabulary of the strategy introduces the concept of "policy", which likewise does not have an unambiguous meaning.

Additional confusion in the vocabulary of public management is caused by initiatives in which the word "programme" functions as a proper name or a colloquial designation for a government intervention. One example is "Programme 500 Plus," implemented on the basis of the Act of 11 February 2016 on state assistance in child-rearing (Act of 11 February 2016). In this case, the designation "programme" refers primarily to a recognisable public intervention and an instrument of family policy, and does not denote a development programme within the meaning of the Act on the principles of development policy, nor a programme as a management structure encompassing a bundle of interrelated projects. A similar function is performed by, for example, the "Good Start" programme, which is support paid at the beginning of the school year, and many other social benefits ("Good Start" programme, 2018).

The practical consequences of this ambiguity were apparent in the creation of the strategic project portfolio. "Programme 500 Plus" was initially submitted to the portfolio by the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy as a project. It was subsequently closed, since it was difficult to demonstrate that regularly paid benefits were intended to lead to the creation of a unique product, service, or result. A decision was therefore taken within the MonALiZa system to monitor benefits instead. It is worth noting that at that stage no pathway had been developed for transferring monitoring to the STRATEG system, which could itself be a subject for further reflection.

This example demonstrates that the ambiguity of concepts was not purely a terminological problem. It translated into the day-to-day practice of portfolio management: establishing the relationships between initiatives, defining project outputs, distinguishing ongoing activities from time-limited undertakings, and deciding what should be subject to project monitoring and what to other forms of monitoring. This kind of clarificatory work continued throughout the entire period of the Government Project Monitoring Office's activity.

At the legal level, the key point of reference for the understanding of programmes in Polish public administration is the Act of 6 December 2006 on the principles of development policy (Act of 6 December 2006). In accordance with Article 4(1), development policy is conducted on the basis of development strategies, programmes, programme documents, and public policies. Article 15(1) defines programmes as "documents of an operational and implementation character established for the purpose of implementing development strategies, specifying the actions provided for implementation in accordance with the programme implementation system and the financial plan, which constitute an element of the programme". A programme in this sense is therefore primarily a document adopted through a specified procedure, rather than a management structure encompassing interrelated projects, outputs, benefits, roles, and decision-making mechanisms.

From the perspective of good practices in project and programme management, this approach is insufficient, since it does not encompass the organisational dimension of a programme: the manner of managing interrelated undertakings, the coordination of dependencies, the monitoring of benefits, and decision-making in the course of implementation

(Encyklopedia Zarządzania, "Program", 2026). For this reason, the recommendations developed by the KPRM emphasised that "the adoption of a document constitutes only a small fraction of the activities forming part of a programme understood from a managerial perspective. In each case it is necessary to appropriately plan, organise, coordinate, and control both the activities preceding the adoption of the document and the projects implemented on its basis" (Strojny, Szymborska, 2021). The legal association of the concept of "programme" with a specific type of document should not eliminate from the discussion of public administration reflection on the proper management of interrelated projects.

It should also be borne in mind that in administrative practice a programme understood as a document may also serve as the basis for the identification of a project portfolio. A good example is provided by successive national road construction programmes, which specify lists of planned road investments. This does not, however, automatically mean that such a programme is managed as a programme in the methodological sense – that is, as a structure serving the coordination of interrelated projects and the achievement of common benefits. A further example of ambiguity is provided by the so-called First Speed Programmes described in the SRD, associated with the National Smart Specialisations (Strategia na rzecz Odpowiedzialnego Rozwoju, 2017, pp. 10, 69, 88). The Strategy defined the criteria for their identification and indicated an open catalogue of areas, including medical engineering technologies, innovative agri-food technologies, and environmentally friendly transport solutions, among others (Strategia na rzecz Odpowiedzialnego Rozwoju, 2017, p. 89). It did not, however, explain precisely the relationship between these programmes and the strategic projects.

The dilemma concerning programmes thus consisted in the fact that the same concept encompassed within public administration several different orders: legal, strategic, managerial, and communicative. A programme could denote an operational and implementation document, the name of a public intervention, a package of sectoral measures, a collection of projects, or an instrument for achieving benefits. Without distinguishing between these meanings, it was difficult to determine unambiguously what should be the subject of project monitoring, who is responsible for programme implementation, what outputs and benefits are to be achieved, and when a programme may be considered complete. A further question worth exploring is whether the programme instrument was sufficiently utilised for its potential to coordinate interrelated cross-ministerial initiatives — one of the functions it may be particularly well suited to perform.

4.4. What does the implementation of the project-based approach mean?

Both the Supreme Audit Office report and the report from the study conducted by the RBMP called for greater "legal grounding of project management in government administration"¹⁹. The SAO indicated that the methodological handbooks developed by the RBMP "were not submitted to the Council for adoption and therefore did not have a binding character. As a result, government administration units applied the project-based approach in a varied manner", (Informacja o wynikach kontroli SMPS, 2022) which the Office considered inconsistent with the provisions of the SRD and the System of Development Management of Poland, which imposed an obligation to implement the project-based approach in government administration. This postulate accurately identified one of the problems of the SMPS, but did not exhaust the question of what the implementation of the project-based approach in government administration means in practice.

The postulate of providing a legal basis for the activities conducted by the RBMP is consistent with the fundamental principle of legalism in public administration²⁰. At the same time, the question of implementing the project-based approach was not reducible to the issue of the formal grounding of monitoring. It concerned more broadly the institutional conditions for implementing the project-based approach in government administration: the absence of a shared definition of project and programme, the lack of a uniform project management language, the limited maturity of tools, and the attempt to introduce a new management logic into a bureaucratic order.

In the publication on knowledge management mentioned in the introduction, Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi describe the process of creating innovation as an activity closely associated with the externalisation of tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge (cf. Nonaka, Takeuchi, 2000, p. 112). This process begins with the search for appropriate analogies and metaphors illustrating the target product. Applying this method, bureaucracy is traditionally compared to a machine (the bureaucratic machine), which can be fine-tuned to function efficiently, like a Swiss watch (cf. Cichocki et al., 2022). The mechanism, however, has an incurable tendency to fall into the so-called vicious circle of bureaucratisation, expanding its competences and progressively stripping itself of flexibility (cf. Koźmiński et al., 2023,

¹⁹ It should be noted, however, that at that time the system was grounded in the following documents: the Act on the Council of Ministers of 8 August 1996 (*Dz.U.* of 2022, item 1188, as amended); Resolution No. 8 of the Council of Ministers on the adoption of the Strategy for Responsible Development to 2020 (with a perspective to 2030) of 14 February 2017 (*M.P.* of 2017, item 260); Order No. 58 of the Prime Minister on the Strategic Projects Portfolio Monitoring Council of 20 April 2018 (*M.P.* of 2021, item 247, as amended); Resolution No. 1/06/2018 of the Strategic Projects Portfolio Monitoring Council on the adoption of the rules of procedure of the Strategic Projects Portfolio Monitoring Council (as amended); Resolution No. 5/2022 of the Strategic Projects Portfolio Monitoring Council on the adoption of the project monitoring process for the portfolio of the Strategic Projects Portfolio Monitoring Council; Resolution No. 7/2022 of the Strategic Projects Portfolio Monitoring Council on the implementation of the project-based approach in ministries.

²⁰ In accordance with Article 7 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland, organs of public administration act within the limits of and on the basis of the law.

p. 259). Bureaucracy emerged in a different historical context and was suited to complicated – but not complex – problems (cf. Snowden, et al., 2007). Given the complexity of today's world, one interesting analogy for the needs of public management is the comparison to a "special unit" – an autonomous team that responds flexibly to emerging challenges (cf. Edmondson, 2017).

In management theory, a related concept is James Brian Quinn's notion of so-called incremental strategies (cf. Jemielniak, 2012, p. 86). It assumes that, given the limited capacity to predict the future, organisations should preserve the capacity for learning and correcting actions in the course of implementation. Development depends, after all, "on social experimentation and social innovation – that is, on institutional evolution" (Hausner, 2012, p. 37.) From this perspective, the implementation of the project-based approach in public administration should not be treated as a one-off adoption of a standard, but as the gradual development of organisational capacities. From a managerial standpoint, such an initiative may be understood more as a change programme than as a single implementation project: it encompasses people, processes, technologies, roles, decision-making mechanisms, and the manner in which management information is used (cf. Becker, 1999). This corresponds to the necessity of a holistic approach to change proposed by Tomasz Janka (cf. Janka et al., 2019).

This does not, however, amount to a simple opposition between law and flexibility. The example of the activities of the Polish Financial Supervision Authority during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that some public institutions were capable of using existing legal frameworks in a more adaptive manner, treating legislative change as a last resort (cf. Kędzierski et al., 2022). As the report edited by Marcin Kędzierski indicates, in the dynamic conditions of the pandemic, excessive casuistry and the slowness of the legislative process could have undermined the effectiveness of action. It should be borne in mind, however, that such an approach carries the risk of reducing transparency and public accountability, since it is the legislative process that creates the space for debate, the justification of decisions, and public scrutiny (cf. Kędzierski et al., 2022).

The dilemma of implementing the project-based approach thus consists in the fact that public administration needs both clear foundations for action and room for the flexible organisation of work. This applies both to the overall process of implementing the project-based approach and to the implementation of each individual initiative. This gives rise to the question of whether – given that the efficient and effective operation of public administration is already an element of the normative standard of good administration – project management might not be treated as a technique for realising that standard. The principle of efficiency may justify the choice of internal organisational methods, provided they fall within the scope of the tasks and competences statutorily entrusted to the body concerned (cf. Gołębiowska, Zientarski, 2017, pp. 60-61). Those implementing the project-based approach should ask themselves whether the objective is the adoption of documents or a long-term change of culture. Legal grounding of

the indicated practices without a change in attitudes may lead to so-called performative compliance (window-dressing)²¹.

In this context, the Supreme Audit Office's postulate concerning the legal sanctioning of the project-based approach should also be considered in light of the emerging trend of so-called de-projectification, understood as a retreat from project culture. As Beata Jałocha indicates, projectification may be superficial, performative, and insufficiently embedded in the management of an organisation (cf. Jałocha, 2025). Organisations may abandon some project management practices when they encounter difficulties in scaling agility, transferring project results to operational activities, or when the project-based mode of working was primarily the result of external funding or a political decision (cf. Jałocha, 2025). The limited scope of research does not, however, make it possible to determine the scale and exact character of the phenomenon. From this perspective, the implementation of the project-based approach does not mean merely the establishment of an obligation to apply a methodology – or methodologies, different ones for different types of projects. It means rather the durable creation of the administration's capacity to define projects and programmes, manage the portfolio, make decisions on the basis of management information, learn from experience, and translate project results into lasting institutional change.

The changes being implemented require the combination of multiple logics – including the legal, organisational, financial, competence-related, process-related, and technological (cf. Kędzierski et al., 2022). In this sense, the implementation of the project-based approach may be compared to the shaping of a development model. In the publication mentioned above, Mazur and Górniak, writing about development models, argue that they "are not planned but rather discovered", since they constitute the resultant of reflection, learning, the imitation of others' solutions, and the influence of many actors (Górniak, et al., 2012, p. 9). The activities of the RBMP arose from the need at that time to create an efficient system for implementing initiatives, but were conducted within a specific structural and institutional context that created particular opportunities while simultaneously imposing strong constraints (cf. Górniak et al., 2012). The success of the undertaking depended on the cooperation of many actors with divergent interests, nor were conflicts absent.

From this perspective, the change was incremental in character and resembled more a process of "pushing through" existing institutional arrangements than the implementation of a pre-designed model (Strumińska-Kutra, 2012). In such conditions, the outcome tends to be not so much elegant institutional constructions as "clumsy solutions" – partial, compromise-based, and imperfect (Strumińska-Kutra, 2012). This need not signify failure, but requires an awareness that, as Strumińska-Kutra emphasises, institutional changes produce both

²¹ Examples of unimplemented legal provisions are given by, among others, Zybała, 2012, p. 355.

intended and unintended consequences²². Such consequences must also be taken into account in the context of the implementation of individual projects and programmes from the portfolio.

Another element of the dilemma identified above that deserves mention is the question of the implementation model. In the years 2013-2015, activities aimed at promoting management by objectives and process management were carried out with the participation of a large external consulting firm, within a project co-financed from the European Social Fund (Procesy, cele, kompetencje..., 2015). In the case of the project-based approach, the activities conducted between 2015 and 2023 were carried out primarily by a team of DZP/KPRM officials in cooperation with representatives of the ministries, with substantive support from the National School of Public Administration and professional organisations such as IPMA and PMI²³. Both models have different consequences. A large consulting project can provide scale, resources, and the rapid production of methodological outputs. Work conducted within the administration, by contrast, favours the building of a sense of ownership, direct and regular contact with officials carrying out tasks, and the gradual creation of a community of practitioners. This does not resolve which model is better, but demonstrates that the implementation of the project-based approach is also a decision about the manner of organising institutional change.

5. Conclusion

Research concerning the years 2015-2023 in public institutions emphasises the dominant atmosphere of that period, associated with the necessity of "delivering on topics" – that is, finalising projects and achieving the assumed indicators (cf. Kędzierski et al., 2022). Earlier, however, the ex ante evaluation report of the SRD had stressed that "the possibility of effectively implementing the SRD is contingent on carrying out a reform of the entire system of state governance", while the Strategy itself addressed this issue only cursorily (Raport ex ante SOR, 2016). The experience of the SMPS may be read as an attempt to deal practically with this contradiction: between the need for the efficient implementation of government priorities and the institutional immaturity of the conditions for their monitoring, coordination, and accountability.

²² The extent of the so-called ungovernability of the areas concerned – which in the projects formulated frequently extended beyond the scope of direct government responsibility – would also be worth investigating.

²³ Further research is needed on the role of professional associations in administrative reforms. As Wald et al. (2025) note, professional associations act as institutional agents, promoting standards, certifications, and professional norms, thereby contributing to the institutionalization of project management as both a discipline and a profession.

The analysis conducted demonstrates that the project-based approach in government administration is not merely a technique for organising work. It is an element of broader institutional design, which requires an awareness of a range of dilemmas: what a strategy is and who is responsible for its coordination; what should be regarded as a project; how a programme as a document differs from a programme as a management structure; how the strategic project portfolio should be grounded; who should be responsible for monitoring; and in what manner management information should translate into decisions. Any formalisation of the project-based approach should be preceded by a determination of whether it is primarily project management, managing by projects, or both levels that require regulation. Translating this into practice may require the following concrete steps.

First, the determination of which level requires regulation should proceed incrementally, through piloting and revision rather than a single binding decision. The implementation of the project-based approach should itself be treated as an incremental change programme, with explicit space for testing and revising solutions before they harden into a fixed model (cf. Section 4.4). Second, legal grounding is necessary, but does not substitute for conceptual and organisational resolutions. In concrete terms, this means legal anchoring with room for adaptation: a statutory basis for the continuity of the monitoring function, so that its survival does not depend on a single administrative order, while avoiding the casuistry that would lock the system into a single, uniform procedure. Third, the strategic project portfolio should be integrated into the main system of state governance rather than functioning as an isolated add-on. This requires a transparent procedure for opening, closing, and reprioritising projects, independent of the cycle of updating the strategic document itself, as well as explicit links between project monitoring and the budgetary and legislative processes, so that project status can inform – and be informed by – financial and legal decisions. Project management should be embedded within existing administrative workflows rather than creating a parallel circuit of documentation and reporting. This would also require closer reflection on the relationship between local Project Monitoring Offices in ministries and political cabinets, in order to ensure a smooth flow of management information to its intended recipients, including the Prime Minister (cf. Section 4.1). Fourth, project-based monitoring and strategic monitoring should be clearly distinguished rather than left to overlap, as occurred between the MonALiZa system and strategic reporting on the SRD's indicators. A defined process is needed for moving from operational monitoring of outputs to strategic monitoring of results and broader development indicators. In practice, this means formalising how data flows from project-level systems such as MonALiZa into indicator-based platforms such as STRATEG. Fifth, the competences, accountability, and career incentives of Programme Managers and Project Leaders require clarification, rather than being treated as an addition to existing duties. Sixth, the mandate of the network of Project Monitoring Offices should be strengthened to resolve cross-ministerial dependencies, rather than relying solely on the Council as an escalation point. Seventh, differentiated guidelines should be developed for different types of projects, setting out how

data should be collected and verified for each; the competence to apply them consistently should be built through a broad training programme. Finally, a mechanism – institutional, archival, or both – is needed for transferring accumulated experience and personnel knowledge across changes of government, so that lessons of the kind drawn in this article are not lost with the dissolution of the bodies that generated them.

None of these measures resolves the tensions underlying the project-based approach as such, since they arise from tensions inherent in the functioning of public administration: between stability and flexibility, legalism and efficiency, politicisation and professionalisation, and planning and learning in action²⁴. The experience of public administration also demonstrates that, owing to the sensitive character of some information and the interpenetration of political and administrative aspects, even the most elaborate methodological and IT systems will not eliminate the need for informal, individual forms of recording management information – a kind of "notebook". All the more important, therefore, is the very recognition of these tensions and their conscious management²⁵. Without such awareness, the projectification of public administration may lead to an increase in reporting burdens, the formalisation of activities, and the performative adoption of methodologies, rather than to a genuine enhancement of the state's capacity to implement appropriate, complex public interventions.

This risk is reinforced by the dominant model of accountability in Polish public administration, concentrated on procedures, the avoidance of errors, and the minimisation of risk. As Karol Olejniczak diagnoses, this stems from the twentieth-century, mechanistic conception of bureaucracy, in which public administration was expected primarily to execute repetitive and routine processes (cf. Olejniczak, 2012). A narrowly conceived implementation of the project-based approach could, in such conditions, lead to "the paralysis of actors' imagination by the process itself", "thinking in the language of regulations and programmes", and "a fragmentary perception of activities" (Bratkowski, 2009, p. 152). Changing this paradigm requires not only new tools but, according to Olejniczak, also "a redefinition of errors and failures", "a change in accountability criteria", and greater acceptance of learning from imperfect solutions (Olejniczak, 2012).

A separate subject of research could be the question of the extent to which the Strategy for Responsible Development was precisely such a "sufficient imperfection" – a document that, despite not having fully designed a project management system, created the basis for monitoring and accountability of specific initiatives. In this sense, the SMPS too may be treated as a case of "sufficient imperfection". The solution was incomplete, developed incrementally, and burdened with numerous tensions, but at the same time it made it possible to accumulate experience that had previously been lacking in government administration. In advisory practice,

²⁴ Owing to the sensitive character of information and the interpenetration of the political and administrative aspects, IT systems will not replace individual forms of recording management information ("notebooks").

²⁵ Nassim Nicholas Taleb argues that "contrary to social science theories, almost no significant discoveries and technologies are the fruit of projects and plans – they are simply Black Swans" (Taleb, 2020).

a similar phenomenon is sometimes referred to as a "buffer project" ("projekt zderzak") – a first, often imperfect undertaking that absorbs resistance, reveals barriers, and familiarises actors with the direction of change. Research on public sector reforms also demonstrates that a first attempt may end in failure, while a second, conducted in already altered political and cognitive conditions, proves successful (Olejniczak, 2012). The failure or incompleteness of the first initiative need not therefore be a loss pure and simple; it may serve a preparatory function, creating the conditions for the later acceptance of solutions that previously met with resistance. It is also worth following the experience of other countries, particularly Germany, although the diversity of European administrative models limits the possibility of straightforward transfer of solutions (cf. Gołębiowska et al., 2017)²⁶.

At the time of completing work on this article, the new medium-term strategy had not yet been published. Regardless of its final shape, the experience of the years 2015-2023 should be drawn upon as material for institutional learning. The objective should not be the simple restoration of the SMPS or the mechanical transfer of earlier solutions, but the conscious use of accumulated experience in designing subsequent mechanisms for implementing state strategy. Jacobsson and Jałocha observe that "what influences the managerial decision about the direction of action [projectification or de-projectification] is the process of making sense of observed paradoxes, which move from latent paradoxes to salient paradoxes" (Jałocha, 2025). If the article is to be characterised as practice-informed recommendations, its fundamental recommendation is precisely this: that the concluded phase should not be treated as a closed chapter of history, but as a source of knowledge about the conditions, constraints, and possibilities of metagovernance in government administration.

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