

# Public agency resilience in times of democratic backsliding: Structure, collaboration and professional standards

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## Abstract

This article investigates how organizational structure, collaboration, and professional standards influence the resilience of public agencies facing adversity. It links organizational reputation and blame avoidance literature with resilience and collaboration literature. We use the case of the Swiss Child and Adult Protection Agencies (CAPA), which faced massive media attacks. We apply a qualitative research design analyzing data from interviews and participatory observations. Our findings show that professional organizational structure, collaboration and standards are three interrelated factors that increase resilience against adversity. In particular, these factors reduce “blame-avoiding policy implementation” (BAPI), which is a coping strategy where street-level bureaucrats (SLB) exploit their discretion to make policy implementation less blameworthy. In their interplay, professional organizational structure, collaboration and standards increase the knowledge of a public agency about a particular situation because they enable better-informed decisions through collective deliberation practices, and strengthens the collective ownership as well as the individual SLB's confidence that the right decision is being made.

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This article's focus is on public agencies resilience against adversity through professional organizational structure, collaboration, and standards. It asks 'How do organizational structure, collaboration, and professional standards influence the resilience of street-level bureaucrats (SLB) facing adversity?' In answering this question, the article links organizational reputation and blame avoidance literature with resilience and collaboration literature.

With the globalized and digitized media landscape, public agencies are facing a challenge that they did not know until a few decades ago. Today, anyone can express their opinion publicly, and these opinions spread at lightning speed. Negative reports and personal stories that trigger emotions generate the most clicks. The transformation from classic to modern or social media increases the likelihood that the actions of public agencies and their individual employees, that is, SLB, become mediatized and politicized (Hinterleitner & Sager, 2019). Allern and von Sikorski (2018, p. 3015) describe modern media as a 'scandal machine'. In his study on the coverage of U.S. national politics in local newspapers, Vermeer (2002, pp. 93–94) puts it as follows: '(...) editors rarely devoted much space to agencies' success'.

Although pressure from the public and media is not new to public administration (Rourke, 1991), nowadays it is exacerbated by the combination with democratic backsliding, that is, public agencies and SLB increasingly face mistrust and norm violations that imply more unhinged attacks (Bauer et al., 2021; Peters & Pierre, 2022; Sager & Hinterleitner, 2022). Therefore, public agencies have increasingly had to develop strategies to maintain or promote their good reputation and to perform their functions in an environment that tends to be more hostile. Research on organizational reputation management (Carpenter, 2010; Carpenter & Krause, 2012; Rimkutė, 2022) and blame avoidance (Weaver, 1986) investigates this. More recent research in this field specifically focuses on SLB's behavior under pressure. Hinterleitner and Wittwer (2022, p. 2) introduce the concept of 'blame-avoiding policy implementation' (BAPI). They show that SLB facing adversity may 'exploit their discretion to make policy implementation less scandal-prone and blameworthy'.

Instead of deviating from the policy and their mandate, public agencies and SLB can adopt other ways of coping with adversity such as negative media pressure; they can become more resilient. Organizational resilience is 'the ability to anticipate, respond to, recover from, and learn from adversity' (Hepfer & Lawrence, 2022, p. 8). We argue that a public agency's resilience is strengthened through three BAPI mitigating factors on the organizational, agency and normative level: professionalized organizational structure, collaboration, and professional standards.

Our study mainly bases on organizational resilience literature complemented with organization theory, organizational collaboration research, and research on street-level bureaucracy.

We use the case of the Swiss Child and Adult Protection Agencies (CAPA), about which a massive media outrage developed. Child and adult protection are about supporting people who cannot manage their own affairs or need protection. Target groups of child and adult protection are for example, elderly people with dementia or children affected by violence in their family. The CAPA were established in 2013 as professional and interdisciplinary public agencies and replaced the former Guardianship Authorities (GA) that were often lay agencies where it was possible that a single layperson took decisions.

We use original data from interviews with CAPA SLB and experts and participatory observations during CAPA case meetings and we conduct qualitative content analysis. Our findings confirm that a professionalized functioning—including organizational structure, interdisciplinary collaboration, and professional standards—increases resilience against media pressure and

thus reduces BAPI. This is mainly because collective deliberation practices increase the knowledge about a particular case and strengthen the collective ownership as well as the individual SLB's confidence that the right decision is being made.

The article is structured as follows: The next section provides an overview of bureaucratic reputation and blame avoidance research, with a particular focus on BAPI. We then underpin our main argument of resilience through organizational structure, collaboration and professional standards with existing research and present our conjectures. The subsequent section presents the case as well as data and methods. After outlining the results, we discuss these and conclude with possible avenues for future research.

## 2 | BUREAUCRATIC REPUTATION AND BLAME AVOIDING POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

In globalized and modern information society where everyone can express their opinion in real time across the globe, public organizations, like any other organizations, need to cultivate their reputation. In addition, distrust of public organizations has been growing for several years now. Many countries have faced waves of democratic backsliding (Bauer et al., 2021; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Democratic institutions and public administrations are increasingly questioned in public and face more unhinged attacks due to democratic norm violations (Hinterleitner & Sager, 2022; Peters & Pierre, 2022).

A good reputation is therefore becoming even more important. Bureaucratic reputation research investigates how public organizations engage in various ways to gain or enhance a positive reputation. Because a public organization is subject to political scrutiny, a good reputation is consequential for their autonomy and legitimacy as it helps political patrons to trust that the organization does what it is meant to do. In contrast, a negative reputation can increase mistrust and provoke interventions in an organization's procedures because a bad reputation also affects the political principals. In the worst case, a public organization whose reputation has deteriorated too much may even be abolished (Carpenter, 2010; Hinterleitner & Sager, 2019; Rimkutè, 2022). Therefore, public organizations cautiously engage in 'reputation management', that is, they try to strategically influence their reputation in various ways (Wæraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012, p. 190). A key instrument of reputation management is communication (Gilad et al., 2015). As public organizations are confronted with the needs and expectations of a multitude of conflicting stakeholders, they need to calibrate their communication accordingly in order to reconcile as many interests as possible and thereby positively influence the assessment of their audiences (Carpenter, 2010; Carpenter & Krause, 2012; Rimkutè, 2022).

While this literature primarily focuses on political actors and the organizational level, such as actions of public agency managers, recent research shows that SLB also engage in reputation management strategies (Hinterleitner & Wittwer, 2022). As opposed to political actors, they have limited ability to handle pressure from democratic backsliding and react on negative media reports because they have fewer resources and less direct access to relevant stakeholders in the political or media realm (Hinterleitner & Sager, 2017). However, SLB can adjust their own policy implementation activities in ways that reduce the potential risk of blame. Hinterleitner and Wittwer (2022, p. 2) summarize this coping strategy of *BAPI* as follows: 'While formally complying with the policy mandate, frontline workers exploit their discretion to make policy implementation less scandal-prone and blameworthy; a coping strategy that has the effect that policies veer from the spirit of their formal mandates'.

### 3 | RESILIENCE THROUGH ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE, COLLABORATION, AND PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS

Following Hinterleitner and Wittwer (2022, p. 2) who ‘show that BAPI is especially likely to occur in weakly professionalized environments’ we argue that a public agency’s resilience increases when its functioning gets (more) professionalized. In doing so, we link traits of organizational professionalization with three resilience-increasing factors on the organizational, agency and normative level: organizational structure, collaboration, and professional standards. Figure 1 illustrates the assumed effect of these factors, which we will call ‘BAPI mitigating factors’, on an organization’s resilience, depending on its level of professionalization.

Organizational resilience is a relatively young and growing strand in management research that investigates how organizations remain viable and functioning in disruptive times (e.g., Sheffi, 2007; Tengblad & Oudhuis, 2018; Välikangas, 2010; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2011). According to organizational resilience research, many factors influence organizational resilience simultaneously. Therefore, organizations need an adaptive and holistic approach to resilience management, which makes organizational resilience an empirically challenging and complex concept (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011). This may also explain the variety of organizational resilience conceptualizations in extant literature (Linnenluecke, 2017). Drawing on existing definitions, Hepfer and Lawrence (2022, p. 8) propose an encompassing definition of organizational resilience as ‘the ability of an organization to anticipate, respond to, recover from, and learn from adversity’ (Linnenluecke, 2017; Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003).

Despite the diversity in organizational resilience research, we see three broad groups of possible resilience-increasing elements: organizational structure, relational capabilities, and individual resilience capacities of employees, in particular high professional standards. Underpinned with additional insights from organizational theory, collaboration research, and street-level bureaucracy research we derive the following three BAPI mitigating factors: First, flexible and adaptable *organizational* structures that are more decentralized and foster team-based and creative problem-solving approaches increase a public agency’s resilience because reacting successfully

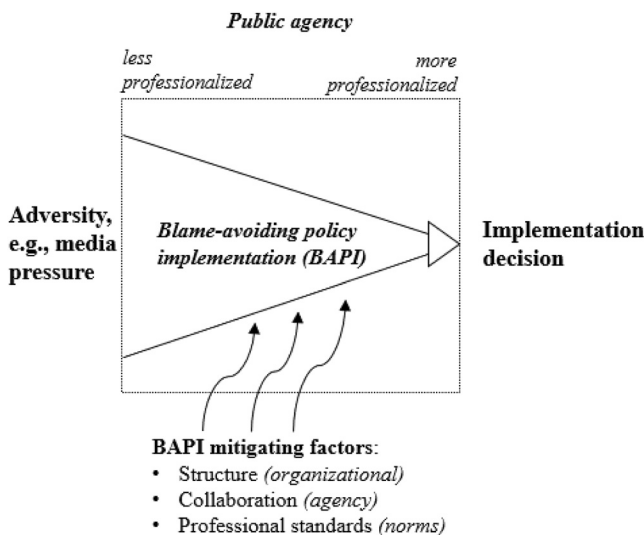


FIGURE 1 Professionalization of public agencies and related blame-avoiding policy implementation mitigating factors.

to adversity typically requires quick structural transformations (Andersson et al., 2019; Sager & Gofen, 2022; van der Vegt et al., 2015). Second, standardized (interdisciplinary) collaboration—that is, *agency* on the group or team level—increases an organization's resilience because in collaborative processes, staff learn more about a complex situation, make better decisions, and perceive joint responsibility (Bronstein, 2003; Hepfer & Lawrence, 2022; Weick & Roberts, 1993; Williams et al., 2017). Third, employees applying high professional standards and values—that is, *norms* on the individual level—increase an agency's resilience against adversity because they are guided by these and do not give in to media or other external pressure (Sager et al., 2019; Tummers et al., 2012).

All three BAPI mitigating factors are interrelated because they all form part of a professionalized public agency. Structural traits as the basic foundation of an organization may primarily influence collaboration and professional standards; but a reverse effect is equally conceivable. Below, we elaborate on these factors in more detail.

### 3.1 | Organizational structure as BAPI mitigating factor

One strand of organizational resilience literature points to the significant role of organizational resources in addressing adversity. Besides financial resources, this research mainly focuses on the formal organizational structure and claims that a decentralized structure increases an organization's resilience because reacting successfully to adversity typically requires quick adjustments (Andersson et al., 2019; van der Vegt et al., 2015). Successful coping with changing environments and adversity requires organizational forms that are more decentralized and incorporate stronger connections among employees (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). Organizations need to adopt decentralized decision-making structures instead of relying on centralized authority and hierarchy. This is because in crisis situations, formal role descriptions are no longer sufficient; processes and collaboration modes adapted to the situation must be developed. Such adaptive responses require that the formal structure can be changed quickly and that decentralized, team-based or network-based approaches to problem solving can be applied. Coordination capacities and processes in organizations become key. Employees and teams may need to establish and maintain direct (new) working relationships with one another (Marrone, 2010; van der Vegt et al., 2015, p. 973).

Case studies suggest that highly bureaucratic, command-and-control structures hinder employees' adaptive capacities and creativity in finding solutions (McManus et al., 2008). While the ideal type of bureaucracy, as described by Weber (1980, pp. 124–30), may not be the ideal type of a resilient public organization, we do consider some of its basic traits to be potentially conducive to increased resilience such as the principle of professional selection of staff, an allocation of tasks according to competence, fixed monetary remuneration, full-time performance, official discipline and control based on objective rules (Sager & Rosser, 2021). These traits primarily foster an organizational structure and staff focusing on professional rules and standards, which we argue reduce the vulnerability toward external pressure and BAPI. We derive the following conjecture:

**Conjecture 1.** *Organizational structure lays the foundation for a public agency's resilience against adversity, more specifically for SLB's resilience against BAPI.*

### 3.2 | Collaboration as BAPI mitigating factor

As outlined above, organizational structure can lay the foundation for the closeness between teams and expertise, which in turn fosters on-going direct communication that 'provid[es] a

capacity to handle unforeseen events in established lines of communication' (Andersson et al., 2019, p. 43).

Organizational resilience research agrees that key factors for resilience are relational capabilities (Williams et al., 2017), operational interpretation (Hepfer & Lawrence, 2022), or a collective mind (Weick & Roberts, 1993). What is labeled differently basically means the same: Collaboration enables aggregate mental processes, or in other words collective sense-making, that allows SLB to gain a better understanding of the complexity they face, which in turn permits SLB to take better-informed decisions and respond effectively in times of adversity. Relational capabilities refer to the ability to activate and tactically use 'social connections that enable access to and exchange of resources', which may 'play an important role in shaping immediate actions and ultimately enabling positive functioning in the face of adversity' (Williams et al., 2017, p. 745). Operational interpretation and collective mind refer to 'organizational members collectively shaping the meaning of disruptive events or situations' (Hepfer & Lawrence, 2022, p. 13; see also Weick & Roberts, 1993). This process includes a diagnostic component, which means that SLB 'collaborate to form a shared evaluation of the situation' (Hepfer & Lawrence, 2022, p. 13), a projective component, in which SLB 'collectively imagine possible future sources of disruption and possible responses' (Hepfer & Lawrence, 2022, p. 14), and a networking component, in which SLB activate relationships as outlined above. To sum up, interdependent know-how and collective ownership of goals and responsibility strengthen organizational and individual resilience against adversity (e.g., Weick & Roberts, 1993).

One major strand of collaboration literature investigates interdisciplinarity. Berg-Weger and Schneider (1998, p. 98) define interdisciplinary collaboration as 'an interpersonal process through which members of different disciplines contribute to a common product or goal'. Bronstein (2003, pp. 300–302) identifies core components of interdisciplinarity, of which the following four are closely related to the resilience-strengthening aspects of collaboration just outlined above. First, interdependence among an interdisciplinary team maximizes the pool of expertise and knowledge available to take decisions as well as the creativity to handle complex problems (see also Lonsdale et al., 1980; Webb & Hobdell, 1980). Second, interdisciplinary collaboration enables SLB to 'achieve more than could be achieved by the same professionals acting independently' (Bronstein, 2003, p. 300). Interdisciplinarity 'maximize[s] the expertise of each collaborator' (Bronstein, 2003, p. 300). Third, in interdisciplinary collaboration, SLB actively and constructively participate in deliberation and share ownership and responsibility in the entire decision-making process. Fourth, interdisciplinary collaboration includes a learning component as collaborators reflect 'about their working relationship and process and incorporat[e] feedback to strengthen collaborative relationships and effectiveness' (Bronstein, 2003, p. 302). To sum up, collaboration enhances resilience and this effect is particularly pronounced when collaboration is interdisciplinary.<sup>1</sup> We derive the following conjecture for this analysis:

**Conjecture 2.** *Collaboration, in particular interdisciplinary collaboration, fostering relational capabilities, operational interpretation or collective mind among SLB, enhances resilience against adversity, thus reducing BAPI.*

### 3.3 | Professional standards as BAPI mitigating factor

As elaborated above, SLB play a central role in effective policy implementation. However, by implementing public policy they are confronted with multiple interests and demands that create

pressure and dilemmas. In other words, SLB are accountable toward multiple sides; professional standards are one of them. Research on SLB show that their typically high professional standards and values may be another source of resilience that motivate them to implement a policy thoroughly and diligently when they are convinced of its meaningfulness (Harrits, 2019; Sager et al., 2019).

Organizational resilience research acknowledges the potential influence of individual employees' crisis resilience on an organization. Core insights for organizational resilience actually bases on research streams about individual resilience that emerged in the 1960s and early 1970s. The basic findings of this research are that individuals differ in their ability to cope with and recover from adversity, and that this ability is rooted in normal, everyday adaptive processes. The extended concept of family resilience mainly confirms the important effect of relational capabilities on successfully coping with adversity, as described above (Hepfer & Lawrence, 2022, pp. 3–4).

Weber (1980, pp. 124–30) describes the ideal-typical civil servants as politically independent and oriented toward professional knowledge (see also Sager & Rosser, 2021, 2022). The civil servant is shaped by her or his profession. Professions provide specialized knowledge and imperatives for action (Richter, 2012, p. 102). Merton (1995, p. 190) describes civil servants typically as 'methodical, careful, disciplined' with strong feelings and a high sense of duty.

These professional standards may include values and attitudes from peers that provide SLB with a 'set of rules one would follow if allowed to act professionally as a member of a professional community' (Tummers et al., 2012, p. 1044). We derive the following conjecture for this analysis:

**Conjecture 3.** *Professional standards and values of SLB enhance resilience, thus reducing BAPI.*

The next section outlines the case as well as the data and methods.

## 4 | RESEARCH DESIGN

To examine the three conjectures, this study applies a qualitative research design based on qualitative content analysis. The data consist of transcripts from semi-structured interviews and participatory observations of CAPA case meetings. The data is inductively coded based on established and standardized rules of qualitative content analysis (e.g., Mayring, 2015; Patton, 2015). First, this section presents the case.

### 4.1 | Case: The Swiss Child and Adult Protection Agencies (CAPA)

The CAPA were established in 2013 as professional and interdisciplinary public agencies after a major reform of the Swiss Civil Code. They are in charge of implementing the Child and Adult Protection Policy, thus they take decisions about protection measures for people who cannot manage their own affairs or need protection. This may include elderly people with dementia, people with mental health problems or children affected by violence in the family. In such situations, often very difficult and delicate decisions need to be taken. Therefore, the CAPA have to take joint decisions by at least three professionals from different disciplines such as law, social work, psychology, or social education. The CAPA were established after an extensive reform process, which lasted 20 years and involved a large number of experts. Despite great unity in this process, a massive negative debate developed in the public and the media afterward (Hildbrand et al., 2020; Stauffer, 2023a, 2023b). Countless stories about the CAPA's apparently wrong and

inhumane decisions were published. Suffering victims, such as parents who had their children taken away from them or elderly people who were involuntarily placed in nursing homes, featured prominently. The negative spiral went so far that CAPA offices and employees needed police protection because of death threats. These negative reactions occurred despite positive evaluations of the policy design and the CAPA's work from experts (Schneebeli, 2015). The CAPA themselves hardly got a word in edgewise. On the one hand, this was because they had hardly any capacity, particularly in the first years of their existence and, on the other hand, because their duty of confidentiality posed special challenges to their communication.

In addition to this enormous media pressure, which had a fatal effect on the CAPA's reputation (Kuenzler, 2021, 2023; Kuenzler & Stauffer, 2023; Kuenzler et al., 2022), there was a movement of democratic backsliding. Groups of affected persons, partly supported by MPs or other political actors from the right-wing and populist Swiss People's Party,<sup>2</sup> demanded the abolishment of the CAPA and launched cantonal and national initiatives against them. Almost immediately after the establishment of the CAPA, MPs also filed motions and other parliamentary requests that questioned the CAPA as public agencies (Stauffer, 2023b).

Upon their introduction, the CAPA replaced the former Guardianship Authorities (GA) that were often lay agencies at the municipal level. Public lay agencies are a specific feature of the Swiss political system (Ladner & Sager, 2022; Linder & Mueller, 2017, pp. 90–97; see also Section 5.1). In the case at hand, the GA typically consisted of voluntary, that is, not or only partially compensated, and part-time laypersons who were politically elected and did not have to meet any relevant professional requirements. As the GA were very small, often consisting of a single or only a few person(s), it was possible that a single layperson could take decisions (Swiss Federal Council, 2006). Hinterleitner and Wittwer (2022) show that media pressure led to BAPI in the case of GA SLB. Interviewed GA SLB 'mainly attributed the occurrence of BAPI to the low professionalization of guardianship authorities prior to the comprehensive reform in 2013' (Hinterleitner & Wittwer, 2022, p. 14).

Thus, this study benefits from a unique opportunity to investigate the activities of a newly professionalized public agency under negative media pressure in times of democratic backsliding and to juxtapose the results with a previous study that examined the former lay agency.<sup>3</sup> Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of lay and professional public agencies that influence the three BAPI mitigating factors on the organizational, agency and normative level.

## 4.2 | Data and methods

To empirically investigate the phenomenon just described and the related conjectures outlined above, we conducted a document and literature analysis (for Conjecture 1) and 11 semi-structured interviews and participatory observations of three CAPA case meetings (for Conjectures 2 and 3). We interviewed CAPA SLB and experts who were involved in the reform process that established the CAPA in 2013. The interviews took place online, by phone or on site between September 2020 and June 2021 and lasted about 30–80 min.

In order to gain a more comprehensive impression of collaboration in everyday CAPA work, we examined one CAPA office by means of participant observation. The observed 'interdisciplinarity meetings' take place once a week with the entire decision-making body that consists of the disciplines of law, social work and social pedagogy. They are intended to provide a space for questions that CAPA staff may have regarding the cases they oversee. Participants discuss and deliberate until they reach a joint decision. The meetings do not necessarily concern final decisions regarding a case, but can take place during any phase of the process. Moreover, a case may be discussed in more than one meeting.



TABLE 1 Overview of characteristics of lay and professional public agencies.

	Public lay agency	Professional public agency
Organizational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No organizational structure (mainly because of small size)</li> <li>- Small size, that is, few staff as generalists (i.e., employee(s) is/are responsible for all tasks and decisions)</li> <li>- Voluntary, part-time, non-professional staff</li> <li>- Employment according to the legislative period (i.e., fluctuations)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Clear organizational structure (ideally decentralized, with a focus on the connection among employees)</li> <li>- Larger size, more staff representing various professional disciplines, organized in teams</li> <li>- Permanent professional staff with vocational training/specialization, remunerated</li> <li>- Responsibilities according to professional competences and expertise</li> </ul>
Agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No (interdisciplinary) collaboration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Standardized (interdisciplinary) collaboration</li> <li>- Decision-making via mutual agreement among professionals</li> </ul>
Norms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mostly political (i.e., re-election)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Professional standards</li> </ul>

Source: Own categorization.

The online appendix describes the sampling process, the interview strategy, and the participatory observations in more detail.

All data was subsequently transcribed and coded by a mixed deductive and inductive approach. While deductive coding focuses on predefined elements from existing research or theory, inductive coding allows to detect additional relevant information. Thus, a mixed approach increases the depth and quality of qualitative analysis (Patton, 2015). Resilience against negative media pressure, as the phenomenon of interest, was operationalized via the concept of BAPI. Thus, if interviewees for instance mentioned that they do not adapt their activities due to media reports, this is coded as ‘resilient’ and vice versa. The presumably mitigating factors of collaboration and professional standards are coded according to the definitions provided above. In addition, inductive category formation was conducted using accepted and standardized procedures (Mayring, 2015; Patton, 2015). The selection criteria for relevant paragraphs of the interviews were as follows: subjectively perceived effects by interviewed persons of collaboration (i.e., joint deliberation, decision-making as well as interdisciplinarity) and professional standards on their coping capabilities with experienced media pressure. The selection criteria for the transcripts of the participatory observations were the subjectively perceived *actual* (interdisciplinary) collaboration—especially joint deliberation and decision-making—and statements of the SLB on the usefulness of this collaboration by the researchers. The coding units are clear and meaningful elements (at least parts of sentences) in the transcripts.

The online appendix describes the coding procedure and the coding results in more detail.

## 5 | RESULTS

This section presents the results according to the three conjectures guiding this examination.

### 5.1 | Organizational structure as basic foundation for resilience (Conjecture 1)

According to Conjecture 1, we assume that basic traits of a professionalized organizational structure, that is, a decentralized structure with a focus on the connection among employees,

the selection of staff and division of tasks and responsibilities according to professional competences, increase resilience against adversity and thus reduces BAPI.

As described in Section 4.1, the Swiss implementing agencies in charge of child and adult protection changed from public lay agencies (the GA) to professionalized agencies (the CAPA).

Public lay agencies are based on an extensive Swiss system of non-professional self-administration. This system leads to many voluntary, that is, not or only partially compensated, part-time and non-professional public mandates by citizens.<sup>4</sup> Thus, many concrete policy implementation decisions are made by lay agencies (Linder & Mueller, 2017, pp. 90–97). While the system of non-professional self-administration brings many advantages, such as the involvement of the population and the local anchoring of public policy solutions, Germann (1981, 1995), for example, points to meaningful limits as public lay agencies in many policy areas can no longer cope organizationally and professionally with increasing complexity and demands. Related to this study, in German-speaking Switzerland before the establishment of the CAPA in 2013, the GA consisted mostly of laypersons who were politically elected and did not have to meet any relevant professional requirements (Swiss Federal Council, 2006, p. 7004). In many cases this system implied that a single lay person could decide upon measures of great scope such as the placement of a child in a children's home, for instance.<sup>5</sup>

The reform of the former GA was intended to remedy these deficiencies. According to the dispatch of the new Child and Adult Protection Policy '[w]ith the entry into force of the new law, all decisions in the area of child and adult protection are to be concentrated with a professional agency'<sup>6</sup> (Swiss Federal Council, 2006, p. 7004). As described above, the CAPA have to take decisions as collegial agencies with at least three professionals from different disciplines such as law, social work, psychology, or social education. Referring to organizational research, the CAPA is an 'organization of assistance'. Such organizations focus on the social integration of their target groups (Bode, 2012, p. 150). They typically address personal 'integration disorders' or socially defined problematic conditions. Thus, the core objective of most organizations of assistance is to restore or preserve the social functioning of individuals. This may or may not be in the interest of these individuals, which results in the double mandate of individual empowerment versus social control that is constitutive of modern social work (Baeker, 1994, pp. 93–94; Bode, 2012, pp. 155–56). In terms of organizational structure, the core of these organizations consists of academically trained specialists, often called 'social professionals'. These professionals usually have a strong intrinsic commitment to the purpose of their work as well as high professional ethics. Internal coordination and decision-making often take place via mutual agreement. The clear reference to professional standards usually appears as the basic characteristic of these organizations' culture (Bode, 2012, pp. 154, 157; Klatetzki, 2012).

To sum up, the document and literature analysis indicates that Conjecture 1 can be corroborated. The CAPA's structure (compared to the [missing] structure of the former GA) lays the foundation for interdisciplinary collaboration and decision-making among professionals.

The following sections on collaboration and professional standards add up on the full picture of a professionalized agency's capacities against adversity.

## 5.2 | Effects of (interdisciplinary) collaboration on resilience (Conjecture 2)

Before diving into the CAPA's resilience capacities, the quote below illustrates that BAPI is not a viable option for the professionalized agencies:

(...) I have the feeling that the CAPA really try to implement this [the new law]. And when they have to make difficult decisions, I have the impression that they are not

afraid to take a stand. So, I don't have the feeling that the agencies say 'no more withdrawal of the right of residence, no more placements of children', but when they realize that somebody finds themselves in such a situation, then they act. (...) I really experience the CAPA as taking responsibility for their decisions.

(Expert 1)

While the option of BAPI is mentioned as a possibility, all interviewees focus on organizational learning aspects mostly related to collaboration, that is, relational capabilities, operational interpretation or collective mind.

The external impact of decisions is therefore certainly an issue, but of course it must never be the guiding motive for decisions. But it is an issue. You think about how you'll react when it comes out in the press. We have a communication concept (...), which was developed [because of the massive negative media reactions]. (...) Every bad situation is also an opportunity. It has also inspired even more reflection on how we could do even better. Where do we have blind spots? How can we prevent such incidents?

(SLB 8)

(...) we have to adapt our tools to this reality [of negative media reports]. Because it's impossible to pretend that it doesn't exist.

(SLB 6)

Overall, interviewees mainly mention better-informed decisions through collective deliberation practices as well as collective ownership and increased confidence that the right decision is being made. These effects are also specifically related to interdisciplinary collaboration.

So, it is not so much an exchange and assertion of opinions, but much more a joint finding of solutions which are best for the client. (...) In the case of methodological, social work questions (...) it is usually not simply one way or the other, but it really requires a collection of ideas (...) and a weighing of the possibilities.

(SLB 8)

We need a cross-disciplinary approach (...) So, interdisciplinarity really means building a solution together with all our scientific knowledge.

(SLB 5)

If you decide in threes and everyone agrees, then that gives security and thus also a certain protection against such attacks.

(SLB 8)

With regard to interdisciplinarity, the participatory observations provide the following additional insights: The majority of the case discussions were initiated by representatives of the discipline of social work (75%). While representatives of the discipline of law took part in the discussion in every case review, representatives of social work were actively involved in 80% and social pedagogues in approx. Thirty percentage of the reviews. It should be noted that the discipline of social pedagogy has fewer representatives on the panel than the other two disciplines. In 30% of the cases discussed (i.e., in 7 cases) all three disciplines were jointly involved in the discussion. In a good 45%, only the disciplines of law and social work were involved (11 cases).

Participatory observation demonstrates the value and effect of interdisciplinary collaboration particularly through its *actual* application rather than explicit statements. Nevertheless, the quote below serves as an illustration that CAPA SLB consider this collaboration useful. A social worker asked the lawyers for advice regarding the review of a fee demand that a lawyer had made to the CAPA:

So, and that's when I realize that I need a guideline from you [*lawyers*], because I realize – Well, I don't know, I [*as a social worker*] can maybe say how much of social work a clarification needs, right?

The projective component of collaboration was also mentioned several times in the interviews:

Most people have the feeling that it's all about saying good or not good, thumbs up or thumbs down. But our task is to find measures that contribute to the improvement of the situation. And that is hard work! ...and when two parents argue about visitation rights (...) then to decide that the child suffers in this conflict, that is quickly clear to everyone, yes and what is better? (...) Is it really better now to take the child out? (...) or is it better, also because it would be right (...), to take it out? But is the right thing then really the better thing?

(SLB 11)

(...) we always have to work into the future and make assumptions about what will happen if we do A and what will happen if we do B. But we never know. People are always very unpredictable.

(SLB 8)

In addition, interviewees explained how collaboration supports individual SLB in their emotional coping with difficult cases, as the following quotes by expert 1 and SLB 8 illustrate:

And what is very important internally from my point of view is the whole topic of coaching/supervision. You have to be able to exchange ideas on difficult topics, and there has to be time available to deal with such stressful situations.

(Expert 1)

Overall, our interviews show how the professionalized context in the case of the CAPA facilitates deliberation among SLB that supports them mentally but also professionally. However, this exchange among professionals needs to be sought proactively via networking—another integral part of resilience and collaboration research explained above.

No one who is not more closely involved with our job can understand what we have to endure in some cases. And when you're with people [*staff from other CAPA offices*] who know all that (...) that helps a lot. It really is like a self-help group. You have to cultivate this exchange; you have to cultivate the networking.

(SLB 8)

To sum up, the findings corroborate Conjecture 2. Interdisciplinary collaboration enhances resilience, which in turn has a negative influence on BAPI. In particular, better-informed decisions through collective deliberation and collective responsibility for decisions are underlined as main resilience-enhancing mechanisms.

### 5.3 | Effects of professional standards and values on resilience (Conjecture 3)

In the interviews SLB and experts confirm that high professional standards and values are at the core of the CAPA employees' activities and clearly lead their decisions.

We have very motivated employees who also have a very high commitment and a great willingness to help these people (...). These employees are not there for the pay, especially the lawyers. I used to work at UBS [*Swiss bank*], where I would probably earn twice as much today. (...) The motivation is to help and support.

(SLB 4)

To evaluate professionally and with a specialist is the best way to resolve the situation so that protective measures can be taken. There are several possible ways. The idea is always to exploit the best or the least bad [*for the client*] (...).

(SLB 6)

Participatory observation shows that there were two main modes of discussion during the meetings: On the one hand, there were case discussions in which knowledge of the other colleagues on processes or technical aspects was sought. These discussions consisted of short question and answer sequences with little participation of the entire panel.

On the other hand, longer discussions took place on questions such as how to interpret a given situation, and arguments were exchanged regarding the course of action to be taken. In these case discussions, participants were clearly more active compared to the first type. Participants disagreed with each other relatively frequently; however, the assertions made in the counter-arguments were always supported by professional justifications. These justifications contained, for example, alternative hypotheses on causes and effects, reports of experience from similar cases, or considerations on the ethical evaluation of an issue. This can be considered a sign of the high quality of the professional debate.

To sum up, the findings corroborate Conjecture 3. Professional standards and values indeed mainly shape the CAPA's decision. CAPA interviewees in particular underlined their concern to find the best possible solution for the clients.

## 6 | DISCUSSION

This section shows how this study adds to knowledge on policy implementation in times of democratic backsliding by juxtaposing the different reactions to adversity of the CAPA and the previous Guardianship Agencies (GA) and by discussing transferable findings for other public agencies.

Overall, our findings map the major effects theorized in extant research on organizational resilience. With their structure enabling or even demanding collective deliberation and decision-making among professionals, the CAPA clearly 'anticipate, respond to, recover from, and learn from adversity' (Hepfer & Lawrence, 2022, p. 2; Linnenluecke, 2017; Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003). The document and literature analysis shows how a public agency's organizational structure may lay the foundation for increased resilience. The interviews and participatory observations mainly show the projective component of resilience, collective evaluations of complex

and disruptive events, shared responsibility, and learning. We also see the networking component, that is, the ability to activate and tactically use ‘social connections that enable access to and exchange of resources’ (Williams et al., 2017, p. 745). Concerning the particular form of interdisciplinary collaboration, the case of the CAPA shows how ‘members of different disciplines contribute to a common product or goal’ (Berg-Weger & Schneider, 1998, p. 98).

The juxtaposition of the professionalized CAPA with the former lay GA shows that both agencies work(ed) in an atmosphere of increased media pressure. Related to the GA, Hinterleitner and Wittwer (2022, p. 13) summarize it as follows: ‘The frontline workers we interviewed overwhelmingly described media pressure (i.e., the negative coverage of guardianship authorities and the scandalization of individual cases) as very burdensome and the form of pressure they feel the most’. An illustrative statement from our interviews sounds very similar:

(...) we feel a strong pressure from the media in both directions (...) The media can react almost simultaneously saying we are too intervening or we are too permissive.  
 (...) it's quite difficult to work with the media on your back.

(SLB 5)

Both agencies' SLB suffer(ed) from the resulting distrust and negative attitudes of clients (see Hinterleitner & Wittwer, 2022, p. 14). In addition, one could argue that compared to the GA the context and working environment of the CAPA even deteriorated over the last decade. Thus, we posit the present study's findings beyond the discussed framework of Hinterleitner and Wittwer (2022) that adds to knowledge on implementation in times of democratic backsliding. Despite the increased resilience against negative media pressure and BAPI, our interviews show that the CAPA are struggling with a negative reputation as a direct consequence of the negative dynamics and only have limited options and resources to change this. The following quotes illustrate this challenge:

(...) the mistrust has become so great that we are always or almost always confronted at the first contact with ‘you CAPA people, you're doing everything wrong’ and so on, with these accusations (...). And that has led to (...) a lot of need for action to show: Actually, we're not that bad.

(SLB 9)

We have offered the media positive stories x times, but they don't report on it. (...) the *Sonntagszeitung* [a Swiss Sunday newspaper] told me that everything seemed to be going well, so they would not report. How are we supposed to correct our reputation if we are only reported on when something is presumably going wrong?

(Expert 3)

What clearly differs, however, are the organizational structure, the collaboration mode and the professional standards—and, finally, the use of BAPI. While Hinterleitner and Wittwer (2022, p. 14) describe that a majority of interviewed GA SLB ‘confirm that media pressure can lead to BAPI’, this is not the case with our CAPA data. On the contrary, we find clear statements against BAPI. Thus, we conclude that professionalization is a relevant explanatory factor for the resilience of a public organization.

As the CAPA belong to one of the classic categories of public organizations, that is, to the ‘organizations of assistance’, we argue that our findings are transferable to, at least, other public agencies of the same category, if not, in some adjusted form, to other categories as well.

Thus, collaboration and joint decision-making among professional disciplines are key factors to improve public agencies' resilience during more conflictual times. Therefore, a corresponding organizational structure that fosters the closeness of employees, for instance, is important. While in the case at hand the typical SLB, that is, the 'social professionals' are characterized by high intrinsic motivation and professional values, we claim that when collaboration and shared decision-making are at the core of an organization, this promotes mutual scrutiny among peers and thus stronger reference to professional standards.

What underlies the positive effects of collaboration, but has not been addressed here so far, is the 'appropriate' size of an organization. Team size is a recognized factor in shaping organizational processes (Campion et al., 1996; Kozlowski & Bell, 2003). On the one hand, research shows that larger teams tend to suffer from poorer teamwork quality, because inter-member cooperation tends to decline (Gratton & Erickson, 2007; Hoegl, 2005). On the other hand, in very small organizations collective sense-making and the maximization of expertise are limited. This study demonstrates how the bigger size of the CAPA, compared to the GA, made a decisive difference in how the SLB take decisions. Thus, collaboration requires a minimum but not too big team size in order to develop its positive resilience effect.

Finally, one interviewed expert offered another way to strengthen public agencies' resilience, namely the active engagement of the political principals that by nature of the accountability chain in democratic government are equally affected by a bad reputation of 'their' agency (Olsen, 2015, p. 428):

The government needs to stand up and say that the CAPA are working well and that professionalization was the right thing to do. (...) For me, that would be the most important thing for the CAPA employees. (...) what would do them the best would be if the politicians backed them up.

(Expert 3)

While our findings suggest that professionalization enhances the resilience of a public agency to external pressures, agencies should still receive additional and active backing from those actors who have more opportunities and privileged access to engage in resilience-increasing activities and reputation management (Hinterleitner & Sager, 2017). This is all the more important in times of democratic backsliding that increasingly questions public administration.

## 7 | CONCLUSION

This article focuses on organizational resilience against adversity and asks 'How do organizational structure, collaboration, and professional standards influence the resilience of street-level bureaucrats (SLB) facing adversity?' We use document and literature analysis, and original data from interviews with SLB from the Swiss Child and Adult Protection Agencies (CAPA) and experts as well as participatory observations during CAPA case meetings and conduct qualitative content analysis. Our findings confirm that a conducive organizational structure, interdisciplinary collaboration and decision-making and high professional standards of employees increase resilience against media pressure and thereby reduce BAPI. This is mainly because collective deliberation practices increase the knowledge about a complex environment and strengthen the collective responsibility as well as the individual SLB's confidence that the right decision is being made.

Two limitations are to be mentioned here: First, this study is part of a broader project (see [Appendix](#) for more information). The interview guideline was not designed exclusively for this study, which, among other things, prevents a one-to-one comparison between the old lay and the new professionalized agencies. Nevertheless, the juxtaposition of the two agencies delivers meaningful insights to increase our understanding about the potential effect of the three identified 'BAPI mitigating factors'. Second, the isolated findings of the interviews and participatory observations on the effect of professionalization for the resilience against negative media pressure and BAPI are not as clear as they could be. We see this as being in the nature of things, namely that professionalization is an integral part of interdisciplinary collaboration and of the self-conception of the SLB of a professionalized public agency. More research is needed to specifically test the effect of SLB's individual resilience capacities. In addition, future research could further investigate the links between organizational structure, collaboration, professional standards and the resilience of public agencies of different types and in different contexts. Moreover, the 'learning from adversity' component is complex and can vary greatly depending on the organization and situation it faces. Research could focus more on organizations' external (e.g., how to communicate with the target group or media) and internal learning (e.g., how to shape working relationships and processes to strengthen effective collaboration). Finally, future research may investigate whether resilience depends on different types of adversity or on how strongly the three identified BAPI mitigating factors are pronounced.

If SLB are to implement public policies on target and not to buckle under any kind of pressure by taking refuge in BAPI, strategies to increase resilience against adversity become more and more essential for public agencies.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No conflict of interest exists for all authors of this manuscript.


## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data supporting this study are included within the article and supporting materials. Parts of data supporting this study are available on request only or cannot be shared due to ethical, legal, or commercial reasons. Please contact the author at [bettina.stauffer@kpm.unibe.ch](mailto:bettina.stauffer@kpm.unibe.ch).

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Collaboration among professionals is also rooted in organizational theory. In addition to the bureaucratic, hierarchical form based on authority due to office or formal power (e.g., Weber, 1980), concepts of authority due to expertise or expertise as source of legitimacy emerged. As a typical organizational form of professionals the collegium was introduced where they take joint decisions (Lazega, 2001; Sciulli, 1992; Waters, 1989, 1993). In reality, the collegium is not the only organizational form for decision-making, but it (co)exists within a particular organizational structure (e.g., as described above; see also Klatetzki, 2012).



- <sup>2</sup> Kriesi and Schulte-Cloos (2020, p. 8) attribute the Swiss People's Party to the populist and radical right party family. They show that this party regularly attacks the government, thus contributing to democratic backsliding, by mobilizing political discontent or with direct-democratic instruments (such as referendums to challenge laws voted by parliament or popular initiatives). In addition, the party contributes to norm erosion by depicting left-wing parties on posters as vermin, for instance (see Swiss People's Party, 2019 and also Bernhard et al., 2015).
- <sup>3</sup> We are aware that in many other (Western European) countries non-professional self-administration does not go as far as in Switzerland (see also Section 5.1). However, we use the juxtaposition of the 'extreme' case of a public lay agency with a professionalized agency only to illustrate the professionalization effect (on an agency's structure, the mode of cooperation and the guiding norms of the employees). For the empirical analysis, we focus on the professionalized CAPA, that are comparable to other public authorities, as we will show below; thus, we are able to derive generalizable findings, which we discuss in Section 6.
- <sup>4</sup> These mandates and tasks include all parliamentary mandates at all three levels (national, cantonal, municipal), some judicial offices, many positions of political parties and associations, and in particular a considerable part of executive offices, commissions and committees (e.g., for schools or social affairs), in particular on the municipal level (Linder & Mueller, 2017, pp. 90–97).
- <sup>5</sup> Within this system, a dark chapter of Swiss history emerged, namely a practice of coercive welfare measures that reached its peak between 1930 and 1950 (Stauffer, 2023b).
- <sup>6</sup> Authors' translation.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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