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**When institutions, image, and identity clash:
The organizational precariat of the German federal civil protection agency**

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Abstract:

This paper aims at advancing our conceptual understanding of organizational survival. In doing so, it addresses a “niche topic” (Adam and Bauer 2018, 2) of organizational studies: How can we assess a public organization’s chances to survive? As most pithily suggested by Kaufman (1976), government organizations appear to be immortal. However, organizational termination research yet lacks a clear theoretical outlook with which we can debate that established hypothesis. Therefore, by considering the continuity, or lack thereof, of organizational identity (Albert and Whetten 1985), this paper argues that an institutionalist perspective (Scott 2013) helps to understand whether circumstances of seeming disruptive organizational change actually can be viewed as such. It flows from this that the extent to which organizational change can occur depends on the institutional arrangement and the degree of institutionalization.

This argument will be illustrated by examining the case of the federal civil protection agency in Germany, which finds itself in a fragile organizational setting. As of right now, this public organization is officially being restructured due to heavy criticism from the public and political sphere that originated in the organization’s lack of visible (useful) activities during the pandemic. However, this is not the first instance in which the federal civil protection agency has undergone reformation. In fact, the organization, which exists since 1958, was abolished and

reinstated under a new name in a matter of less than five years (1999-2004). While this process could be labelled much more detailed from a terminological standpoint (Hannan and Freeman 1989, Kuipers and Boin 2005, MacCarthaigh 2014), particularly the continuity of the organization's identity (Lewis 2002) suggests that this public organization has not experienced a process of disruptive organizational change at all. Rather, since being re-established, it has maintained the same main functions, similarly educated personnel, and even operates from the same city district. Against this background, it will be argued that the institutional environment (i.e. the constitutional division of labor between the federal and state level, the financial and organizational structures, and various significant policy ideas) only allows for a certain degree of organizational change.

Consequently, this conference paper, which portrays a dissertation project in its second year, first, would introduce the institutionalist perspective later utilized to analyze organizational change, and present the conceptual facets from organizational termination research that harmonize with and add to the analytical potential of said institutionalist perspective. Then, the paper would outline the case of the federal civil protection agency in Germany, constituting the empirical field. Against this background, the argument would eventually be geared towards assessing the endogenous ("organizational stickiness") and exogenous ("political incentives") factors (Adam et al. 2007) that influence a public organization's fate to, lastly, analyze the case of the federal civil protection office.

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