Top Officials in Turbulent Times: Converging Research Agendas in Europe East and West

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1. Introduction to the Special Issue

This special issue brings together contributions from the 13th Trans-European Dialogue Conference that was held in Bratislava/Slovakia on 12–13 February 2020 and hosted by the Institute of Public Policy, Comenius University Bratislava. The Trans-European Dialogue (TED) is an annual scholarly conference on a timely topic in Public Administration, jointly organised by the European Group for Public Administration, EGPA, and the Network of Schools of Public Administration in Central and Eastern Europe, NISPAcee, which represent the main professional associations of public administration in Europe. It was attended by 50 high level and senior scholars from 18 countries as well as practitioners from international organisations, think tanks and national governments, including the Civil Service Council of Slovakia. The event provided an opportunity to take stock of the latest research on top officials in Central and Eastern Europe, to compare the position of top officials to Western Europe and to identify current research frontiers and agendas for future research.

The TED2020 conference focused on the “Politics of Bureaucracy: Top Officials in Turbulent Times”. The reference of the title to “turbulent times” appears to be a major understatement when looking at the world around us at the time of writing the introduction to this NISPAcee Special Issue. Nobody could have expected that within a very short space of time after the conference the world around us would be transformed by the outbreak of a new virus that would lead to a global pandemic. From a personal point of view, the scale of the turbulences exceeded everything we could have probably ever imagined at the time, even if news of a new virus was already circulating at the time of the conference proceedings.

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From the point of view of public administration, the COVID-19 crisis has presented an unprecedented challenge. Overnight, it has changed the way public administration works in most countries in Europe as much as it has provided a powerful reminder of the importance of public administration for the provision of public goods and indeed for everybody's life. While research has been quick to direct its attention to the management of the pandemic, it is fair to say that we are not even at the end of the beginning of our understanding of what COVID-19 really means for public administration.

The COVID-19 crisis has come on the back of a decade that has been labelled by others as "the age of perpetual crisis" (Beckett 2019), hence the conference's initial interest in the role of top officials in turbulent times. The 2010s started early with the global financial crisis that continues to dominate politics and public policy in Europe today. But we have lived through many more crises, including a crisis of democracy in many parts of Europe, in particular many Central and Eastern European countries, a crisis of the European Union itself, a Eurozone crisis, a refugee crisis, an unfolding climate crisis and a looming demographic crisis. Most notably, by the beginning of the 2020s, none of these crises appears to have been resolved, while the COVID-19 crisis promises to lift the sense of crisis to a completely new level.

What does this uncertain and volatile context mean for top officials? What does it mean for their careers, their roles and their relations to others inside and outside public administration? For the purpose of this Special Issue, top officials include top civil servants in the most senior positions of public administration and advisors variously labelled ministerial, political or special advisors. These officials are in critical positions that translate political programmes into public policy, manage public administration and ensure the accountability of administrative actions. By implication, they are critically exposed to the management of the varieties of crises mentioned above.

The study of top officials has been prominent ever since the writings of Woodrow Wilson at the end of the 19th century and Max Weber at the beginning of the 20th century. For long, research has concentrated on the relation between politicians and senior civil servants at the top of public administration. The main areas of academic debate have traditionally addressed the competencies and careers of top bureaucrats (see Veit 2020 for a recent review), the role behaviour of politicians and bureaucrats (classically Aberbach et al. 1981), the political control of the bureaucracy including its politicisation (Rouban 2012), the influence of senior bureaucrats on public policy (Dahlström 2011), their role in creating public value (Moore 1995), and the impact of ideas and reforms such as the New Public Management (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017).

The rise of political and special advisors has added a "third element" (Shaw and Eichbaum 2015) to the study of top officials. Originating in the study of Westminster systems (Hustedt 2019), the role of special advisors raised new questions

with regard to their role in policy-making, their relation to permanent civil servants and wider concerns of accountability and legitimacy (Hustedt, Kolltveit, and Salomonsen 2017). The latter aspects may become even more pronounced with the COVID-19 crisis, where political advisors might wield a lot of influence but stay out of the public spotlight.

2. The study of top officials in post-communist countries

While the study of top officials has a long history to look back at in Western democracies, it emerged as a new field of study in Central and Eastern Europe after the exit from communism. Many of the traditional themes in the study of politicians and bureaucrats and, more recently, special advisors gradually made their way into the post-communist context. However, it has taken until the age of perpetual crisis for research agendas to converge between Central and Eastern Europe and Western Europe and for research projects to effectively bridge both regions. In this introductory article, we provide a broad picture of pertinent research on politicians and bureaucrats in Central and Eastern Europe (see Bach and Wegrich 2020 and Meyer-Sahling 2017 for recent reviews of research in Western democracies and in post-communist Europe respectively).

Research interest in politicians and bureaucrats was slow to emerge during the first decade after transition. Initially public administration debate focused on major questions of administrative transformation, overcoming the legacy of communism, reorganising public administration and bringing it under the rule of law (Hesse 1998, Elster et al. 1998). An important starting point for the organised study of top officials was arguably a NISPAcee conference in 1998 in Prague when a working group on politico-administrative relations led by Tony Verheijen and Aleksandra Rabrenovic was set up and met for the first time (see Verheijen 2001 as the first edited volume emerging from the Working Group). For many years, Guy Peters was not only an active participant but also a co-leader of this group resulting in two edited volumes on the topic (Peters et al. 2005, 2006). The working group has remained active until today under the lead of Bernadette Connaughton and Katarina Staronova.

Yet compared to the study of top officials in Western Europe, research saw a different framing in Central and Eastern Europe during the first two decades after transition from communism. The mapping of institutional arrangements prevailed in the first phase. Efforts to trace institutional reforms and a collective puzzlement that institutions failed to induce administrative behaviour as predicted by students of the new institutionalism in Western democracies were at the centre of the debate. The instability of senior civil service positions and the regular political interference with the recruitment and selection of top civil servants were further identified by this first generation of studies as characteristic of top official governance in Central and Eastern Europe.

Traditional topics such as the role perceptions of senior civil servants and the impact of coalition government on the management of top officials in the post-communist context became subject to inquiry (Peters et al. 2005). The initial findings have remained a point of reference for current research and debates insofar as current research suggests that patterns of politico-administrative relations have changed little since the late 1990s and politicisation of public officials is still a dominant trend (Staronova and Rybář 2020, Kohoutek and Nekola 2020).

The second decade of research on public administration and top officials in Central and Eastern Europe was dominated by the Europeanisation paradigm, a preoccupation with the belated establishment of Weberian bureaucracies and, by implication, a separation between politics and administration. By contrast, public administration in Western Europe was heavily focused on the origins and consequences of the New Public Management during the same period of time (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017).

The 2000s witnessed a change of perspective towards the Europeanisation of public administration and, by implication, the position of top officials. The preoccupation with institutional reforms and the institutionalisation of the core executive persisted during the period of preparing public administration for EU accession (Dimitrova 2005, Lippert et al. 2001) as well as looking at institutional changes and roles of top public officials after the accession (Zubek 2008, Zubek and Staronova 2012). The reliance of EU conditionality helped speed up reforms and break deadlocks that had previously prevented the successful passage of reforms.

Yet the preparation for EU accession also reinforced the institutional and personnel instability in top official positions that was much lamented during the 1990s (Dimitrov et al. 2006). Yet, Klaus Goetz (2001) remarked at the beginning of the decade that Europeanisation promotes the emergence of islands of excellence and pockets of effectiveness in the core executive, which could reinforce the fragmentation of public administration and senior personnel management.

The accession of Central and Eastern European countries in several waves (2004, 2007, 2013) represented a historical milestone in the development of the region. For public administration and, specifically, top officials it meant the need for further adaptation. Institutional reforms that were passed before accession often turned out to be “empty shells” (Dimitrova 2010) that quickly reversed back to type. Instability and politicisation in top official positions remained a defining feature of post-communist executive governance (Meyer-Sahling 2008).

However, the accession to the EU also heralded the growing divergence of administrative reform pathways and positions of top officials across the region. In particular, the roles of top officials in the Baltic States evolved in a more stable way, following more closely the example of their Northern European neighbours (Nakrošis 2015; Randma-Liiv et al. 2015). By contrast, in the Visegrad countries and

in Southeast Europe, pre-accession achievements turned out to be a great deal less sustainable (Meyer-Sahling 2011).

The onset of the age of perpetual crisis in the 2010s appears to have led to a convergence of research agendas in East and West after all. Having become EU member states, it has been argued that Central and Eastern European states have become increasingly “normal countries” (Shleifer and Treisman 2014). While it is contestable what can still be described as normal in a context of continuous economic, political, social and environmental crisis, it is evident that research on public administration has increasingly bridged the divide between East and West.

Most notably, the research conducted by Tiina Randma-Liiv and her team on the impact of the global financial crisis on public management, coordination inside the core executive, and the position of the senior civil service has led the way. It compares responses from Western Europe and new EU member states in Eastern and Central Europe, ultimately showing more similarities than differences (Peters et al. 2011). Marleen Brans and Guy Peters (2012) built on earlier research on the rewards offered to chief executives, ministers and top civil servants, this time, however, covering also several Central and Eastern European countries, bringing new comparative data. Cross-regional initiatives, such as the COCOPS project (Hammerschmid et al. 2016), also helped integrate research agendas such as on the roles of top officials in policy-making and on the politicisation of senior executives in EU member states across the whole of Europe and indeed in EU accession states in the Western Balkans (Bach et al. 2020).

Research on the impact of other types of turbulences on top officials has only recently started to emerge. The response of public administration to changing external conditions such as climate change and the demographic crisis has been explored insofar as these crises have slowly but surely gained prominence in public discourse and in relation to administrative reform agendas (Lodge and Wegrich 2014).

The rise of populism and wider changes in political representation and the institutionalisation of party systems have only recently started to attract more attention (Belloir and van den Bergh 2020, this issue). Bauer and Becker (2020) have started to explore the role of populist public administration policy. They propose a typology of approaches to account for different trajectories in countries as diverse as the United States, Hungary, Peru, and Switzerland.

The same applies to the role of top officials in countries that have undergone periods of democratic backsliding or whose political leaders evidently challenge the established roles of top official (Meyer-Sahling and Toth 2020, this issue). These challenges may include a growing role for special advisors, a disempowerment of the permanent civil service as well as a growing politicisation of the senior civil service. So far, these questions remain research frontiers in Europe both East and West.

The COVID-19 pandemic further increases the complexity of governing and changes the way public servants work. Although its impact on the relationship between politicians and senior bureaucrats has not yet been addressed empirically, we have seen tensions about appropriate policy responses emerge between expert advice provided by top officials (the most prominent example probably being Anthony Fauci in the U.S.) and executive politicians. More generally, the effectiveness and legitimacy of crisis management during the COVID-19 pandemic serves as a testbed for the problem-solving capacity of different institutional configurations of political-administrative relations.

3. Overview of articles in this Special Issue

There is undoubtedly a shared interest in addressing the abovementioned questions in future research. For now, this Special Issue provides a starting point for the exploration of these agendas. The contributions in this volume each address one or several key questions related to the main conference theme, “Politics of Bureaucracy: Roles of Top Public Officials in Turbulent Times”.

Setting the wider stage, Tobias Bach, who served also as an opening key note speaker, outlines the current academic discussions about the relationship between politics and administration from the perspective of the career paths of top civil servants. He concludes his overview by indicating potential research paths and methods that may assist in moving forward in this area.

Following him, Alexandre Belloir and Caspar Van den Berg look at the impact of party system fragmentation and polarisation on the appointment of top officials in the Netherlands. Utilising survey data in a cross-time approach they find that political-strategic insight has overshadowed the substantive expertise (*Fachwissen*) and procedural knowledge of top civil servants when dealing with politicians.

Marek Rybář and Milan Podmaník study the career backgrounds of top civil servants prior to and after the adoption of the Civil Service Law in the Czech Republic. They find that the introduction of a new law resulted in a shift towards a less politicised state administration at the level of deputies, yet politicians have retained tools to influence the outcomes of bureaucratic recruitment.

Political appointments are being explored also by Jan Meyer-Sahling and Fanni Toth in an environment where democratic backsliding is prominent, notably Hungary. In their research they find that the efforts by the Hungarian government to roll back democracy were accompanied by the increasing politicisation and instability of top official positions. They suggest that the expansion of political appointments and continuously high political turnover in top official positions may be characteristic of executive governance in illiberal democracies.

Samuel Krajňák, Katarína Staroňová and Heath Pickering explore the framework within which ministerial advisers in Slovakia operate as well as their profile across different types of governments. They show a lack of government transparency irrespective of the party in power, which provides loopholes for employing ministerial advisers in informal ways. “Visible” ministerial advisers have short tenure, though their recruitment depends on the type of party in power.

Sofie Hennau explores politico-administrative relations on the local level of Flemish municipalities, particularly in the area of administrative discretion and trust among the actors, using large-n survey data of Flemish local bureaucrats.

Finally, Julia Dahlvik, Axel Pohn-Weidinger and Martina Kollegger explore the role of political appointments in independent institutions, namely that of the Austrian Ombudsman Board. They examine the career pathways of appointees as well as the role behaviour after they have been appointed to a de-facto independent supervisory institution.

These contributions are followed by three essays that address specific challenge. Michal Sedláčko explores roles prescribed to top public officials as “public value” managers in the current literature, identifying five clusters of tasks and competencies. He concludes the discussion by opening a new research agenda, asking under what conditions a public value approach contributes to changes in the given public administration culture.

In his essay, Tony Verheijen looks back at 30 years of transformation in post-communist countries and highlights the ongoing divergence between Western Europe and Central and Eastern Europe and Southeast Europe, both in terms of the conditions for academic research and in terms of the ongoing evolution of politics/administration relations in post-communist countries. He highlights several themes for further research, including a focus on young professionals moving in and out of the civil service as well as the diminishing role of civil servants in providing policy advice.

Finally, B. Guy Peters discusses several pertinent aspects related to interactions between politicians and bureaucrats. He highlights how political changes, such as the rise of populist politicians, have impacted those relations and outlines different strategies of populist leaders in dealing with the civil service. He moves on to discuss several paradoxes of public administration in turbulent times and finally outlines several avenues for future research on the relationship between politics and administration.

We would like to thank all the participants in TED2020 for their active involvement and specifically the contributors in this special issue for their efforts, as well as the reviewers for their hard work in turbulent times.

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