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Politicisation, professionalisation, or both? Hungary's civil service system

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Abstract

This paper aims to determine where the Hungarian civil service system might be situated on an imaginary merit system – spoils system scale. In doing so, the Hungarian system is analyzed from two angles. Firstly, regulation is scrutinized as it is manifested in the Civil Service Act. Secondly, practice is examined relying on available statistical and survey data. The author argues that, contrary to the conclusions of most of scholarly publications, the Hungarian Law is a pseudo-merit system law, not in fact preventing the prevalence of a spoils system. Practice generally reveals, however, features of a modestly politicized system with signs of increasing professionalization. The last two sections investigate the potential explanations for these somewhat surprising findings and whether the findings for the Hungarian civil service may be generalized to some or most of the Central and East European countries.

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Introduction

This paper aims to determine where the Hungarian civil service system is situated on an imaginary merit system – spoils system scale.¹ In doing so, the Hungarian system is analysed from two angles. Firstly, regulation will be scrutinized as it manifested in the Civil Service Act. Secondly, practice will be examined relying on available statistical and survey data. The author argues that, contrary to conclusions of most of scholarly publications, Hungarian Law is a pseudo-merit system regulation, not in fact preventing the prevalence of a spoils system. Practice generally reveals, however, features of a modestly politicised system that falls far from being a spoils system; meanwhile, a clear tendency of professionalisation can be observed. The next section investigates the potential explanations for these somewhat surprising findings. In the last section, I attempt to determine if the findings are specific to only Hungary or if they may be generalized to cover some or most of the Central and East European countries as well.

Understanding the Hungarian Civil Service System

Civil service is a major element of administrative capacity. Only devoted, well-trained and skilled staff, in brief a professional personnel can carry out the increasingly complex functions that government work demands. The civil service has to meet two somewhat contradictory requirements. On the one hand, it is responsible for fulfilling goals set up by the ruling political party. On the other hand, it has to provide politicians with professional, unbiased advice and expertise, both in policy making and implementation (Bekke and Meer, 2000, pp. 281–282). This duality of requirements is reflected in two polar ‘classical’ models of civil service systems. The merit system, following largely on Weber’s and Wilson’s perspective (Weber, 1978, pp. 212–231; Weber, 1947, pp. 77–128; Wilson, 1887), emphasizes professionalism. In that context, politicisation² is considered a negative factor, since it means that political aspects prevail over professional ones. According to Weber and Wilson, ideally political will should be conveyed to administration via channels other than direct political control over the composition of civil service. An opposite civil service system model is the spoils system that concerns civil service position as spoils of the ruling party. This arrangement allows direct control over the administrative personnel in order to assure that the political will is implemented with

¹ Contrasting a ‘merit system’ with a ‘spoils system’ – instead of either a ‘position system’ (Bossaert et al., 2001; OECD, 2004) or a ‘system with other characteristics’ (Bossaert and Demmke, 2003) or ‘departmental system’ (OECD, 2004) which may seem obsolete. The reason for doing this is that the public employment method used within the Hungarian communist system was largely conceived as a spoils system and during the transition from communism the question of what type of civil service to choose appeared to literally all stakeholders as a decision between spoils and merit system.

² A complex theoretical concept of politicisation was presented by Hojnacki (1996) and Bekke and Meer (2000). In this paper I will rely on a less sophisticated concept of politicization. Politicization in this context refers solely to the fact that public administration personnel are under direct political influence; namely that selection, promotion, wage, laying-off, and so on depends solely, or to a large extent, on political criteria.

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