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Topical Paper:

How to improve the quality of public administration in Europe? Lessons from and for civil service reform

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Introduction

The EUPACK project has generated comprehensive country knowledge on the characteristics of public administration in EU member states. It covers a wide range of themes in public administration including the size, structure and scope of government, the management of the civil service, policy-making and the co-ordination of government, transparency and accountability relations in public administration. The information provides a consistent overview that will, for the first time, allow for systematic comparison of public administration across EU member states to facilitate the targeting of future support by the European Commission.

Major challenges remain for the improvement of the quality of public administration in Europe. They include (i) the evaluation of the effectiveness of EU support provided so far in the area of administrative capacity building, (ii) the factors that drive differences in the quality of public administration across EU member states, and (iii) the identification of institutional designs and practices that enhance the performance and integrity of public administration and hence a better understanding of 'what works in civil service management in Europe'. The scale of these questions should not be underestimated, as the evidence to answer them remains remarkably limited.

This briefing note focuses on the last of the three questions. It draws on insights from the study of civil service reform and management as one of, if not, the most important dimension of public administration. In this context civil service management is understood as the day-to-day operation of managing people in public administration. It includes management functions such as recruitment, promotion, transfer, dismissals, salary management, performance evaluation and will further address questions such as the adequate scope of the civil service (Berman 2015).

The briefing note will raise more questions than provide answers. This reflects our limited understanding of 'what works' in the area of civil service reform and management (Meyer-Sahling, Mikkelsen and Schuster 2018). This may be surprising, as there is a general consensus among researchers and practitioners that the professionalisation of the civil service is essential for a country's development (Evans and Rauch 1999). However, we lack adequate evidence how to design civil service management systems that improve the performance, integrity and hence quality of public administration. How important are formal examination systems for civil service entry? Should

we centralise civil service recruitment or should we delegate it to individual administrative organisations? Shall we reward civil servants on the basis of their performance or shall salaries mainly be determined by years of experience or other mechanisms? How does an effective performance evaluation in the civil service look like?

These are critical questions for civil service reformers. Questions of this kind often appear for reformers at the level of EU member states and are indeed regularly posed to European Commission officials. Without an answer to these questions, it is difficult to determine how to improve the quality of public administration in EU member states and what kind of initiatives to support.

Taking insights from the study of civil service reform, this briefing note will present three arguments and conclude with a proposal the future role of the European Commission in promoting the quality of public administration in Europe. First, there is a broad consensus that merit recruitment has positive consequences for the performance, motivation and integrity of civil servants, while the politicisation of the civil service is widely associated with negative consequences (Dahlstroem, Lapuente and Teorell 2012, Evans and Rauch 1999, Meyer-Sahling and Mikkelsen 2016, Neshkova and Kostadinova 2012, Oliveros and Schuster 2017). Second, civil service reformers and academic researchers lack adequate evidence on how to design effective merit recruitment systems and how to overcome problems of civil service politicisation in the first place. Third, there exists limited knowledge on what works in other areas as of civil service management such as salary management, performance management and career management and how to best design civil service management structures for a given context (Meyer-Sahling, Mikkelsen and Schuster 2018).

For the European Commission, this situation presents both opportunities and constraints in terms of what to advice and how to support EU member states in their quest for a better working public administration. In particular, it provides an invitation to generate systematic evidence on how to improve the quality of public administration in Europe and to support measures in member states that seek to generate better evidence on what works in civil service management, for instance, by means of regular civil service surveys that are used in several OECD countries. In doing so, the European Commission would focus its efforts on learning and improving the capacity of member states to monitor, evaluate and indeed design reforms that will improve the quality of civil service management on the basis of robust evidence.

The briefing note is based on insights from the academic literature on public administration, in particular, civil service reform and management and research conducted by the authors on the issue in Central and Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans in the context of projects funded by SIGMA-OECD and the Regional School of Public Administration (ReSPA) (Meyer-Sahling 2009 and 2012, Meyer-Sahling et al 2015). In addition, the note will, where possible, refer to evidence from a project funded by the British Academy and the UK Department for International Development and led by the authors on the consequences of civil service management practices in transition and developing countries (Meyer-Sahling, Schuster and Mikkelsen 2018).[1]

1. *What we know about what works in civil service reform and management*

Political scientists, economists, public administration and management scholars widely agree that the quality of a country's bureaucracy, in particular, the professionalization of its civil service, is beneficial for its development. A 'use-able' bureaucracy is a precondition for the consolidation of democracy (Linz and Stepan 1996). It is associated with economic growth and development (Evans and Rauch 1999). It is associated with less public sector corruption (Dahlstroem, Lapuente and Teorell 2012, Meyer-Sahling and Mikkelsen 2016, Oliveros and Schuster 2017). It enhances the performance of public policy, in particular, by improving the management of policy programmes (Lewis 2008). In the context of European integration, bureaucratic quality is positively associated with progress during the negotiations for EU accession and both the transposition and implementation of EU policies by member states (Hille and Knill 2006, Falkner and Treib 2008).

Two features of civil service management have received most attention in the context of this debate. On the one hand, research stresses the positive consequences of merit recruitment practices on the performance and integrity of the civil service. On the other, it has been widely shown that civil service politicisation has negative consequences. By contrast, there is much less evidence on the impact of other civil service design elements and management practices such as salary management, promotions, transfers and performance management practices.

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[1] The project report is available at
https://www.britac.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Meyer%20Sahling%20Schuster%20Mikkelsen%20-%20What%20Works%20in%20Civil%20Service%20Management.pdf

2. The challenge of institutionalising merit recruitment

Merit recruitment assumes that candidates are recruited and selected on the basis of their skills and qualifications rather than informal criteria such a personal contacts, political support or belonging to particular ethnic or social groups (Meyer-Sahling et al 2015). In short, it assumes that the best-qualified person is selected for a given role. Accordingly, merit recruitment is argued to increase the skill and competency levels of the civil service. Moreover, it is argued to create an *espirit de corps* among those who have gone through competitive recruitment and selection processes and sets their careers apart from those of politicians and other political appointees.

While the benefits of merit recruitment are very plausible, it is less clear how to best organise recruitment processes to achieve merit outcomes. Several design options must be considered by reformers. Shall job vacancies be advertised and if so where? Shall candidates sit competitive entrance examinations including written tests? Or is a personal interview and an assessment of a CV sufficient for merit recruitment? Shall the recruitment process be centrally organised, for instance, by an independent civil service commission? Or is it preferable to delegate recruitment and selection to institutions that seek to fill vacancies and should managers be given the freedom to hire the staff they see fit best?

So far we have few answers to these questions. Emerging evidence from our research conducted for DFID UK suggests that public vacancy announcements are generally preferable, as they increase the transparency of recruitment processes and widen the pool of potential applicants (Meyer-Sahling, Schuster and Mikkelsen 2018). However, the answers to the other questions appear to be much less generalizable but are more dependent on the characteristics of the context that is being considered.

First, written examinations are commonly assumed to help to screen the competencies of candidates (Heywood and Meyer-Sahling 2013). Moreover, they might increase the transparency of recruitment and selection and attract a wider pool of potential applicants, as they signal to the outside world that recruitment and selection processes are professionally managed. At the same time, critics warn that written entrance examinations may be too cumbersome, inefficient and unable to actually screen relevant skills and knowledge for jobs and careers in the civil service.

The evidence on the importance of written entrance examinations is mixed. It has been suggested, for instance, that written entrance examinations are a useful design option in countries in which the general level of politicisation of recruitment and selection is high (Sundell 2012). By contrast, when politicisation is low, it may be less important to rely on overly formalistic recruitment and selection mechanisms.

To give a couple of examples from Central and Eastern Europe, Estonia and Latvia are the two countries with the least politicised civil service in the region insofar as the central state administration is concerned. Moreover, neither of them operates compulsory written examinations for recruitment and career advancement (Meyer-Sahling 2009). However, the conclusion that should be drawn from this example is *not* that written examinations are unnecessary but that they may be less important in the given context.

Second, the degree of central involvement in recruitment and selection processes is even more contested. Centralisation, on the one hand, tends to increase the consistency of recruitment and examination processes. On the other hand, centralisation is often seen as inflexible and slow. In particular, the New Public Management advocated the decentralisation of personnel management powers in order to 'let managers manage'.

For now, there is little robust evidence on the pros and cons of centralisation versus delegation. Most plausibly, it depends again on the characteristics of the context. Decentralisation may be suitable in a context of low politicisation where managers maybe relied upon using their discretion responsibly to select the best-qualified candidate. The same may not be true in a context of high politicisation, in which managers are subject to political pressures or they are themselves political appointees. Indeed, emerging evidence from the Western Balkans suggests that a prominent role for line mangers is associated with more politicisation and more favouritism, presumably because of the (irresponsible) use of discretion by managers. By contrast, centralised recruitment and selection processes are associated with less politicisation and less favouritism.

However, even if recruitment processes have been centralised and if compulsory written examinations have been introduced, there is no guarantee that they will succeed in bringing about the desired merit outcomes (Schuster 2017). The evidence from Central and Eastern and, in particular, South Eastern Europe is that regulatory frameworks often retain legal loopholes that allow for non-merit appointments (Meyer-Sahling et al 2015). The appointment of acting managers is a prominent example.

Moreover, even if legal loopholes have been minimised, one cannot expect that merit outcomes will be achieved. When a culture of favouritism and political patronage is deeply entrenched, politicians and political appointees usually seek ways to circumvent the formal rules of the game. They may influence the appointment of selection commissions, instruct 'independent' external candidates or leak examination questions, all of which undermine the principle of merit recruitment. In other words, even if we identify a suitable design of a recruitment and selection process for a given context, we need to pay particular attention to the quality of implementation and might indeed need to devote additional resources to achieving the desired results.

3. The challenge of overcoming politicisation

In addition to the merits of merit recruitment, research and practice have paid considerable attention to the negative consequences of the politicisation of the civil service. Politicisation refers to the recruitment, promotion, retention, remuneration and disciplining of civil servants on the basis of political principles (Peters and Pierre 2004). Studies of politicisation tend to focus on appointments and dismissals. Politicised recruitment is often seen as the direct opposite of merit recruitment. However, political criteria are not the only non-merit criteria, as recruitment may also take into account personal connections and ethnic belonging. Moreover, there is some debate as to whether partisan loyalty and professional competencies contradict each other or whether they may go together, an issue to which we will return below.

On the research side there is plenty of work that has identified a negative effect of politicisation on outcomes such as policy performance, corruption and the absorption capacity of EU funds (Lewis 2008, Meyer-Sahling and Mikkelsen 2016, Oliveros and Schuster 2017). Why is politicisation a problem? Its negative consequences are usually traced to a number of mechanisms. Political

appointees have shorter time horizons. They are more dependent on their patron and, as a result, might stay in office for a shorter period of time. Politicisation is associated with more personnel turnover in the civil service and less stability. Political appointees are also often (but not necessarily) considered to be less qualified, as they got their job thanks to political connections rather than skills and qualifications (Heywood and Meyer-Sahling 2013).

Politicisation also has a number of direct and indirect effects on job satisfaction, work motivation and the intention to stay in the civil service (Lewis 2008). For instance, when senior positions are occupied by political appointees, staff in lower ranks have less opportunities to rise to the top because what matters are political connections rather than performance. Staff may therefore invest in political lobbying. Or they may simply see their career opportunities narrowed, become less motivated and choose to leave the civil service altogether. We can therefore observe that politicisation does indeed have a range of undesirable consequences for the quality of public administration.

If politicisation is generally found to have negative consequences, it is puzzling why governments do not make more efforts to overcome it? To answer this question, it is necessary to look more closely at the factors and mechanisms that facilitate the politicisation of the civil service in the first place and indeed contribute to its persistence. Four factors are particularly relevant.

First, politicisation may be the result of 'habit' in the sense that it is deeply entrenched in the administrative tradition of a country. The communist legacy of over-politicisation, for instance, might explain to some extent why politicisation has been sticky in many countries in Central and Eastern Europe and in South Eastern Europe. Yet similar arguments can be made for other countries and regions in Europe.

Second, politicians and indeed bureaucrats and external observers might not know better, that is, they might lack the awareness of the negative consequences of politicisation for the performance and integrity of public administration. This may sound implausible for those who research or advice on public administration reform because they frequently encounter these questions in the context of their professional life. But the reality is probably different, in particular, when bearing in mind

that the evidence of the effectiveness of civil service designs is patchy and not widely disseminated. Research that we have done for ReSPA on the Western Balkans, for instance, suggests that politicians lack adequate knowledge of recruitment and appointment procedures.

Third, political parties and politicians are usually the main drivers of politicisation (Kopecky, Mair and Spirova 2012). Even if we assume for a moment that politicians are aware of negative consequences of politicisation, they might actually draw selective benefits from politicising the civil service. It is hence conceivable that, under certain conditions, de-politicisation is politically costly for politicians. In particular, two types of considerations tend to make political appointments beneficial for politicians.

In the first place, political appointments are a means to build parties or political networks and to consolidate electoral support. Parties and politicians therefore make appointments to reward their supporters (Grzymala-Busse 2007, Kopecky et al 2016). This motivation behind politicisation was widespread in 19th century America and remains important in developing countries. However, it is also relevant in many Southern European countries, for instance, Greece and parts of Italy, and it is common in South East European EU member and applicant states.

Politicisation that focuses on rewarding political supporters with jobs in the civil service is often, but not exclusively, concentrated in the lower ranks of the civil service and leads to bloated, over-staffed civil services. It is often associated with lower levels of economic developments, in particular, a lack of employment opportunities in the private sector labour market.

In the second place, political appointments are a means of controlling the civil service (Bach, Hammerschmid and Loeffler 2015). Politicians make strategic appointments to control policy-making, implementation and coordination inside public administration. Political appointments allow ministers and political parties to align their policy preferences with those of the civil service and to increase its political responsiveness. They expect that they help them implement a political programme (even though they might not be aware of the negative side-effects listed above).

Political appointments for the sake of politically controlling the civil service are widespread across Europe. They can be found in Central and Eastern Europe and in many Western European civil services. Civil services that have largely remained de-politicised at the very top such as in the UK, the Netherlands and Denmark are exceptions in Europe. Rather, for Western Europe, there has been debate over the increase of this form of politicisation during the last two or three decades, the consequences of which remain poorly understood.

Quite naturally, political appointments for the sake of political control are more common after a party change in government, in particular, when parties in government change from one end of the ideological spectrum to the other (Meyer-Sahling and Veen 2012). Especially in the new member states from Central and Eastern Europe, it is evident that politicisation at the top is higher in countries that have regularly undergone major ideological shifts between government coalitions. Poland, Hungary and Slovakia are good examples of this pattern. However, the motivation behind political appointments is also relevant for many Western European countries.

What does the discussion of drivers of politicisation mean for initiatives to overcome it? First, in order to address bad habits and a lack of awareness, the most plausible strategy would be to expose political and administrative elites in politicised countries to more and better information. Ideally, this role is taken by an independent media and potentially a flourishing civil society sector. In addition, external initiatives might aim at systematically and comprehensively increasing levels of knowledge and debate of civil service management practices in order to overcome obstacles to de-politicisation.

Second, it is likely to be harder to overcome incentives to make political appointments for the sake of party building and politically controlling the civil service. The political costs of abandoning these practices may be just too high for politicians. As a consequence, many civil service reform proposals will inevitably fail. If political incentives contradict these proposals, they will either not be adopted or, if so, politicians will seek ways and means to circumvent the rules when it comes to implementation.

If it is largely impossible to eliminate politicisation, the focus will have to shift towards strategies to accommodate it. To be sure, there is no robust evidence on how to do this but a number of design

options are worth further investigation. For instance, if politicians are unwilling to give up appointment powers, civil service statutes might need to be designed in a way that they force them to select candidates for managerial positions from *inside* the civil service in order to ensure that candidates have sufficient experience and expertise to perform their job at the highest level. Alternatively, if politicians want to keep the freedom to recruit from outside public administration, mechanisms might have to be put in place in order to rigorously test (i.e. filter) the professional competencies of political appointees before they assume their official role.

A strategy of 'accommodating politicisation' may also gain wider acceptance in the political system. It would be more realistic and it would take into account that politicisation is far more widespread in Western Europe than is usually admitted by international organisations that are involved in public administration reform assistance. For now, there is no evidence that would shed light on differential effects of politicisation in the East and West and North and South of Europe. However, the experience from many Western European countries raises the prospect that structured or bounded politicisation at the top of the civil service that involves high levels of professional competencies among political appointees increases the responsiveness of the civil service without undermining performance and integrity across the entire civil service. However, it remains to be seen how much politicisation is too much and which type is costly for the performance of public administration and which is not.

4. The challenge of systemic professionalisation

Having discussed the challenges of institutionalising merit recruitment and overcoming politicisation, how much can we say about other areas of civil service management? To be brief: rather little. For instance, which type of salary system is more conductive to performance and integrity in the civil service? What is the impact of promotion and transfer systems? Can well-designed performance evaluation systems make a positive difference? And what about some of the design features that are regularly listed in reform papers and proposals such as the scope of the civil service?

Starting with the salary system, most of us would agree that it makes an important difference how we are paid for doing our job. Yet the evidence for civil service systems is scarce. Evidence from our research on developing countries suggests that salary levels contribute to job satisfaction of civil

servants and their intention to pursue a career in the public sector (Meyer-Sahling, Schuster and Mikkelsen 2018).

The evidence is much less clear for the impact of salary levels on corruption and integrity in the civil service. We would expect that higher salaries reduce corruption in the civil service (Van Rijckeghem and Weder 2001). However, research on the subject is inconclusive (Meyer-Sahling, Mikkelsen and Schuster 2018). This may be puzzling but it also indicates that the focus on salary levels may be misguided when focusing on the civil service. Indeed, it may be much more important that civil servants perceive their salaries to be fair vis-à-vis their colleagues, their superiors and peer groups outside the civil service. Yet there is no research on how horizontal salary equality or vertical salary compression affect the attitudes and behaviour of civil servants.

Second, so far we have primarily discussed the recruitment, selection and appointment to the civil service. However, is it plausible to assume that the mode of entering the civil service still matters five, ten or even twenty years into the career in the civil service? Should we not rather expect that it is much more important how a civil servant advanced to his current job or will advance to a better job in the future rather than how he/she was recruited a long time ago? Promotion and transfer policies refer to the present or future of a civil servant's career and might therefore be at least as important as recruitment and selection decisions, if not more important (Meyer-Sahling, Mikkelsen and Schuster 2018).

Yet our knowledge of the impact of different types of promotion and transfer systems on the professionalisation of the civil service is scarce, too. Is it more effective to focus on predictability and transparency, for instance, by means of seniority-based promotions? Or is it more suitable to establish competitive processes for promotions within the civil service or even public competitions that pit civil servants against candidates from the private sector and the wider public sector? For now, research and practice have not produced evidence that would provide good answers to these questions.

Third, performance evaluation systems have made their way into the public sector across Europe over the last two decades (Staronova 2017). Common wisdom assumes that they are an essential

management tool as much as they should affect the salary level and career prospects of civil servants. In practice, performance evaluation systems are often criticised for their ineffectiveness. They are therefore a common civil service management function for which policy-makers at the level of national governments seek advice but little evidence is available for public administration in Europe.

Finally, comparisons of civil service systems frequently focus on broad categories such as the size and scope of the civil service. These are important markers for the identification of differences and similarities. However, it is not possible to say whether a relatively larger or narrower scope of the civil service is beneficial. By implication, there is no unambiguous advice on whether the scope of the civil service should be increased in a given country.

Indeed the question of scope is secondary to other questions. The scope of civil service laws implies that certain policies apply to employees within the scope. This means that a change in scope becomes a problem for civil service management, if key policies of the civil service are changed too. In Estonia, for instance, the scope of the civil service law was radically shrunk in 2013, while the category of public employees was expanded. The change matters insofar as employees are subject to different standards and procedures. For instance, they enjoy less job protection, do not have to attend ethics training and are not subject to the policies of the Civil Service Ethics Council.

Similar dilemmas can be found for other Central and Eastern European countries. In Poland, for example, the scope of the civil service law has been changed several times insofar as the boundary between politics and administration is concerned (Heywood and Meyer-Sahling 2013). During the first PiS-led governments between 2005 and 2007 the high and mid-level managers (Directors General, Directors of Departments and their Deputies) were removed from the civil service and transferred to a wider state staffing pool that, from the outside, had features of a separate senior civil service corps. In theory and practice, however, it meant that governing parties and ministers could make appointments to managerial positions without facing significant constraints. As a consequence, the change of scope primarily meant a change in the scope of politicisation.

In summary, the quality of public administration very strongly depends on the people it employs and the way they are managed. Yet there is no general consensus on which institutional designs are best suited to manage civil servants effectively. The positive consequences of merit recruitment are widely appreciated but a focus on merit versus politicised recruitment fails to take into account the importance of many other civil service management functions. There is hence quite an agenda for investment in collecting more and, above all, better evidence which designs work more or less effectively in the area of civil service reform and management.

5. *What way forward?*

What are the implications of this discussion for the European Commission's role in promoting the quality of public administration in Europe? The conclusions from the briefing note should be clear: The evidence for the effectiveness of many civil service management functions is often not available or it is not robust. Moreover, the evidence that is available suggests that some practices may be generally beneficial for the quality of the civil service but in many cases the choice of civil service designs may be context dependent.

For the European Commission, the lack of robust evidence – as well as the lack of treaty-based competencies in the area of public administration reform – would make it extremely challenging to develop a European public administration reform policy that prescribes member states what to do. Instead, the European Commission might rather play a role as an 'enabler' that supports the generation of evidence for the identification of the types of designs and practices that work across and within member states.

One of the most effective tools to enhance the evidence for managers and reformers is the implementation of civil service surveys as they are regularly conducted in several OECD countries (OECD 2016). They provide detailed information about the attitudes and behaviour of civil servants, including their satisfaction, motivation and performance on the job as well as their experience with human resources management, the quality of leadership and other aspects of public administration. Civil service surveys are monitoring and evaluation tools that help to identify strengths, weaknesses and hence areas of civil service management that are in need of improvement. They can further

provide an effective management tool to engage the people in public administration, solicit feedback and respond to concerns.

For the European Commission, civil service surveys would allow for the identification of shared standards and engagement in learning across EU member states. Moreover, member states would benefit greatly from European Commission support as regular civil service surveys would provide much-sought-after evidence and establish an infrastructure to conduct them in the first place. To be sure, civil service surveys are but one instrument in the public administration toolbox of the European Commission. Yet they would strengthen the enabling role of the European Commission in the field of public administration reform in Europe.

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