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ARTICLE

Governing the post-communist state: government alternation and senior civil service politicisation in Central and Eastern Europe

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Recent debates on the transformation of the state in Central and Eastern Europe have centred on the impact of political competition on state politicisation. The presence of robust competition, including coherent governments and critical oppositions are said to reduce the potential for state politicisation. This article challenges this perspective. It concentrates on the impact of patterns of government alternation on senior civil service politicisation. The article emphasises problems of political control of senior bureaucrats, which are argued to emerge after regular wholesale alternations between ideological blocs as opposed to other types of alternations. The article relies on data from an expert survey that was conducted in eight Central and Eastern European countries that joined the EU in 2004. It develops an index of politicisation that captures the range and intensity of senior civil service politicisation. It then conceptualises senior civil service politicisation as a mode of governing the post-communist state and traces the variation in politicisation to patterns of government alternation in Central and Eastern Europe since their transition to democracy.

Keywords: East-Central Europe; Baltic States; post-communism; state-building; political parties

1. Introduction

This article examines the political determinants of senior civil service politicisation in Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs). The topic cuts across current debates in comparative public administration and comparative politics. The former has traditionally paid a great deal of attention to the relation between politics and administration (Aberbach *et al.* 1981, Peters 1988, Page 1992, Hood and Lodge 2006). Studies that concentrate on politicisation as the ‘political influence over senior ranking appointments’ (Page and Wright 1999) identify different patterns for Western Europe. Page and Wright (1999), for instance, distinguish between bureaucracies that are largely de-politicised such as in the UK and Denmark, political appointments made to the ‘commanding heights’ of the bureaucracy in places such as Germany and France, and the reliance on ‘partisan appointments’ deeper into the administrative hierarchy in most of Southern Europe. Recent work on the senior civil service finds that politicisation in Western democracies has increased over the last two to three decades (Maor 1999, Peters and Pierre 2004, Dahlstroem 2009).

Scholarly knowledge is more limited as regards the politicisation of the senior civil service in CEECs, which include here the countries that have emerged from communism and have recently

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joined the European Union. The politicisation of administrative personnel was a key feature of the communist administration (Goetz and Wollmann 2001). The nomenclature system implied that the communist party appointed and/or approved the appointment of officials to senior positions of institutions in the state, society and the economy. Political and ideological reliability remained a key criterion for the selection of appointees until the end of the communist regimes. After transition, attempts were made in CEECs to establish professional and de-politicised civil service systems. However, some research argues that the politicisation of the civil service remains widespread in CEECs (Nunberg 1999, Verheijen 2001, Meyer-Sahling 2008). Goetz and Wollmann (2001) even suggest that the nature of civil service politicisation is at the centre of what amounts to a new type of executive governance that is different from Western traditions.

Comparative politics has addressed the issue of politician–bureaucrat relations in the context of studies of state-building and party patronage. Party patronage is traditionally defined as the ‘distribution of divisible goods to party supporters’ (Shefter 1977, Müller 2000). This includes the distribution of jobs in the civil service to party supporters. More recent definitions concentrate on the ‘power of political parties to appoint people to the public and semi-public sector’ (Kopecky *et al.* 2012). Research on CEECs argues that the parallel processes of state-building and party formation after the transition from communism have provided ideal conditions for party patronage. Newly formed parties have an incentive to give jobs in the civil service to party affiliates in order to build their organisations and consolidate their support.

Accounts of party–state relations argue that the presence of ‘robust’ political competition mitigates the incentive of parties to politicise the state by means of patronage appointments (O’Dwyer 2006, Ganey 2007, Grzymala-Busse 2007, for a critical review see Haughton 2008). Robust competition refers to the presence of ‘coherent governments’ and ‘coherent’ and/or ‘critical oppositions, where the latter have the capacity to monitor the activities of governments and hence to prevent the exploitation of the state by political parties. The causal mechanism of ‘monitoring by means of competition’ is well known from research on public sector corruption (for a recent review, see Rose-Ackerman 2006).

This article challenges the emerging consensus that robust competition is an effective mechanism for the mitigation of state politicisation in CEECs. Instead of focusing on the relation between government and opposition, this article concentrates on the relation between government ministers and senior bureaucrats. Based on the insights of agency theoretic approaches to executive politics, it argues that the politicisation of the senior civil service is driven by concerns of governments over the political control of the bureaucracy. In CEECs, problems of control are most severe in political contexts that are characterised by regular wholesale alternations of ideological blocs of parties in government. In these contexts, politicisation for the sake of political control is entrenched. It develops into a mode of governing the state that reproduces itself with every wholesale alternation of government. By contrast, political contexts that are characterised by partial alternations and the relative dominance of one ideological bloc over an extended period of time are typically characterised by less senior civil service politicisation.

In order to demonstrate the validity of the argument, the article proceeds in two steps. The first part provides new evidence regarding the politicisation of the senior civil service in CEECs. The evidence is derived from an expert survey that was conducted in the winter of 2007/2008 in the CEECs that joined the EU in 2004. The article develops an index of politicisation capturing the range and intensity of senior civil service politicisation across levels of the bureaucratic hierarchy and across countries. The second part analyses the patterns of government alternation in the eight countries under study. It finds a close relationship to senior civil service politicisation and discusses how and at which points in time government alternations may lead to the (recurring) politicisation of the senior civil service.

The findings of our article resonate closely with other arguments in the wider debate on post-communist developments such as Frye's (2010) 'perils of polarisation' for economic growth and policy stability as well as Popova's (2010) conjecture that political competition may be an 'obstacle to judicial independence'. This article contributes to this debate in at least two ways. First, it presents new empirical data and a new index to measure the politicisation of the civil service. Second, it carries theories of executive politics that were originally developed for established Western democracies to the new democracies of post-communist CEECs in order to develop a fresh perspective on political determinants of politicisation. In doing so, it identifies the politicisation of the senior civil service as a mode of governing the post-communist state rather than an instrument that primarily serves the exploitation of the state for the sake of building political parties.

2. Measuring senior civil service politicisation in CEECs

The politicisation of the civil service has been a long-standing concern of public administration in CEECs. However, there is little agreement regarding the degree of politicisation and the different patterns of politicisation that have emerged in the region. This relates primarily to the lack of empirical data to map and compare civil service politicisation.

So far, the absence of civil service laws has been used as a proxy for measuring politicisation (Dimitrova 2005, Grzymala-Busse 2007). Yet the mere adoption of civil service laws might not be sufficient for the de-politicisation of the civil service (Meyer-Sahling 2006, Gajduscsek 2007). Civil service laws differ in their scope and might simply omit the very top positions from the law. Laws might also delegate and hence formally assign discretion over the appointment of civil servants to politicians rather than independent appointment commissions.

Comparative politics studies of state-building in CEECs have referred to the growth of state personnel as alternative indicators of state politicisation, party patronage and 'run-away state-building' (O'Dwyer 2004, 2006, Grzymala-Busse 2007). Here, the assumption is that state growth indicates state politicisation, while stability and decline in the number of state employees indicate its absence. While this indicator has the advantage of being easy to measure, it suffers validity issues. Changes in the number of state employees might be the result from factors unrelated to political appointment practices. For instance, public finance reforms can include reducing staff numbers. Also, the EU accession process involved new functions for administrations in CEECs that usually required the recruitment of new staff.

Another problematic indicator is the World Bank Governance Indicator for Government Effectiveness (O'Dwyer 2004, 2006). The indicator refers to the 'quality of the civil service'. It is based on surveys of external observers, primarily international business elites, who might have very little first-hand information of what is going on inside government. The scores are very sensitive to environmental changes such as economic crises and government scandals without being able to capture the politicisation of the senior civil service more closely. Most important for the current context, the indicator only provides aggregate public sector scores and hence no specific information on senior civil service politicisation.

The problem of gaining quality data has been partially addressed by the use of expert surveys. For instance, in the mid-1990s Evans and Rauch (1999) conducted a survey on newly industrialised countries designed to identify features of Weberian bureaucracies. A high degree of Weberianness is seen as meritocratic civil service governance, while politicisation is associated with a low degree of Weberianness. Evans and Rauch take a highly focused perspective, in that they study the top two to three ranks of civil servants in ministries of economy and development. This approach gives them a more accurate indicator than most of the indicators discussed.

Yet with their indicator, it is not possible to differentiate across levels of the bureaucratic hierarchy and, most relevant for this article, their research does not include the CEECs.

The current article builds on Evans and Rauch's research. It relies on an expert survey that replicates several of their questions. However, in order to gain a more comprehensive picture of senior civil service politicisation, it distinguishes four managerial levels in the typical ministerial hierarchy (Table 1). Most of the questions then required respondents to estimate the extent to which a certain aspect of personnel management applied to a given senior civil service position in practice.

Table 1 shows the hierarchy of senior positions below the minister in a typical government ministry of the eight CEECs under study. It is evident that there are several differences across the countries. At first glance, this is a matter of labels. For instance, the top position in the Estonian bureaucracy is the Secretary General, in the Czech Republic it is the Deputy Minister but it is a State Secretary in the other countries. The levels reported in Table 1 do not take into account the legal status of the positions because this article seeks to reveal the positions that are politicised in practice rather than by law. The concept of senior civil service is here therefore considered in functional terms related to officials in managerial positions of the ministerial bureaucracy. Also, ministerial cabinet positions, which will be discussed below, shall be included here in the understanding of the senior civil service.

The expert survey was conducted in all eight countries between November 2007 and March 2008 as a self-completion questionnaire. For the eight countries, there were 93 replies, ranging from eight replies for Slovakia to 18 replies for Hungary. Encouragingly, an average of 11.6 replies per country is higher than comparable surveys on public administration.¹ The selection procedure differs slightly from the survey by Evans and Rauch. Whereas the latter relied on fellow academics, here a mix of respondents from academia and inside government were selected. Insiders include current and former officials from central civil service offices such as heads of civil service departments and a set of current and former State Secretaries or deputy State Secretaries. The latter's views are likely to be slightly biased towards their sector, but, since they are heavily involved in cross-ministerial coordination tasks they can be assumed to have a good horizontal knowledge of the 'average' government ministry.

Indeed, drawing on insiders as respondents creates a risk of getting data that is biased because they portray the world in which they live in a more positive (or more negative) light. However, the authors' experience from many interviews suggests that only a very small number of outside observers can be expected to yield valid and reliable information on the subject. By contrast, insiders tend to have better subject-related knowledge, as they are present and the closest possible observers.

To address potential biases in the survey data, personal interviews were conducted in the eight countries to get an alternative (qualitative) measure for politicisation. Interviews were conducted between April 2007 and February 2009 in the context of the SIGMA project on the post-accession sustainability of civil service reform in Central and Eastern Europe (Meyer-Sahling 2009, 2011). Overall, the authors conducted more than 100 interviews with current and former senior officials, current and former members of parliament, academics, journalists and representatives of NGOs. In the context of the interviews, it was often possible to ask detailed questions on patterns and mechanisms of politicisation, which provide important qualitative information for the contextualisation of the survey results and to gain understanding with regard to the evolution of politicisation over time.

Moreover, in order to create a valid and reliable estimate of politicisation, the survey did not ask respondents to judge politicisation on an ordinal scale. Rather, we asked about empirical issues such as the estimated degree of turnover after elections. These questions had to be answered separately for all levels in the ministerial hierarchy listed in Table 1. Then we

Table 1. Management positions below the level of minister.

Level	Estonia	Latvia	Lithuania	Poland	Czech Rep	Slovakia	Hungary	Slovenia
Level 1	Secretary General	State Secretary	State Secretary	State Secretary	Deputy Minister	State Secretary	State Secretary	State Secretary
Level 2	Deputy Secretary General	Deputy State Secretary	Under-secretary	Under-secretary	Director of Section	Head of Office and General Director	Specialist State Secretary	Director General
Level 3	Head of Department	Head of Department	Head of Department	Director General and Director of Department	Director of Department	Director of Division	Head of Department	Head of Bureau
Level 4	Deputy Head of Department and Head of Division	Deputy Head of Department and Head of Unit	Deputy Head of Department and Head of Division	Deputy Director of Department and Head of Unit	Head of Division	Director of Unit	Deputy Head of Department and Head of Division	Head of Sector and Head of Unit

used these questions to construct an index of politicisation, and tested these scores against interview data.

To be more specific, we build a new index of politicisation drawing on five indicators: These are (i) the scope of senior positions that are subject to political appointments ('depth' of politicisation), (ii) the size of ministerial cabinets, (iii) the turnover among senior officials after elections, (iv) the experience of senior officials in politics, for instance, as party functionary, elected representative, and (v) the importance of political contacts including party membership for career progression.

The first two indicators refer to the 'range' of politicisation, how many positions and levels in the ministerial bureaucracy are subject to politicisation. The other three indicators are better conceptualised as the 'intensity' of politicisation. It takes into account that not all political appointments are alike. A minister may promote a bureaucrat who is a member of his political party, as happens often in countries such as Germany and Austria, but he may also appoint a former party functionary to a position in the ministerial bureaucracy. The latter scenario assumes a greater intensity of politicisation than the former.

For this index, each category was weighted evenly (for coding details, see Table 2). For each category, a maximum score of 5 points was given. A country could thus receive a maximum of 25 points. Scores were then standardised to 100. Note that we used the median response in the survey rather than the mean since this is the more appropriate choice for a survey such as this one. The advantage of the index is twofold. First, as discussed below, the estimates have excellent face validity, i.e. they make sense. Second, it is easily replicable, in that it can be used for future politicisation research as well.

Table 2 presents the aggregate results of this exercise. The last column of Table 2 indicates a considerable degree of variation in senior civil service politicisation across countries. Estonia comes out lowest with a score of 14. The scores for Latvia (28) and Lithuania (24) are also at the low end of the scale. At the other end, Slovakia and Poland have both a score of 66 and hence the highest level of senior civil service politicisation in the region. Slovenia (48), the Czech Republic (50) and Hungary (54) represent an intermediate group, though they are closer to Poland and Slovakia than to the three Baltic States, especially Estonia. The mean politicisation score for the countries is 44.

Table 2. Overall politicisation of the senior civil service.

Country	Depth of appointments ^a	Size of ministerial cabinets ^b	Turnover after elections ^c (%)	Experience in politics ^c (%)	Political contacts ^c (%)	Overall country score ^d
Czech Rep	Grey area	>5	30–49	10–29	30–49	50
Poland	Grey area	>5	70–89	30–49	50–69	66
Slovenia	Grey area	<5	50–69	30–49	30–49	48
Latvia	Grey area	<5	<10	<10	30–49	28
Lithuania	Grey area	<5	<10	<10	10–29	24
Hungary	Grey area	>5	30–49	30–49	30–49	54
Estonia	Non-political	<5	<10	<10	10–29	14
Slovakia	Political	<5	70–89	30–49	50–69	66

^aNon-political = 0; grey area = 2.5; political = 5.

^bNo cabinets = 0; less than five members = 2.5; five or more members = 5.

^cLess than 10% = 0; 10–29% = 1; 30–49% = 2; 50–69% = 3; 70–89% = 4; 90% or more = 5.

^dThe sum of the five variables was standardised to 100.

A closer look at Table 2 shows that most of the variation is introduced through the three indicators referring to the intensity of politicisation. By contrast, Table 2 suggests that there are few differences with regard to the depth of political appointments, while there is only limited variation with regard to the size of ministerial cabinets. Yet Table 3 and especially the Tables A1–A4 in the Appendix provide a more differentiated picture of politicisation across countries as well as levels in the ministerial hierarchy.²

To be more specific, the data show that the senior civil service of the three Baltic States is largely de-politicised. Even for the top level, the politicisation scores are rather low, especially for Estonia and Lithuania. This picture is largely confirmed by the interviews. In all three countries, the top level is subject to open competition. Vacancies are advertised and selection is done by selection commissions that consist of public officials and/or independent external experts. This does not mean that ministers have no say over the appointment to the highest non-political post in the ministries. They can refuse the proposals that are made to them (all three countries).

The second group of countries includes the Czech Republic, Slovenia and Hungary. Here, the politicisation scores are very high for the top level, while the second level below the minister is located in a grey area between politics and administration. The third level also belongs to the grey area, but the values for the intensity of politicisation are lower than for the second level. Finally, the fourth level referring to deputy heads of departments and heads of divisions/units is largely beyond political interest (but not beyond political reach!). The main difference to the three Baltic States therefore concerns the intensity of politicisation of the first and the second level, while the politicisation scores for the third and fourth level are closer to each other. Yet it is surprising that Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovenia belong to the same group, as they differ in many other respects.

For instance, the Czech Republic has no civil service law and thus no specific rules and procedures for the recruitment of staff apart from the labour code (see above). The selection of deputy ministers is without regulation. Deputy Ministers are typically political posts. Directors of Sections and Directors of Departments are often but not always political appointments. Ministers have discretion to make appointments to these positions. Constraints emerge from coalition agreements, for instance, when coalition partners gain the right to send their candidates to ministries whose minister is not from their party. The constraints are hence almost exclusively political, while there are no civil service rules that could constrain the politicisation of personnel.

In Slovenia, the situation is similar insofar as the State Secretary is clearly a political appointee. The situation is more ambiguous for Directors General (level 2). On the one hand, they are chosen on the basis of open competition and with the help of a selection committee that limits political representation. On the other hand, the data reflect very clearly, which was also confirmed in the interviews, that Directors General are fairly politicised. Moreover, an item from the expert survey not included in the index suggests that the politicisation of the top increased in Slovenia more than in all other countries between their accession to the EU in 2004 and early 2008 when the survey was taken. Political influence over the Director General position is secured in that the

Table 3. Politicisation across senior civil service levels.

	Czech Rep	Poland	Slovenia	Latvia	Lithuania	Hungary	Estonia	Slovakia
Level 1	85	100	90	50	22.5	90	30	95
Level 2	47.5	85	67.5	27.5	17.5	52.5	17.5	75
Level 3	27.5	32.5	27.5	22.5	12.5	32.5	5	47.5
Level 4	5	5	0	0	5	10	5	37.5

minister can choose from an open list. The selection committee merely distinguishes between 'suitable' and 'unsuitable', but data received from the Civil Service Council suggest that less than 20% of the applicants are judged as unsuitable.

For Hungary, the data indicate that the top position is clearly political and largely determined by the governing parties. The second level is in a grey area, but the intensity of politicisation remains remarkably high. Until 2006 these positions were part of the permanent civil service but in practice they were, by and large, political appointees. The appointment of State Secretaries is strongly influenced by the Prime Minister. Ministers can propose a candidate but the prime minister makes the final proposal before the president of the republic makes the formal appointment. The levels below the state secretary and the specialist state secretary are more varied. For instance, the personal interviews suggested that it is possible to find Department Heads who have been in their position for 10 and more years. But there are many positions of strategic importance, which have increasingly become politicised. By contrast, it is unusual to see the political appointment to positions below the level of Head of Department.

The third group includes Poland and Slovakia. They have almost consistently the highest politicisation scores for all four levels. In Poland, it is evident that State Secretaries and undersecretaries are clearly political appointments. According to the interviews, the positions of Director General and director of department have also become increasingly political over the last few years, but the intensity of politicisation is much lower than for the top two levels of the bureaucracy. The fourth level capturing deputy directors of departments and heads of units must be largely classified as de-politicised. Yet interviews that were conducted in the spring of 2007 (Kaczynski government) and in March 2008 (Tusk government) indicate that even the Head of Unit was turned into a political position in several ministries.

Finally, in Slovakia State Secretaries and Heads of Service Offices are clearly political appointments. The appointment of General Directors in Slovakia is also by and large political. For the calculation of the politicisation scores, this study considers them together with Heads of Service Offices who are nominally located between the State Secretary and the General Directors in the ministerial hierarchy. It should be stressed that the selection of general directors is done on the basis of open competition and examinations. These procedures have been argued to be ineffective. Moreover, the interviewees in Slovakia largely agreed that the politicisation of the ministerial bureaucracy typically includes Directors of Division (level 3) and in many ministries it even reaches down to the level of Director of Unit. The scores for the range and the intensity of politicisation are therefore higher than in the other countries.

The identical aggregate scores for Poland and Slovakia are mainly the result of larger ministerial cabinets in Poland. Ministerial cabinets have been institutionalised in all countries under study. Their size partially correlates with the other indicators of politicisation. The three Baltic States, Slovenia and Slovakia come out with the relatively smaller cabinets (usually less than five members), while the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland have larger cabinets. Hungary clearly has the largest cabinets in the region. One regularly finds cabinets with 15–20 members. In the Prime Minister's Office, the cabinet had at some point more than 50 members, which almost turned it into a parallel structure within the PMO. Interviews suggest that the chief of political cabinets has become increasingly influential figures in the ministerial policy-making process. They are often as important as State Secretaries who are formally the top positions below the minister.

It is striking to find Slovakia on one level with the Baltic States as a country with a small number of political advisors for ministers. The interviews suggested that the deep politicisation of the ministerial bureaucracy creates less need for the creation of large advisory bodies near the minister. It is therefore difficult to explain at this stage in what ways cabinet appointments and appointments to senior civil service positions are substituting or reinforcing each other. In

any case, the evidence suggests that the ministerial cabinets can be regarded as if they were one or even two additional layers in the ministerial bureaucracy. This means that they are an important aspect of the range of politicisation and hence important for the calculation of overall politicisation scores.

While the expert survey in combination with the personal interviews provide a differentiated picture of the differences in senior civil service politicisation, questions arise with regard to politicisation beyond the senior ranks of the ministerial bureaucracy. This paper has been cautious to label the index an ‘index of senior civil service politicisation’. Yet comparison with other surveys provides useful cues. For instance, Kopecky *et al.* (2012) distinguish political appointments across hierarchical levels and domains of the public sector. They find that in most European countries political appointments are concentrated at the top of institutions and they are more common in the ministerial bureaucracy as opposed to executive agencies and state-owned enterprises. More research is required on this question, but it is plausible to expect a high correlation between senior civil service politicisation and public sector politicisation more widely. This expectation also reflects the work by Evans and Rauch (1999), which is, after all, based on an assessment of the top positions in ministries and agencies that concentrate on economic policy even though the findings are typically interpreted as referring to the Weberianness of the bureaucracy in general.

3. Government alternation and senior civil service politicisation

This section argues that the range and intensity of senior civil service politicisation in CEECs is influenced by patterns of government alternation that have come to prevail since the transition to democracy. In particular, it argues that government alternations that are wholesale and involve changes between parties from competing ideological blocs tend to produce a wider range and more intense politicisation of the senior civil service than regular partial changes of government and alternations that occur within political blocs.

This argument challenges recent research on the relations between political competition and state politicisation in CEECs. Grzymala-Busse (2007) and O’Dwyer (2004, 2006) both argue that robust competition involves the emergence of critical oppositions and responsible governments, which create incentives for governing parties to refrain from politicising the state apparatus due to monitoring by their political competitors. Their understanding of ‘state politicisation’, ‘state exploitation’ (Grzymala-Busse 2007) and ‘run-away state-building’ is broader than the present understanding, but we expect that very similar mechanisms are at work when seeking to explain the politicisation of the senior civil service. These positions are at the apex of the administrative hierarchy, politicisation attempts should be most visible and hence attract most critical monitoring by the political opposition.

O’Dwyer (2004, 2006) examines the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland. He argues that the Czech Republic is characterised by less politicisation (understood as ‘runaway state-building’) than the other two countries because responsible governments and coherent oppositions emerged during the 1990s. Under these conditions, governing parties had no incentive to pursue runaway state-building strategies to stabilise party organisations. By contrast, in Slovakia political competition was first characterised by the presence of a predominant party (‘People’s Party – Movement for a Democratic Slovakia’ (HZDS) led by Vladimir Meciar) in government and a fragmented opposition and subsequently a fragmented government coalition (Dzurinda government formed in 1998) that faced a formerly dominant party in the opposition. In particular, the Meciar government faced few constraints on politicisation and run-away state-building because the opposition lacked the coherence and capacity to constrain the main governing party. In Poland, O’Dwyer identifies a ‘weak governance model’, which is characterised by

incoherent governments and incoherent oppositions. Under these conditions, again, opposition parties lack the capacity to constrain the politicisation of the state by governing parties.

O'Dwyer's research concentrates on the 1990s and it is limited to three CEECs. He concludes his analysis by referring to Hungary as a country with a relatively more institutionalised party system that yielded both coherent governments and coherent oppositions. Hence, he hypothesises that the Hungarian bureaucracy should be much less politicised than the Slovak and the Polish bureaucracy. In this study, the senior bureaucracy of the Czech Republic and Hungary came out as less politicised than the senior civil service in Poland and Slovakia. However, the differences were rather small. Even the Czech and the Hungarian senior civil service must be considered as relatively highly politicised when compared with the Baltic States. O'Dwyer's argument would therefore require closer investigation of the Baltic States as countries with a relatively low degree of politicisation. A full application of O'Dwyer's analysis to the Baltic States and to the 2000s is beyond the scope of this article. Yet even without going into detail, his understanding of robust competition as the presence of coherent governments and coherent oppositions would almost certainly rank Hungary and the Czech Republic higher than the three Baltic States. In particular, Lithuania faced a major crisis of the party system in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

The work by Grzymala-Busse (2007) resonates closely with O'Dwyer's argument and proposed mechanisms. She puts more emphasis on the emergence of a critical opposition in CEECs in order to capture the robustness of political competition. Her index of robust competition returns two clusters of countries that include the eight CEECs studied in this article. First, she classifies Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Lithuania and, to a lesser extent, Estonia as countries with a relatively more critical opposition (robust competition). By contrast, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and especially Latvia are classified as cases with a low level of robust competition. There is evidently a rather weak correlation between Grzymala-Busse's twofold classification of countries and senior civil service politicisation as shown in this article. Hungary, Poland and Slovenia do not come out with a low degree of senior civil service politicisation, while Latvia should do far worse than expected by Grzymala-Busse. As it turns out, Slovakia is the only country on which Grzymala-Busse, O'Dwyer and the analysis in this article agree.

The discussion of the accounts by O'Dwyer and Grzymala-Busse should not be taken to mean that their arguments are incorrect. They focus on the first decade after the exit from communism, do not explicitly focus on the senior civil service and, as will be shown below, rely on different assumptions motivating politicians to politicise the state. Yet in order to account for the variation in senior civil service politicisation in CEECs identified above, this article develops an alternative mechanism of politicisation.

This study's argument is borrowed from the literature that applies transaction costs economics and principal-agent theory to the study of executive politics (Epstein and O'Halloran 1999; Huber 2000; Huber and Shipan 2002). In brief, it assumes that ministers as principals face a natural problem of controlling their bureaucratic agents when it comes to policy-making, coordination and implementation. This problem of control increases if ministers face bureaucrats who have a reputation of having worked for predecessors (ministers of previous governments, i.e. previous principals) who have very different policy objectives and agendas than they have themselves. As a consequence, these ministers have an incentive to seek alternative appointees who are closer to their own preferences.

The mechanism for the explanation of politicisation concentrates on the relations between governments and bureaucrats as the actors to be politicised. It is more plausible than the sole focus on government–opposition relations without paying much attention to the bureaucrats. The use of appointments for the sake of politically controlling public bureaucracies is well established in studies of executive politics in Western democracies (especially Calvert *et al.* 1987,

Wood and Waterman 1991, Thies 2001, Lewis 2008). Appointments are assumed to help politicians to reach policy outcomes closer to their own ideal position. Politicians are hence seen as policy-seeking rather than office-seeking. This perspective differs from the argument developed by O'Dwyer and Grzymala-Busse, who assume that political leaders provide jobs in the civil service for the sake of rewarding loyal party supporters and to ensure the organisational survival of their parties. This article does not claim that their assumption is wrong but it is arguably incomplete. Recent research by Kopecky *et al.* (2012) on party patronage in Europe supports this position. They find that 'reward' as the sole motivation for political appointments is unusual. Instead, parties (and especially politicians in public office such as ministers) tend to give jobs for the purpose of controlling government operations. Correspondingly, this article emphasises the role of political appointments as an instrument of steering policy-making and implementation and hence as a means of governing the state rather than merely building party organisations.

But under what conditions will ministers in post-communist Europe make political appointments to senior positions in the ministerial bureaucracy? Problems of control between new government ministers and the bureaucracy are expected to be especially striking when governments change completely from one side of the political spectrum to the other, i.e. if one witnesses wholesale, inter-bloc changes of government. By contrast, government changes that involve only partial party turnover and concern only parties within political blocs produce smaller problems of trust and thus fewer incentives for new ministers to change senior personnel. Finally, problems of control are smallest if government alternations are limited to the replacement of the prime minister while the partisan composition of government remains unchanged.

It is worth appreciating that both party and bloc alternations matter for gauging problems of control and hence incentives to politicise senior personnel.³ The principal-agent perspective implies that politicians replace bureaucrats in order to overcome problems of diverging preferences. This means that wholesale alternations only lead to greater problems of trust between politicians and bureaucrats if the ideological differences between incoming and outgoing government are larger than after partial alternations. In most cases this assumption holds because wholesale alternations in government tend to involve government changes from one side of the political spectrum to another, for instance, from the left to the right or vice versa. However, if this is not the case, perceived problems of control between (new) politicians and (old) bureaucrats are likely to be smaller than after wholesale alternations that also involve an alternation between political blocs.

The same qualification applies to partial alternations. In most cases, partial alternations occur within political blocs, for instance, when one small party of a coalition is replaced by another small party from the same political bloc. However, if this does not apply, incoming politicians might perceive greater problems of control even after partial government alternations. It is easily conceivable that the largest party of a coalition government is replaced, while only a small party remains in office forming a coalition with a relatively larger party from another political bloc. Under such conditions, perceived problems of control will be nearly at the level of wholesale, inter-bloc alternations of government; only mitigated by the presence of one 'old' party, which can be assumed to lock in some of the policies and personnel of the outgoing government.

Bearing in mind these qualifications, this article distinguishes between six patterns of government alternation: (i) wholesale changes of government that involve inter-bloc alternations, (ii) partial changes of government that involve inter-bloc alternations of the largest governing party, (iii) wholesale changes of government that occur within political blocs, for instance, among parties of the right or among parties of the left, (iv) partial changes of government that involve no bloc alternation or, to be more precise, that do not involve inter-bloc alternations of the largest governing party, (v) changes of prime minister without changes of any governing

party, and finally we add a form of absolute non-alternation as (vi) governments that are confirmed at elections. Given the discussion above, it is assumed that problems of control are largest for the first scenario above and they are smallest in the last scenario, which involves no change at all in the composition of government.

Table 4 reports the patterns of alternation for the post-communist period in the eight countries under study. The expectation is that systems with predominantly wholesale, inter-bloc alternations and/or partial, inter-bloc alternations co-vary with a wider range and more intense politicisation than systems that lack these features. To keep things simple, Table 4 concentrates on government alternations after elections. This includes all democratic elections apart from the founding election, which is usually not counted as a ‘normal’ alternation. As founding elections, the first fully democratic elections are classified as the ‘first competitive, multi-party elections occurring during a transition to democracy’ (Reich 2001). The fifth category labelled ‘changes of prime minister but no changes in partisan composition of government’ was excluded in Table 4 because no such case was counted for an alternation after a parliamentary election in any of the countries under scrutiny.

The research relies on data from Müller-Rommel *et al.* (2004) and the *European Journal of Political Research Political Data Yearbooks* for the changes that occurred after elections until the end of 2007 when the survey on senior civil service politicisation was taken. The personal interviews were central in examining the mechanisms relating government alternations and politicisation and to explore the relationship at different points in time since the first democratic elections after the fall of communism.

Table 4 indicates that the patterns of alternation in CEECs co-vary relatively closely with the politicisation scores discussed above. The data show a prevalence of regular wholesale changes of government that involve inter-bloc alternations in Slovakia, Poland and Hungary, illustrating how problems of control after wholesale changes of government lead to the politicisation of the senior civil service. In Hungary, for instance, government changes in 1994, 1998 and 2002 led to the large-scale replacement of State Secretaries, the selective replacement of heads of departments and an impressive growth of ministerial cabinets (Meyer-Sahling 2008). The relatively long period of government stability between 2002 and 2010 naturally increased the stability of the ministerial bureaucracy.

In Poland, too, it is possible to trace the politicisation of the ministerial bureaucracy to the early 1990s when wholesale changes of government between competing blocs of parties created the perception for the need to tighten political control of the bureaucracy. Similar to

Table 4. Government alternations after elections (excluding founding elections).

	Elections	Wholesale and left-right alternation	Partial and left-right alternation	Wholesale and intra-bloc alternation	Partial and intra-bloc alternation	Government confirmed
Latvia	4	0	0	0	4	0
Estonia	4	0	0	2	2	0
Lithuania	3	1	0	1	1	0
Slovenia	4	0	2	0	1	1
Czech R	5	2	0	0	2	1
Hungary	4	3	0	0	0	1
Slovakia	5	4	0	0	1	0
Poland	5	4	0	1	0	0
Total	34	14	2	4	11	3

Hungary, the centre-left of the political spectrum was dominated by the communist successor party, while the centre-right was dominated by former dissidents, in this case, affiliates of Solidarity. The split between ex-communists and anti-communists in Poland has been less relevant since the elections of 2005. The Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) was reduced to a small party and it did not recover by 2007 when the next elections were held. The 2007 elections produced again a wholesale change but from a government led by the national-Christian-conservative Law and Justice Party (PiS) to the liberal conservative Civic Platform (PO). The change of government must hence be classified as a wholesale, intra-bloc alternation but the practice of replacing large numbers of senior officials was still continued in 2007.

Slovakia differs from Poland and Hungary in that the nature of wholesale inter-bloc alternations is less clear-cut. During the 1990s two blocs could be distinguished between the supporters and opponents of Vladimir Meciar, then prime minister of Slovakia (Haughton and Fisher 2008, Hlousek and Kopecek 2008). In the late 1990s, the anti-Meciarism camp consisted of parties of the centre-right and the centre-left. By now, it is still difficult to distinguish political blocs on the basis of left and right. One of the blocs is dominated by Robert Fico's social democratic Smer but also includes the Slovak National Party and Meciar's HZDS, while the other bloc consists mainly of centre-right parties including conservative, liberal and Christian democratic parties. Despite the differences in the nature of inter-bloc divisions, the change of government in 2006 (i.e. the last alternation before taking the survey) followed a very similar script than the wholesale, left-right alternations in Poland and Hungary earlier. Smer, the SNS and the HZDS, which formed a coalition after the election, showed particular appetite for positions in the ministerial bureaucracy by replacing officials three and four levels down the hierarchy.

Slovenia, Lithuania and the Czech Republic provide more complex circumstances. The pattern of alternation in the Czech Republic should be regarded as close to the other Central European states. The difference is largely a matter of timing. Only every second election led to a wholesale, left-right alternation between the centre-right Civic Democrats (ODS) and the centre-left Social Democrats (CSSD). Problems of political control of the bureaucracy were therefore regularly reproduced but less frequently when compared with Slovakia, Hungary and Poland.

Alternation patterns in Lithuania and Slovenia are characterised by changes over time. In Slovenia, governments were dominated by one bloc of the party system until 2004, namely parties of the centre-left. The social democratic party of the long-serving Prime Minister Drnovsek (Liberal Democracy of Slovenia, LDS) came to government in 1992. It formed various coalitions with parties of the centre-right and the centre-left. In 2000, it was out of power for eight months when it was replaced by a coalition of centre-right parties (Bajuk government), but it returned to government after winning the elections in the autumn of 2000. As a consequence, many interviewees in Slovenia argued that the change of government in 2004 was like a second regime transition. This had major consequences for the governance of the senior bureaucracy. Before 2004, the senior civil service was relatively stable, turnover after elections was lower but when the Jansa government took office in 2004 Slovenia experienced more political intervention in personnel policy than ever before since transition. The Slovenian case therefore illustrates neatly that in post-communist democracies senior civil service politicisation can emerge even after long periods of relative government stability.

For the period until 2008, Lithuania took an opposite path compared with Slovenia. In the 1990s it was common that the centre-left bloc, dominated by the communist successor party, Liberal Democratic Party of Lithuania, alternated in government with the centre-right bloc, the successor of the former democratic opposition movement, Homeland Union. Wholesale, inter-bloc alternations occurred in 1992 (founding elections) and in 1996. After the 2000 elections, the centre-left represented again the largest party in parliament but the government was initially formed by new parties of the centre-right (Paksas II government). The centre-left only came to power after another partial change of government in 2001, that is, more than one year after the

elections. The gradual handover of power to the centre-left and the confirmation of a centre-left government (Brazauskas) at the 2004 elections meant that Lithuania experienced a shift towards centre-left dominance for almost eight years. During this period, there existed less potential for the emergence of distrust and hence the politicisation of the senior civil service.

The most recent elections in 2008 (after the conduct of the survey) led again to a wholesale, inter-bloc alternation that brought the centre-right Homeland Union back to government. Despite years of relative stability and major investment in the institutionalisation of a professional civil service, pressure on the senior civil service quickly emerged. Turnover in the senior ranks of the ministerial bureaucracy is said to have been lower than in the early and mid-1990s but personal interviews in Lithuania in the middle of 2009 suggest that the politicisation of the senior civil service has moved closer towards the pattern found in Slovenia.

Estonia and Latvia, finally, are without wholesale, inter-bloc alternations. They are also the two countries with the lowest degree of senior civil service politicisation. In Latvia all changes of government after elections were partial, intra-bloc alternations among centre-right parties. The question of senior civil service politicisation was largely resolved by the mid-1990s. The first government that was formed by Godmanis still after elections to the Supreme Soviet (obviously, this is not counted in Table 2) was involved in the cleansing of the administration from communist party officials and party members. The transition was embedded in the re-gaining of state independence, which implied that de-communisation was often complemented by de-Russification. During the mid-1990s, Latvia rarely had stable government coalitions in place but most of the State Secretaries who were appointed in the early 1990s survived the government changes. Because they are responsible for the management of personnel within 'their' ministries, they have also been able to prevent the downward creeping of politicisation. Pressures to replace State Secretaries and their deputies in 2002 when the New Era politicians Repse became prime minister were quickly diffused. It was agreed that State Secretaries can be transferred to other ministries and hence rotated rather than dismissed. Interviews suggest that Latvia comes closer than any other countries to some classic form of government by mandarins even if the politicisation score is lower for Estonia.

Estonia's trajectory is relatively similar to that of Latvia, in that center-right parties have dominated governments. In 1995 and 1999, two wholesale alternations occurred but they involved shifts between conservatives and liberal parties that were clearly identifiable with the right of the political spectrum. Centre-left parties, quite interestingly, were part of the coalitions but they were not the senior coalition partners. Over the last 10 years all government alternations in Estonia were partial, intra-bloc alternations. Similar to Latvia, the politicisation of the senior civil service was only an issue during the early days after transition and independence when new governments were eager to ascertain that senior bureaucrats are loyal to the new regime. The government that was formed by Prime Minister Parts in 2002 presented a short-lived challenge of the status quo, as a new party, Respublica, came for the first time to government and feared that its political programme could be sabotaged by the senior civil service. In order to alleviate this concern, a compromise was reached whereby ministers can dismiss Secretaries General one year after they have gained their appointment as minister. This means that a new minister is required to 'live' with an old Secretary General for a while. This solution has proven to be remarkably effective, as it provides time for ministers and secretaries general to develop relations of mutual trust and hence reduce the pressure to change senior personnel for the sake of politically controlling the bureaucracy.

4. Conclusion

This article examined the politicisation of the senior civil service in CEECs and its relationship with patterns of government alternation. It covered eight CEECs that joined the EU in 2004.

Following the development of an index of senior civil service politicisation, we found that politicisation varies considerably across the countries. The Baltic States, especially Estonia, stand out with a low degree of politicisation. Even the very top position of the ministerial bureaucracy is not necessarily a political appointment. In the Central European states, senior civil service politicisation is more common. Slovakia and Poland stand out as the countries with the highest degree of politicisation. Politicisation reaches down three and four levels into the ministerial hierarchy and is more intense than in the other countries. Slovenia, the Czech Republic and Hungary form an intermediate group, even though the range and intensity of politicisation in these three countries is closer to Poland and Slovakia than to the three Baltic States.

In explaining senior civil service politicisation, this research emphasised the impact of patterns of government alternation. Empirically, it was shown that regular wholesale changes of government involving alternations between parties from competing ideological blocs are associated with higher politicisation scores. New, incoming governments tend to perceive major problems of control vis-à-vis bureaucrats who have served their predecessors in government. The consequence is a pressure to politicise the senior ranks of the ministerial bureaucracy.

The findings are consistent with theories of executive politics based on transaction costs economics and principal-agent theory. These theories emphasise the incentive of politicians to make political appointments to the bureaucracy for the sake of political control. Especially Lewis' (2008) work on political appointments by US presidents shows that changes in the party affiliation of the president are followed by higher degrees of politicisation because incoming presidents lack trust in senior officials of executive agencies who have worked for and might have been appointed by the outgoing president. This article has shown that the argument applicable to the US context travels remarkably well to post-communist executives.

This article has further suggested that the presence/absence of robust competition as argued by O'Dwyer (2004, 2006) and Grzymala-Busse (2007) is not a strong predictor of senior civil service politicisation. Their argument may be more relevant when casting a wider web that includes the lower levels of the administration as well as institutions outside the core structure of the ministerial bureaucracy. The doubts regarding the mitigating impact of robust competition on politicisation is shared by Kopecky's (2011) study of new democracies in Africa.

Despite the encouraging findings produced by this study, one has to acknowledge that there might be additional factors to consider when analysing senior civil service politicisation in CEECs. First, one ought to consider in more detail the impact of the communist legacy. Studies of public administration in Western Europe tend to invoke the role of administrative traditions in explaining senior civil service politicisation (Rouban 2007). Kopecky and Spirova (2011) have recently argued that the communist legacy can at least in part explain patterns of party patronage in Hungary, the Czech Republic and Bulgaria. Yet the 'reproductive capacity' of administrative traditions in CEECs as opposed to Western Europe remains a matter of debate (Meyer-Sahling and Yesilkagit 2011).

Second, research on the Europeanization of CEECs has pointed to the importance of EU pre-accession conditionality (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005). Because the establishment of professional and de-politicised civil service systems was a condition for EU membership, one might expect a mitigating impact of the EU on senior civil service politicisation. It is questionable however whether EU integration is able to explain variation in senior civil service politicisation across countries that were, by and large, subject to conditionality during the same period of time and have been member of the EU for the same amount of time.

Future research will have to show to what extent these factors contribute to senior civil service politicisation. It also remains to be seen how the politicisation of the senior civil service in the eight CEECs that joined the EU in 2004 differs from other post-communist democracies such

as the Western Balkan states and how it differs from Western Europe. Future research will have to investigate these questions further.

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Notes

1. For instance, Evans and Rauch (1999) had mostly three respondents per country. Dahlstroem (2009) who studies civil service politicization in Western democracies relies on two to four respondents per country.
2. Naturally, the scores for individual levels do not include the size of cabinets.
3. On conceptualising patterns of government alternations, see especially Mair (1997).

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Appendix

Table A1. Politicisation of level 1 below minister.

Country	Position	Depth of appointments	Turnover after elections (%)	Experience in politics (%)	Political contacts (%)	Overall country score
Czech R	Deputy Minister	Political	70–89	70–89	70–89	85
Poland	State Secretary	Political	>90	>90	>90	100
Slovenia	State Secretary	Political	>90	70–89	70–89	90
Latvia	State Secretary	Political	10–29	10–29	50–69	50
Lithuania	State Secretary	Grey area	<10	10–29	10–29	22.5
Hungary	State Secretary	Political	70–89	70–89	>90	90
Estonia	Secretary General	Political	<10	<10	10–29	30
Slovakia	State Secretary	Political	>90	70–89	>90	95

Table A2. Politicisation of level 2 below minister.

Country	Position	Depth of appointments	Turnover after elections (%)	Experience in politics (%)	Political contacts (%)	Overall country score
Czech R	Director of Section	Grey area	50–69	30–49	30–49	47.5
Poland	Undersecretary	Political	>90	50–69	70–89	85
Slovenia	Director General	Grey area	70–89	50–69	70–89	67.5
Latvia	Deputy State Secretary	Grey area	<10	<10	50–69	27.5
Lithuania	Undersecretary	Grey area	<10	<10	10–29	17.5
Hungary	Specialist State Secretary	Grey area	30–49	50–69	50–69	52.5
Estonia	Deputy Secretary General	Grey area	<10	<10	10–29	17.5
Slovakia	Head of Service and General Director	Political	70–89	30–49	70–89	75

Table A3. Politicisation of level 3 below minister.

Country	Position	Depth of appointments	Turnover after elections (%)	Experience in politics (%)	Political contacts (%)	Overall country score
Czech R	Director of Department	Grey area	10–29	10–29	10–29	27.5
Poland	Director General and Director of Department	Grey area	30–49	<10	30–49	32.5
Slovenia	Head of Bureau	Grey area	10–29	10–29	10–29	27.5
Latvia	Head of Department	Grey area	<10	<10	30–49	22.5
Lithuania	Head of Department	Grey area	<10	<10	<10	12.5
Hungary	Head of Department	Grey area	10–29	10–29	30–49	32.5
Estonia	Head of Department	Non-political	<10	<10	10–29	5
Slovakia	Director of Division	Grey area	70–89	10–29	30–49	47.5

Table A4. Politicisation of level 4 below minister.

Country	Position	Depth of appointments	Turnover after elections (%)	Experience in politics (%)	Political contacts (%)	Overall country score
Czech R	Head of Division	Non-political	10–29	<10	<10	5
Poland	Deputy Director of Department and Head of Unit	Non-political	10–29	<10	<10	5
Slovenia	Head of Sector & Head of Unit	Non-political	<10	<10	<10	0
Latvia	Deputy Head of Department and Head of Unit	Non-political	<10	<10	<10	0
Lithuania	Deputy Head of Department and Head of Division	Non-political	<10	<10	10–29	5
Hungary	Deputy Head of Department & Head of Division	Non-political	10–29	<10	10–29	10
Estonia	Deputy Head of Department and Head of Division	Non-political	<10	<10	10–29	5
Slovakia	Director of Unit	Grey area	30–49	10–29	30–49	37.5