

Politico-Administrative relationships in an illiberal populist regime. Policy roles of top civil servants in Hungary's ministerial bureaucracy.

Abstract

According to the Weberian model bureaucrats are responsible for execution of political decisions, whereas the Wilsonian model ads policy advice as their key function. In this latter model political leaders set up major goals and directions, the “What”, whereas bureaucrats, on the higher echelons of administration, take part in policy-making by identify the “How”, that is, the particular instruments and methods to be applied; based on their expertise and professional experience they can assess and plan implementation. Illiberal populist policy-making is characterised, among others, by the neglect of professional policy advice, indifference towards coherent policy paradigms, sudden and radical policy reforms, and restricted participation of policy experts. (Bartha et al., 2020) Our study focuses on the case of Hungary, a country among those internationally leading the illiberal populist wave. The study is based on 22 anonymised interviews with Hungarian officials serving in managerial positions (from level of heads of major ministerial departments to state secretary) in ministries during the past decades, including the recent past characterised by illiberal conditions and at least some time earlier, so they can compare the two different ways of functioning.

The interviews addressed issues of the policy process, focusing on advisory activities. Additionally to the qualitative study, some quantitative data regarding the legislative process in Hungary, such as period devoted to the parliamentary deliberation, the number of statutes modified within a year, etc. are also utilized.

The interviews reveal that the bureaucratic-professional capacity for policy advice has greatly dropped in the illiberal era due to the decline of demand and subsequent decrease in supply. (Howlett, 2015) Professional advice is not expected, rather banned from the ministry apparatuses; interministerial consultation is ineffective or missing. Regularly the timing (frequently a few days only) open for policy drafting is so short that is evidently not enough for any significant analytical activity. At the same time, un-identifiable external actors without any formal position or contract appear actively in the process. These consultants frequently deliver ready-made solutions that, as experience shows, have become decisions with hardly any further improvement or modification.

In brief, it seems that politics perfectly and totally overturn policy aspects, short term political survival of the political elite negates the longer run social interest.

References

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