

Typology of ambassadorial appointments: Central and Eastern Europe and beyond

Abstract

This paper proposes a novel typology of ambassadorial appointments. Thus far, the debates on diplomacy recognise two types of ambassadorships, as determined by the political influence involved – professional versus nonprofessional, or political, appointments (Kember 1976; Macbeth 1980; Gelfand 1988; Waterman et al. 2015; Hollibaugh 2015). The former refers to officials, who have dedicated their career to diplomacy, with the latter assuming ‘anyone from outside the career foreign service’ (Macbeth 1980: 2). Consequently, the established dichotomy does not provide insight into various modes and degrees of political influence, nor allows for the identification of appointments that do not strictly belong to either grouping.

In contrast, a much more nuanced approach to the types of appointments, as determined by various career paths and modes and degrees of politicisation, is offered within the field of public administration (see Meyer-Sahling 2008). This paper takes a novel approach, merging the debates on diplomacy and public administration, in order to expand and develop further the existing typology of ambassadorial appointments.

The analysis employs data collected in the first eight months of 2020 in the Diplomatic Service of Bulgaria. It focuses on 82 cases of individual appointments of ambassadors and foreign representatives of the country, or the entire incumbent cohort. The dataset contains demographic, biographical, professional and political information for the appointees, permitting an in-depth examination of their background. The evaluation specifically focuses on the career paths of the ambassadors, providing an insight, often spanning over 40 years or longer.

First, the study recognises the cluster of career diplomats, which is already part of the established dichotomic typology in the debates on diplomacy. From a public administration perspective, it implies a mode of de-facto non-politicisation, or appointments made on merit criteria. Second, it proposes a new type, referred to in this paper as professionals turned diplomats. It implies ambassadors, who after an unrelated career elsewhere access the Diplomatic Service at a later stage, only to become part of the professional cohort. Combining features from both professional and political appointments, similar hybrids have already been discussed in the literature on public administration (see Meyer-Sahling 2008). Third, it proposes a further new hybrid type, referred to here as ambassadors with intertwined careers and assuming diplomats with an even more diverse background. Having started their professional life elsewhere, they access the Diplomatic Service at a later stage, only to exit the system for a short spell, often at a political establishment. Finally, a fourth type recognises the new entrants, or the political appointments, as per the dichotomic typology in the field of diplomacy. From a public administration perspective, it implies an appointment, motivated by major political considerations, or partisan politicisation.

The proposed typology provides a useful analytical tool, particularly suitable for the evaluation of ambassadorships in Central and Eastern Europe. It offers an insight of the appointment practices within the Diplomatic Service in the context of regime transition, democratisation and Europeanisation. Diverging from the established dichotomy, it suggests a nuanced approach to political influence that shapes diplomatic careers.