

Still Hiding in the Shadows? Political Advisers in Central and Eastern Europe

Katarina Staroňová and Marek Rybář

staronova@governance.sk (Comenius University Bratislava, SVK)

marek.rybar@mail.muni.cz (Masaryk University Brno, CZE)

NISPAcee Annual Conference, Ljubljana, 21-23 October 2021 CONFERENCE

FIRST DRAFT, please do not cite or circulate

Abstract:

Academic research on ministerial advisers has grown quickly in the last 20 years. Most studies have been undertaken in Western Europe, Anglo-Westminster countries, and Scandinavia. Using an original expert survey and semi-structured in-depth expert interviews, the paper maps out the formal positions of ministerial advisers and their involvement in the executive policy-making in ten countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

Firstly, we find out a strong variation in the status and formal position of ministerial advisers: In some systems (Poland, Bulgaria, Romania) the ministerial cabinet system was set up, while in others (Slovakia, Hungary, Czechia) their status is less visible and transparent. Secondly, ministerial advisers live "in the shadows": The degree of publicly available and readily accessible information about who the advisers are and what their formal responsibilities are varies significantly: some countries (the Baltics) are significantly more transparent than others (Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia). Variety of roles the ministerial advisers play does not seem to be consistently linked to their formal positions and functions: Whether the advisers have a managerial authority over regular civil servants, provide a substantial policy advice, or play active role in mitigating political conflicts is not fully shaped by their formal status.

Unlike in most established democracies in Western Europe, where ministerial political advisers emerged as a functional response to perceived irresponsiveness of public bureaucracies, we find mixed support for the thesis in the CEE. Several incremental civil service reforms highlight the importance of various contextual factors.