

Trust, Competence, or Party Loyalty? Understanding Motivations for Patronage Appointments in Government Ministries in Slovakia 2010-2020

Abstract

What determines politico-administrative relations in the ministries of central government? More precisely, how do government ministers deal with senior civil servants when they engage in patronage practices, what motivates them and what constraints and opportunities do they face? Using a highly-politicized setting of three governments in Slovakia between 2010 and 2020, we have demonstrated that turnover of managerial civil servants remains extremely high regardless of political affiliation of the successive government ministers. That suggests a decisive position of government ministers, and a limited interference from their party headquarters in determining appointments to civil service positions. To further explore the political dynamics of patronage appointments, we analyze data obtained from over forty semi-structured interviews with former ministers and top civil servants. We explore the motivations for patronage, the constraints ministers face in the process, and the criteria used for political appointments. Our findings suggest that individual ministers retain considerable autonomy from their parties in patronage appointments at their ministries. They face little political and administrative constraints in recalling professional civil servants and appointing their preferred administrators. Control, rather than reward, is their primary motivation. We can analytically differentiate between reasons to dismiss the standing civil servants and the reasons to appoint the new ones. In the former, negative trust plays the key role: Ministers don't believe they can rely on the inherited managerial level of civil servants. In the latter, positive trust is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for appointment. As ministers are under pressure to deliver results to their principals (voters and parties), they also value expertise, a commodity that is in short supply both within their parties and in their ministries. Our findings suggest they often tend to solve the problem by turning to their personal networks, drawing suitable appointees from their pre-political careers and non-political circles.