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Abstract

The personnel system of the Hungarian central administration—particularly that of the ministries—is based on a strict distinction between politically variable and professionally constant elements. In my presentation, I intend to examine this legal framework, focusing, on the one hand, on its historical development and transformations, and, on the other hand, on those elements of the regulation that allow for deviations from this principle and the emergence of alternative models.

The system established in the early 1990s was essentially based on the German ministerial model, which applied this separation in a strict manner. The professional organisation of the ministry was headed by a career bureaucrat, the administrative state secretary, whose deputies—the professional leaders of specific (sub)policy areas—were the deputy state secretaries. This model remained in place until 2006, when both positions were abolished and the senior professional managers of the ministries—state secretaries—were transformed into officials appointed by the government.

Although legislation adopted after 2010 theoretically restored the system that had existed prior to 2006—based on the separation of political and professional leadership and the administrative role of the administrative state secretary—certain aspects of organisational law have enabled a "stealth" transformation of this model. One of the main examples of this transformation is the amended regulation governing the direction of the activities of deputy state secretaries. Under these rules, not only administrative state secretaries have the authority to direct deputy state secretaries. Ministerial organisational and operational regulations may stipulate that a deputy state secretary is placed under the authority of the minister, a (political) state secretary, a government commissioner, or a prime minister's commissioner. In my presentation, I will analyse the impact of these amendments on the internal structure of Hungarian ministries.

My analysis is based on an examination of the organisational structures of Hungarian ministries between 2010 and 2026, with particular attention to the role of administrative state secretaries, especially the decline of their function as heads of the professional staff of ministries. Accordingly, the analysis relies not only on a legal approach but also on organisational analysis and document analysis methods.

Based on this examination, it can be concluded that in the vast majority of Hungarian ministries, the administrative state secretary can be interpreted primarily as the head of functional organisational units (such as human resources, legal services, and budgeting departments). As a result, the original legal principle—according to which the administrative state secretary plays a central role as the head of the professional staff of the ministry—has undergone significant transformation and can now be regarded as an exception rather than the rule.

Points for practitioners

Formal professional status does not ensure professional autonomy. Even in highly codified administrative systems, career-based leadership positions can be functionally reshaped through organisational design and personnel practices.

Internal organisational rules matter as much as statutes. Reporting lines, coordination mechanisms and ministerial rules of procedure play a decisive role in reallocating authority between political and professional actors.

Fragmentation weakens professional leadership. When senior career officials lack a unified hierarchical structure, their capacity to provide administrative coherence and long-term institutional memory is reduced.

Politically permeable career paths alter administrative behaviour. When senior civil service positions serve as stepping stones into political office, incentives shift toward political alignment rather than professional impartiality.

Targeted legal adjustments undermine merit-based expectations. Person-specific modifications of qualification or appointment rules signal that professional standards are contingent, weakening their credibility within the administration.

For reformers and advisors: titles can be misleading. Assessing professional leadership requires analysing actual organisational practice and career dynamics, not only formal legal classifications.

Keywords: professional leadership; politicisation of administration; senior civil service; organisational design; career-based bureaucracy; Hungary

1. Introduction: Professional Leadership between Normative Design and Executive Practice

The separation of political leadership and professional administration constitutes a core organising principle of continental European public administration. In classical ministerial systems influenced by the German administrative tradition, political actors determine policy priorities and assume political responsibility, while a career-based senior bureaucracy ensures continuity, legality and professional coherence within the executive. This distinction has long been regarded not merely as a matter of organisational design, but as a fundamental safeguard of administrative neutrality and state capacity in parliamentary democracies (Hajnal, 2021).

Hungary represents a particularly revealing case for examining the contemporary fate of this model. Following the democratic transition of 1989–1990, Hungarian public administration law explicitly embraced a strict separation between politically variable and professionally constant elements within the executive (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018). The ministerial organisation was built around a dual leadership structure: ministers and political state secretaries constituted the political executive, while professional leadership of the administrative apparatus was entrusted to career bureaucrats, most notably the administrative state secretary *(közigazgatási államtitkár)* and the deputy state secretaries *(helyettes államtitkárok)*. This arrangement, closely aligned with the German ministerial model, aimed to insulate the professional administration from short-term political pressures while preserving clear lines of democratic accountability (Kovács et al., 2025).

This institutional equilibrium, however, has proven fragile. The abolition of both the administrative state secretary and deputy state secretary positions in 2006 marked a decisive break with the post-transition consensus and openly politicised the senior management of ministries. Although this model was formally abandoned after 2010 and the professional leadership positions were reinstated in law, the restoration was primarily normative in character. At the level of statutory regulation, career bureaucrats once again appeared at the apex of the ministerial hierarchy, suggesting a return to the classical logic of professional leadership (Boda, 2024).

The central claim of this paper is that this apparent restoration masks a much deeper transformation. While the legal framework after 2010 formally re-established the status of career bureaucrats, the practical functioning of professional leadership within Hungarian ministries diverged substantially from the underlying assumptions of the model. Rather than re-emerging as unified heads of professional administration, senior career officials became embedded in a reorganised executive environment characterised by centralised political control, flexible organisational rules and politically conditioned career dynamics.

This divergence between normative design and executive practice can be captured through the metaphor invoked in the title of this paper: *poetry and truth*. The "poetry" of Hungarian administrative law continues to articulate the language of professionalism, neutrality and hierarchical coherence. The "truth" of executive governance, by contrast, reveals a system in which professional leadership is functionally transformed without being formally dismantled. The administrative state secretary increasingly operates as a manager of internal support functions rather than as the effective head of the professional staff, while deputy state secretaries, despite their legally defined status as career civil servants, increasingly function as politically exposed actors within executive circulation.

Importantly, this transformation cannot be understood as the result of overt legal politicisation. The Hungarian case does not exhibit a wholesale abandonment of merit-based categories or a formal fusion of political and administrative roles. Instead, politicisation operates indirectly, through organisational law, personnel practices and career pathways that systematically soften the boundary between professional administration and political leadership. Discretionary appointment and dismissal regimes, fragmented lines of authority within ministries, and the growing permeability between professional and political senior positions collectively reshape the incentives and expectations attached to career bureaucratic roles (Krizsán & Fekete, 2025).

The paper therefore asks a set of interrelated questions. How did the formal restoration of professional leadership after 2010 translate into organisational practice? What has happened to the role of the administrative state secretary as the supposed head of the professional apparatus? How do deputy state secretaries navigate a position that is legally professional but increasingly embedded in politically structured career circulation? And more broadly, what does the Hungarian case reveal about the capacity of highly codified administrative systems to resist—or accommodate—politicisation without explicit deinstitutionalisation?

Methodologically, the analysis combines doctrinal legal analysis with the examination of organisational structures and executive practice. It draws on statutory regulation, ministerial organisational and operational rules, and documented patterns of senior appointments between 2010 and 2026. By focusing on the interaction between legal design and executive practice, the paper seeks to contribute to a growing body of scholarship on indirect and structural politicisation, demonstrating how professional leadership can be formally preserved while functionally transformed.

2. The Chief Administrative Officer after 2010: Formal Head, Functional Manager

Following the governmental transition in 2010, Hungarian public administration law formally restored the position of the administrative state secretary (*közigazgatási államtitkár*), referred to here as the Chief Administrative Officer (CHAO). At the level of statutory design, this step appeared to re-establish the classical role of the senior career bureaucrat as the apex of the ministerial administrative hierarchy (Kovács et al., 2025). The Government Administration Act (Act CXXV of 2018) confirmed that each ministry must have a single CHAO, responsible for the internal operation of the ministry, the coordination of administrative activities, and the safeguarding of legality and continuity within the executive (Ágh, 2022.

In doctrinal terms, the CHAO thus embodies the core attributes of professional leadership within the ministerial system. Formally, the position is defined as politically neutral, career-based and functionally distinct from political executive officeholders. The CHAO stands on the same hierarchical level as political state secretaries, reports directly to the minister, and is entrusted with coordinating the work of deputy state secretaries from an administrative perspective. Taken at face value, this legal configuration suggests a reinvigorated model of professional leadership consistent with the classical German ministerial tradition.

Yet, as in the case of professional leadership more broadly, the formal restoration of the CHAO position after 2010 did not translate into the re-establishment of its pre-2006 substantive role (Ágh, 2022). While the legal status of the chief administrative officer was reinstated, the organisational environment and practical conditions under which the position operates have

undergone profound transformation. The result is a growing divergence between the CHAO's formal designation as head of the professional administration and its actual function within ministerial governance.

A first dimension of this transformation concerns the *functional scope of authority* attached to the position (Fazekas, 2018). Empirical analysis of ministerial organisational and operational rules between 2010 and 2026 reveals a consistent pattern across Hungarian ministries. In practice, the CHAO's responsibilities are increasingly concentrated on horizontal internal service functions, such as human resources management, legal compliance, budgeting, internal control and organisational support (Fazekas, 2019). These functions are undoubtedly central to the functioning of any ministry; however, they differ qualitatively from the role of substantive professional coordination traditionally associated with the position (Fazekas, 2014).

Conversely, responsibility for substantive policy coordination is frequently allocated elsewhere within the ministerial hierarchy. Major policy domains typically fall under the direct supervision of political state secretaries, and deputy state secretaries responsible for policy areas are often placed under their authority through internal organisational rules. As a result, the CHAO's coordinating role over the core substantive work of the ministry is significantly weakened. Although the position remains legally defined as the head of the professional apparatus, its effective reach over policy-defining administrative activity is limited (Boda & Hajnal, 2025).

This functional narrowing is reinforced by the *organisational fragmentation of authority* within ministries. While the Government Administration Act formally entrusts the CHAO with administrative coordination, it grants ministries wide discretion in determining internal reporting lines. Ministerial organisational and operational regulations may provide that deputy state secretaries report not to the CHAO, but directly to the minister, a political state secretary, or a government commissioner (Fazekas, 2019). Empirical evidence confirms that this option is not merely theoretical: as of recent years, the majority of deputy state secretaries in every Hungarian ministries operate under the direct supervision of political executives rather than under the administrative authority of the CHAO. *There is no ministry in which the CHAO functions as the primary hierarchical superior of the deputy state secretaries, despite what is suggested by the Government Administration Act.*

The consequences of this arrangement are structural rather than incidental. By fragmenting the authority of the CHAO over the senior administrative layer, internal organisational law effectively prevents the emergence of a unified professional hierarchy. The chief administrative officer becomes one coordinating actor among several, rather than the central node of administrative leadership. This represents a decisive break with the classical model, in which the CHAO served as a professional counterweight to political leadership by integrating substantive administration under a single career-based authority.

A second, closely related dimension of transformation concerns the *political exposure of the CHAO position through appointment and dismissal mechanisms.* Although formally classified as a senior civil servant, the CHAO is appointed and dismissed through procedures that provide only weak protection against political discretion. The legal framework does not require competitive recruitment, independent assessment, or binding professional criteria for appointment. Instead, decisive influence over both appointment and dismissal remains

concentrated in the hands of political executives, primarily the minister and, indirectly, the Prime Minister through the highly centralised structure of government.

This configuration places the CHAO in a structurally ambiguous position. On the one hand, the office is presented as career-based and professionally neutral. On the other hand, tenure in the position depends heavily on continued political confidence. Changes in ministerial leadership, portfolio restructuring or shifts in executive priorities are frequently accompanied by turnover at the level of chief administrative officers. From an organisational perspective, this makes the CHAO a politically exposed role, even in the absence of explicit politicisation of the legal status of the position.

The combination of functional narrowing and political exposure fundamentally alters the incentives attached to the CHAO office. Rather than acting as an autonomous professional leader capable of mediating between political direction and administrative implementation, the CHAO increasingly operates as a senior manager responsible for ensuring internal efficiency, compliance and organisational stability within boundaries defined by political leadership. The capacity to influence substantive administrative coordination is correspondingly reduced (Hajnal, 2021).

Crucially, this transformation does not amount to the abolition of professional leadership. The CHAO position continues to exist, and its legal description remains anchored in the language of professionalism and neutrality. What changes is the *meaning* of professional leadership in practice. The CHAO becomes less the head of a coherent professional bureaucracy and more the manager of internal administrative processes within a politically steered organisation.

This shift has important implications for understanding politicisation within the Hungarian executive. It demonstrates that politicisation does not necessarily require the formal reclassification of professional roles as political offices. Instead, it can operate through organisational restructuring, discretionary personnel regimes and the strategic redistribution of functions. Professional leadership is preserved formally, but its substantive content is redefined in ways that align it more closely with centralised political control (Fazekas, 2018).

Finally, the transformation of the CHAO role sets the stage for the reconfiguration of deputy state secretaries examined in the following section. As the chief administrative officer's coordinating authority over the senior administrative layer is weakened, deputy state secretaries increasingly operate within politically conditioned reporting structures and career trajectories. The CHAO's functional marginalisation thus forms a key element of the broader transformation of professional leadership within Hungarian ministries after 2010.

3. Deputy State Secretaries after 2010: Career Bureaucrats and Politically Tailored Circulation

Alongside the transformation of the chief administrative officer, the most consequential shift in the Hungarian model of professional leadership concerns the position of deputy state secretaries (*helyettes államtitkárok*, hereinafter: DSS). In formal legal terms, deputy state secretaries represent the core of the ministerial professional leadership. They are classified as senior civil servants, entrusted with directing major organisational units, either in substantive policy fields

or in internal service functions, and are explicitly distinguished from political executive officeholders by their career-based status.

Under the post-2010 legal framework, the status of deputy state secretaries appears, at first glance, to reaffirm the principles of professionalism, continuity and administrative neutrality associated with the classical ministerial model (Fazekas, 2019). Deputy state secretaries are not political appointees in the strict sense; their position is not tied to electoral cycles, and their legitimacy is formally grounded in professional qualifications and career progression rather than political trust (Hulkó, 2024). From a doctrinal perspective, they should thus function as senior career bureaucrats translating political decisions into administratively coherent and legally compliant action (Pozsár-Szentmiklósy, 2022).

In practice, however, the role of deputy state secretaries has undergone a profound transformation. While their formal classification as professional officials has been preserved, their position has increasingly become embedded in politically structured organisational and career dynamics. Central to this transformation is the emergence of what may be described as politically tailored circulation at the top of the executive (Balázs, 2020).

Empirical evidence from the past decade demonstrates that deputy state secretaryships have increasingly functioned as entry points into the political executive, rather than as insulated endpoints of an administrative career. A growing number of actors have moved directly from deputy state secretary positions into political state secretary roles. These trajectories are not isolated or anecdotal. Rather, they indicate a patterned circulation regime in which experience accumulated in a formally non-political position precedes appointment to overtly political executive office.

This permeability fundamentally alters the internal logic of professional leadership. Although the formal distinction between political and administrative leadership remains intact at the level of legal classification, it is substantially softened in practice. Deputy state secretaries can no longer be understood exclusively as neutral guardians of administrative professionalism. Instead, they increasingly occupy a liminal position between administration and politics, operating within an environment where upward political mobility is both possible and, in some cases, structurally anticipated (Kovács et al., 2025).

Crucially, this shift does not require any formal reclassification of the deputy state secretary position (Fazekas, 2018). The law continues to describe DSS as senior civil servants (Stumpf & Kiss, 2023). The transformation operates through practice: through career incentives, patterns of appointment, and organisational placement. As a result, the administrative pole of the executive triangle becomes partially entangled with political mobility without any explicit legal fusion of roles. Politicisation thus proceeds in an indirect and structural manner (Boda & Hajnal, 2025).

A further defining feature of this circulation regime is the weakening of sectoral specialisation at the level of senior executive leadership. Classical parliamentary governance presumes that junior ministers (in Hungary they are called as ‘state secretaries’, *államtitkárok)* and comparable executive officeholders develop and retain expertise within relatively stable policy domains. In the contemporary Hungarian context, by contrast, political executive careers increasingly involve movement across substantively diverse portfolios within relatively short timeframes.

Several former deputy state secretaries who became political state secretaries – or later ministers – have exercised authority over markedly different policy areas, ranging from justice and administrative reform to economic governance, infrastructure policy or sustainability-related portfolios. These trajectories suggest that policy-specific expertise is no longer the primary organising principle of executive careers. Instead, deputy state secretaryships function as training grounds for generalised executive competence, political reliability and integrative skills (Kovács et al., 2025).

From an organisational perspective, this development has two major consequences. First, the professional expertise associated with policy domains becomes less firmly anchored in stable organisational roles. Expertise is increasingly treated as portable and generic, rather than as the product of long-term sectoral immersion. Second, political leadership gains flexibility in deploying trusted personnel across policy fields, reinforcing centralised coordination while weakening the professional autonomy of individual organisational units.

The politically tailored circulation of deputy state secretaries also interacts directly with the functional marginalisation of the chief administrative officer. As discussed in the previous section, the CHAO's coordinating authority over senior administrative officials has been weakened through organisational fragmentation and discretionary reporting lines. Deputy state secretaries are frequently placed under the direct authority of (political) state secretaries ('junior ministers') rather than under administrative coordination (Fazekas, 2018). This organisational arrangement not only limits the CHAO's capacity to act as the unified head of the professional apparatus, but also situates deputy state secretaries within politically supervised hierarchies that further condition their role.

Taken together, these dynamics produce a reconfigured model of professional leadership. Deputy state secretaries remain formally classified as career bureaucrats, yet their role increasingly combines administrative responsibility with political exposure and career mobility. The boundary between professional execution and political leadership is not abolished, but it is continuously renegotiated through practice.

This transformation underscores a central argument of the paper. The post-2010 Hungarian executive does not politicise professional leadership through overt legal transgression or formal deprofessionalisation (Boda & Hajnal, 2025). Instead, it reshapes professional roles through organisational law, personnel practices and career circulation. Deputy state secretaries exemplify this logic: formally restored as career administrators, they operate in practice within a politically tailored circulation regime that subtly but systematically alters the meaning of professional status within the executive.

4. Interpreting the Transformation of Professional Leadership: CHAO and DSS in Interaction

Taken together, the post-2010 trajectories of the chief administrative officer (CHAO) and the deputy state secretaries (DSS) reveal a coherent, though largely implicit, reconfiguration of professional leadership within Hungarian ministries. While the two positions differ in legal status and functional orientation, their transformation follows a common logic: the *formal restoration of career-based professionalism combined with the functional redistribution of authority in ways that systematically favour political steering.*

At first glance, the post-2010 institutional design appears to strengthen professional administration (Stunpf & Kiss 2023 and Árva et al., 2021)). The reintroduction of the CHAO as the single administrative head of the ministry, alongside the reaffirmation of deputy state secretaries as senior career civil servants, suggests a return to the classical ministerial model disrupted in 2006. However, when examined jointly, the CHAO and DSS positions no longer form a coherent professional hierarchy comparable to their pre-2006 configuration (Kovács et al., 2025).

The CHAO, although formally designated as the apex of the administrative apparatus, increasingly operates in a *functionally narrowed role* (Fazekas, 2018), centred on internal services, organisational management and procedural compliance. Substantive coordination, by contrast, is progressively displaced toward politically supervised positions. This development weakens the CHAO's capacity to act as a genuine counterweight to political executive leadership and transforms the position into a managerial node embedded within a politically controlled organisational environment.

Simultaneously, deputy state secretaries—who should constitute the backbone of substantive professional leadership—are increasingly situated within *politically conditioned organisational and career structures.* Their formal status as career bureaucrats is preserved, yet their practical role is reshaped by two interrelated dynamics. First, internal organisational law frequently places them under the direct authority of political state secretaries rather than under administrative coordination by the CHAO. Second, their position has become a recurrent stepping stone into overtly political executive office.

The interaction of these dynamics produces a *structural decoupling* of professional leadership. The CHAO is deprived of effective coordinating authority over the senior administrative layer, while DSS are simultaneously detached from a stable, hierarchically integrated professional chain of command. In this configuration, professional leadership does not disappear; rather, it is *disaggregated and re-embedded* within politically steered organisational arrangements.

Importantly, this transformation cannot be explained by a single institutional change or by overt politicisation of administrative law. Instead, it emerges from the *combined effect* of (i) discretionary organisational design, (ii) politically exposed appointment and dismissal regimes, and (iii) career incentives that reward political mobility. The result is a professional leadership structure that is formally restored yet substantively altered.

From an analytical perspective, this configuration exemplifies a broader pattern of indirect politicisation. The Hungarian executive does not abolish the distinction between political and administrative roles. On the contrary, it maintains this distinction at the level of legal categories and organisational labels. What changes is the *distribution of practical authority and career logic* across these roles. Professional leadership is retained as a formal idiom of governance, while its operative meaning is recalibrated to fit a highly centralised and politically coordinated executive system (Gajduschek & Staroňová, 2023).

This interpretation also clarifies why the transformation of professional leadership after 2010 should not be understood as a temporary deviation or a contingent outcome of individual appointments. Rather, it reflects a *stable institutional equilibrium* in which career bureaucratic positions are preserved as part of the organisational architecture but integrated into a governance model that systematically privileges political direction over professional autonomy.

In this sense, the CHAO–DSS configuration represents a cornerstone of the Hungarian model of executive governance: a hybrid arrangement in which professional leadership is neither abolished nor autonomous but structurally subordinated through organisational and career mechanisms.

5. Person-Specific Legal Adjustment and Institutional Hybridity

The functional transformation of professional leadership outlined above is reinforced by a second, closely related set of mechanisms*: person-specific legal adjustment and institutional hybridity.* These mechanisms further erode the practical boundaries between political and professional roles without formally dismantling the legal framework of the ministerial system (Kiss & Sebők, 2025).

A particularly illustrative example of person-specific legal adjustment is the appointment of Zsófia Rácz as deputy state secretary for youth affairs in 2019. At the time of her appointment, the applicable legal framework required deputy state secretaries to possess completed higher-education qualifications relevant to their field of responsibility. As Rácz was still a university student, Parliament amended the governing legislation to introduce an explicit exception applicable to the youth affairs deputy state secretary position, thereby enabling her appointment despite the absence of the normally required credentials.

Analytically, the significance of this episode extends well beyond the individual controversy surrounding the appointment. It reveals a distinctive mode of legal governance in which *statutory rules function as adaptable instruments rather than as binding constraints.* Instead of aligning personnel decisions with pre-existing legal requirements, the law itself was adjusted ex post to accommodate a politically preferred outcome. Although the amendment was formally lawful and procedurally compliant, it exemplifies a practice of targeted legal adaptation that weakens the integrity of general, merit-based standards.

Such person-specific legal adjustment has important implications for professional leadership. It signals that even roles formally classified as career-based and professional are subject to political override through selective legal intervention. This not only alters expectations surrounding qualification and merit but also contributes to a broader perception that legal rules governing professional status are *contingent and negotiable.* Over time, this perception undermines the credibility of professional safeguards and reinforces the political embeddedness of senior administrative positions (Soós, 2024).

A complementary manifestation of this logic can be observed in the organisational design of certain administrative bodies, most notably the National Tax and Customs Administration (NAV). Formally classified as a central administrative agency rather than a line ministry, NAV nonetheless operates under the leadership of a political state secretary and is closely integrated into ministerial and governmental coordination structures. This arrangement blurs the conventional distinction between ministerial hierarchy and agency autonomy.

From a comparative standpoint, revenue administration is often treated as an area requiring heightened insulation from political influence, given its direct implications for fiscal capacity and legal equality. The Hungarian model departs from this assumption by embedding political executive leadership directly into an administrative body with substantial enforcement powers.

The resulting institutional hybridity extends political authority into domains that, in many systems, are deliberately shielded from partisan control.

Together, person-specific legal adjustment and institutional hybridity reinforce the broader transformation of professional leadership identified in this paper. They illustrate how *formal legal continuity can coexist with substantial functional change,* enabling political leadership to stretch and reshape administrative institutions without overt deinstitutionalisation. In this respect, the Hungarian case demonstrates that strong legal codification does not necessarily constrain political power; under certain conditions, it may provide the very instruments through which flexible and centralised governance is engineered (Soós, 2024).

Seen in conjunction with the CHAO–DSS configuration, these mechanisms complete the picture of post-2010 executive transformation (Tap & Gherghina, 2026). Professional leadership persists as a legal category, yet its operative significance is increasingly circumscribed by organisational design, personnel practices and adaptable legal frameworks. The result is a hybrid executive order in which professionalism functions less as a source of autonomous authority and more as a formalised language through which politically steered governance is exercised.

6. Discussion: Formally Restored, Substantively Transformed Professional Leadership

The analysis presented in this paper has examined the transformation of professional leadership in Hungarian ministries through the interaction of legal design and executive practice after 2010. Taken together, the findings reveal a consistent and robust pattern: *the legal and symbolic restoration of career-based professional leadership did not lead to the re-establishment of its classical substantive role.* Instead, professional leadership was reconfigured in ways that preserved its formal status while fundamentally altering its practical meaning.

At the level of statutory regulation, Hungary maintains a strict and highly codified distinction between political and professional roles (Stumpf & Kiss, 2023). The re-introduction of the administrative state secretary as the chief administrative officer of the ministry, alongside the reaffirmation of deputy state secretaries as senior career civil servants, reflects a deliberate commitment to the vocabulary and institutional forms of professionalism. From this perspective, the post-2010 system appears to align closely with continental European ministerial traditions, particularly the German model on which the Hungarian system was originally based.

However, the empirical examination of organisational structures, appointment and dismissal practices, and career trajectories demonstrates that *formal categories alone are insufficient to capture the actual operation of professional leadership.* The chief administrative officer and the deputy state secretaries no longer function as integrated components of a coherent professional hierarchy. Instead, their roles are differentiated and re-embedded within a politically steered organisational environment.

The chief administrative officer, although legally defined as the head of the professional apparatus, has become primarily a *functional manager.* Responsibility for internal services, compliance and organisational stability has been consolidated under this position, while substantive policy coordination has been displaced towards politically supervised executive

layers. This functional narrowing weakens the capacity of the CHAO to act as a genuine professional counterweight within the executive triangle and redefines the position's contribution to ministerial governance (Kovács et al., 2025).

At the same time, deputy state secretaries—formally the backbone of substantive professional leadership—operate in a context characterised by *politically tailored circulation.* Their legal status as career bureaucrats coexists with career dynamics that increasingly reward political mobility. The permeability between deputy state secretary positions and political executive office, combined with fragmented reporting lines and politically exposed appointment regimes, situates DSS at the intersection of administration and politics. This does not abolish their professional status, but it systematically conditions it.

The interaction between these two developments is analytically decisive. The functional marginalisation of the CHAO and the politically structured circulation of DSS together produce a *structural decoupling of professional leadership.* Professional authority is neither centralised nor autonomous; it is dispersed, conditional and embedded within politically defined organisational arrangements. Importantly, this configuration remains stable precisely because it does not require formal deinstitutionalisation. On the contrary, it relies on the continued existence of professional roles as legal categories.

Person-specific legal adjustments and institutional hybridity further reinforce this pattern. The selective modification of legal requirements for individual appointments and the extension of political leadership into administratively sensitive domains exemplify a mode of governance in which legality operates as a flexible instrument. Rather than eroding legal structures openly, political leadership leverages codified frameworks to engineer adaptive and centralised solutions while maintaining the appearance of rule-bound administration.

From a broader theoretical perspective, the Hungarian case illustrates how *indirect and structural politicisation* can operate within highly formalised institutional settings. Politicisation does not necessarily manifest through explicit legal breaches or the abandonment of professional norms. Instead, it emerges through organisational design, personnel regimes and career incentives that recalibrate the balance between political control and professional autonomy. Professional leadership persists in form, but its operative meaning is transformed.

7. Conclusions

This paper set out to examine the transformation of professional leadership in Hungarian ministries in the period following the formal restoration of career-based senior administrative positions after 2010. By focusing on the administrative state secretary and the deputy state secretaries, and by analysing the interaction between legal design and executive practice, the paper has demonstrated that the post-2010 Hungarian model represents neither a simple return to the classical ministerial system nor an overt politicisation of administration.

Instead, the findings point to a more nuanced transformation. Professional leadership was formally reinstated, but functionally redefined. The administrative state secretary no longer operates as the effective head of the professional staff, while deputy state secretaries increasingly occupy positions shaped by political supervision and mobility. These changes were

achieved without dismantling the legal framework of professionalism; on the contrary, they were enabled by it.

The Hungarian case thus highlights a central paradox of contemporary executive governance in highly codified systems. Strong formal regulation does not necessarily insulate professional administration from political influence. Under certain conditions, it may provide the very tools through which political leadership can restructure organisational authority, personnel practices and career trajectories while preserving institutional continuity.

Beyond its country-specific relevance, this analysis contributes to broader debates on politicisation, professional leadership and executive governance. It underscores the importance of moving beyond formal legal categories and examining how professional roles are enacted in practice. For comparative public administration, the Hungarian experience serves as a cautionary example: the preservation of professional titles and legal status does not guarantee the preservation of professional autonomy or authority.

In conclusion, the transformation of professional leadership in Hungarian ministries after 2010 illustrates how the "poetry" of legal design can coexist with a very different "truth" of executive practice. Career bureaucrats remain visible within the institutional landscape, yet their capacity to act as autonomous professional leaders has been systematically reshaped. Understanding this distinction is essential not only for analysing the Hungarian case, but also for assessing the resilience of professional administration in contemporary parliamentary systems more generally.

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