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Policy Work and Politicisation in the Ministries of the Czech Republic: The Dilemmas of State Service

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1. Preface: Why a Book on Czech Ministry Officials?

Arnold Robinson: "When anybody finds a way of saving money or cutting staff in local government, it works for Whitehall just as well."
Humphrey Appleby: "Yes, but local government is extravagant, overstaffed, incompetent, whereas we…"
Arnold Robinson: "Exactly so."
Humphrey Appleby: "I know my duty, Arnold."
(Jay, Lynn, & Whitmore, 1982)

In popular fiction, films, and television comedy series, civil servants are often lampooned as incompetent, unresponsive and erratic, and lagging behind the times. Similar portrayals—but often without the humorous undertone—can be found in media coverage reporting on various misdeeds of public administration, ranging from the incompetence of its personnel to systemic inefficiency and wasting of money. To give but one example from the Czech Republic, a TV documentary series, *Případy pro ombudsmana* [Cases for the Ombudsman], aired by ČT2, the Czech public television channel, showcased various wrongdoings of local and state administrative bodies that had direct, negative impact upon the lives of ordinary people.

Czech government ministries, the central units of state administration, are not exempt from such perceptions. Citizen polls on the activities of the Czech ministries show long-term "less than good" satisfaction (CVVM, 2019a). Assessing the overall functioning of the Czech bureaucracy, the public is divided between 30 percent who are satisfied and 30 percent who are dissatisfied (the rest claim no opinion) (CVVM, 2019b). Popular literature decries the *Destruction of the Czech State Admin-*

istration, which is the title of a relevant work by Outrata and Růžička (2014), as evidenced by the relatively low ranking of the performance of the Czech public sector compared to that of other EU countries (24th position) and worldwide (97th position) (Word Economic Forum, 2018).

However, despite such negative-to-alarming sentiment about the performance of the Czech public administration, very little is *empirically* known about Czech ministries' staff as the key enablers of this (messy) situation. As Veselý, commenting on the Czech situation, astutely observes "ministries are enigmatic institutions to many people" (2014, p. 108). Like Germany's famed World War II Enigma encrypting machine, it is indeed rather hard to decode what goes on within the walls of the Czech ministries, know who their officials are, what they do, and the "signals" they actually send about their work.

This volume is a modest attempt to shed light on those issues and thus dispel some of the mystery that surrounds the Czech ministries and the Czech public administration in a wider sense. The aim of the volume is to inquire into the nature of the work that public officials do in the ministries of the Czech Republic (policy work) and discover the extent to which the officials' work is politicised (politicisation). The enquiry is based on a large-N survey undertaken in 2013, complemented by analysis of relevant secondary data and statistical data focused on the Czech ministries' state service covering the period 2013–2019.

After an introduction, this book presents the set of methods that was used to explore policy work and the politicisation of Czech ministry officials (Chapter 2). The methodology section is followed by an overview of the major developments in the Czech public administration since the watershed year of 1989 (Chapter 3). Next, I discuss the state of the research on policy work and politicisation, including the conceptual and practical interconnections between the two areas. To that end, I draw on the international and some of the domestic literature on public administration (Chapter 4). The book then lays out descriptive, statistical, and analytical information on the Czech public administration and the Czech ministries in order to provide a contextual backdrop for the research on which my conclusions are based (Chapter 5). The chapter on the context leads us to the formulation of research questions and goals pertinent to policy work and politicisation in the Czech ministries (Chapter 6). Taking the concept of policy work as a starting point, my empirical research focused on identifying and analysing policy work done by Czech ministry officials, including the nature of officials' work-styles. After that, I pay specific attention, conceptually and empirically, to the extent to

which officials are exposed to the kind of pressure that goes along with the politicisation of the civil service.

The theory and concepts developed in this book come in three chapters. The first establishes the linkages between policy work and politicisation, two related areas in the study of public administration (Chapter 5). The book then focuses more specifically on policy work (Chapter 7) and politicisation (Chapter 8) based upon empirical research in each area. The reason for this approach is to avoid overwhelming the reader with a long account of the theories of policy work and politicisation, which would complicate understanding of the nuances in each area. Finally, my approach to analysis of the ministry officials' activities, workstyles, and politicisation leads into a summary of the findings I have made and some observations about what, in my view, are promising avenues for further enquiry, in both the academic and the practical sense (Chapter 9, Chapter 10).

The focus of this volume on the actual policy work done by insiders (that is, ministry's staff) and their politicisation means that it does not deal in depth or detail with the historical, legal, and economic aspects of the Czech civil service.[1] Correspondingly, the book's focus on the 2013–2019 period means that it makes no attempt to cover or explain how the Czech civil service functioned during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Lastly, but no less importantly, let me say that this volume would never have materialised if it were not for the research project of the Czech Science Foundation, *Policy Workers in the Czech Public Administration: Practices, Professional Values and Identity*, led by my inspiring colleague Arnošt Veselý. To him go my big thanks, not least for involving me in such a unique and productive undertaking. I am also thankful to František Ochrana, Vilém Novotný, and Michal Plaček. Their work has provided me with a much-needed creative impetus for shaping my thoughts on the policy work of Czech ministry officials. I am particularly grateful to Martin Nekola, another of my close associates, for his original ideas and assistance, and for sharing with me some of the trials and tribulations of the publication process. Finally, I want to express my big gratitude to Rob Hoppe and Hal Colebatch for gently pointing out to me how complex and sophisticated policy work-related theory and practice actually are.

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1   Other than referencing such aspects for context, especially in Chapter 3.

2. Methodology

The methodology applied in this study of policy work and politicisation involves both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The research began with a document review based on desk research. Desk research refers to "the process of collating and coding existing information for analysis, without direct contact between researchers and research participants" (Amelia and Cohen, 2020:2). The information sources used in desk research typically include archived government working documents, NGO reports, strategy documents of different kinds, annual reports, statistics, assessments, research articles, and other reports.

In this case, the following documents in English or Czech language were reviewed (see also Chapter 5):

- research articles and monograph chapters about policy work and politicisation;
- legal documents (laws, by-laws, regulations, codes of conduct, etc.);
- statistical reports produced by the Czech Statistical Office;
- the Czech Republic's state accounts (as compiled by the Ministry of Finance);
- the accounts of individual Czech Republic's ministries;
- Czech ministries' annual reports;
- annual reports on the public administration and the state civil service of the Czech Republic;
- strategic and conceptual documents (from the European Union and from Czech state and regional administrations);
- analyses produced by the Ministry of the Interior and NGOs (including Transparency International and Reconstruction of the State);
- an assessment of the impact of the Civil Service Act.

Review of these documents generated significant information about major developments in the Czech civil service after 1989. General information on the nature of policy work and the politicisation of civil service bureaucracies was also collected, although that information almost never directly concerned the Czech Republic. With regard to the Czech state service, state and ministry accounts provided data on individual administrative units, including the ministries' activities, structure and organization. A dataset for analysis was created from the information. Based on the data set, a descriptive statistics method was used to describe the characterstics of the ministries' staff (their numbers, age, sex, level of education, salaries, most frequent areas of work, etc.).

However, due to the lack of tested procedures for sampling policy workers and gathering data about them (not least because of the rather vague and varied terminology found in the literature), the process of establishing a theoretical population and a valid sample frame for our large-N study of Czech ministry policy workers and their politicisation was a challenge (Veselý, 2013). As Veselý explains:

> Unfortunately, the empirical articles on policy work are usually silent on theoretical population. It can be only rather vaguely deduced from the description of sampling procedures. The population in policy work surveys consists of government employees that have certain specific features... In our research we thus decided for an inductive strategy. We have defined our theoretical population as follows: "All officials in the Czech Republic's central public administration (i.e. fourteen ministries), except people that work exclusively in the internal operations of the ministry. By internal operations we mean work that serves the given ministry only, such as technical maintenance of the ministry's building, ICT work for the ministry, internal accounting of the ministry, management of personnel files of ministerial employees etc. (2013, pp. 93–95).

The theoretical population was defined and a sample frame was set mainly by using ministry telephone directories, because only a few Czech ministries made lists of employees available. Random sampling then produced a "census-like" sample frame of 4,600 valid units, among whom 1,351 full interviews were conducted, resulting in a response rate of 29.4 percent (Veselý, 2013). The 1,351 interviews were used to conduct an enquiry into both Czech ministry officials' policy work and the politicisation of their work. More specific information on the methods used for gathering responses is available in Chapter 6. Finally, an inferential statistics method was applied to test the relevant assumptions and hy-

potheses formed in Chapter 7 about Czech ministry officials' policy work and in Chapter 8 about the politicisation of the officials' work. Besides describing the methodology used, Chapters 7 and 8 also provide empirical evidence of the types and styles of ministry officials' policy work and the extent of their politicisation.

3. Setting the Stage: The Czech Public Administration Reform and the Civil Service after 1989

The fall of the Czechoslovak communist regime in 1989 was the beginning of the country's transformation from a totalitarian state to a parliamentary democracy. Needless to say, the public administration played a central role under communist rule. The system was based on centralised, rigid, top-down decision-making in substantive policy areas and beyond, reaching into most civic activities and initiatives (Ochrana, Půček and Špaček, 2015). Sustaining an undemocratic government would have been unthinkable without the—usually—dutiful administration of the decisions of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (Hendrych, 1993). Abandoning communist-style government of the state after 1989 necessitated, among other things, a series of reforms in the area of public administration, which I will sketch out in some detail. This is to provide a contextual backdrop to my research into Czech ministry officials' policy work and its politicisation.

After the regime change in November 1989, the administrative reform first concentrated on decentralisation and deregulation, in order to put an end to the concentration of power and rigid subordination of policy to the Communist Party (Hendrych, 1993; Vidláková, 1993b). Even before 1989, it had been increasingly recognised that the process of democratising the public service would require a re-examination of administrative structures, tasks, procedures, and personnel at both the state and local level. In practice, however, after 1989 the reinstatement of local-level administrative rights took precedence (Vidláková, 1993a). Three reasons can be identified for postponing the administrative reform at the state level. The first was the arduous, drawn-out political power struggle over the outcome of the split of the Czechoslovak federation into two independent republics (the Czech Republic and Slovakia)

which took effect in January 1993. The Czech and Slovak Republics were a case of "asynchronous and uneven modernisation" in one country (Musil, 1993). Voters' preference for powerful nationally-oriented parties (the Civic Democratic Party (Občanská demokratická strana = ODS) in the Czech Republic and the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia in the Slovak Republic) was already identifiable in the 1992 federal elections (Evans and Whitefield, 1998).

The second reason was the perceived need to pursue free-market reforms before attempting societal and administrative changes of a more holistic nature. As Vidláková pointed out:

> [T]he federal and state governments long considered economic reform and the privatisation of state enterprises as their absolute priority; by comparison the reform of public administration was very much a secondary issue. Secondly, continuous quarrels over the division of powers between the Federation and the two Republics meant that a great deal of energy was wasted. Often it was unclear who had the power to act, and the mutual blockage of initiatives was not uncommon. All this led to a situation in which a change in the Czech central administration was more or less accidental, often rushed through and carried out under great pressure and without the necessary co-ordination (Vidláková, 1993a, pp. 68–69).

The third reason was the new political elite's disenchantment with public officials' expertise and erudition, and a general attitude of distrust towards bureaucrats. This was due to many bureaucrats' former activity in the service of the Communist Party, and even direct membership in it, which supported the perception that they were backward, demoralised, unreliable, and lacking in professional integrity (and after 1989 underpaid as well) (Vidláková, 1993a, 2001).

The democratisation of administrative structures, as enacted in new legislation adopted between 1990 and 1993, was primarily focused on the redevelopment and empowerment of local self-government (municipalities) (Špaček, 2018). Municipalities were established and given the status of legal entities. They were expected to take on most of the administrative responsibilities of the local national committees that existed in the old communist structure. As the legislation did not set any minimum size for the newly formed municipal units,[2] their number increased from about

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2   The formation of the municipalities involved the abolition of the administrative amalgamations instigated by the Communist Party rule in the 1970s and 1980s (Špaček and Neshybová, 2010).

4,000 in 1989 to over 6,200[3] now (almost 2,200 municipalities became independent between 1990 and 2000) (Špaček and Neshybová, 2010). At the next, higher level of government, the 1990 legislation also made provision for the establishment of 76 districts, whose offices replaced the district-level national committees as the next level of territorial administration. The functions of the new district offices were supplemented by detached workplaces of the state bureaucracy working in specific areas such as finance (financial offices) and labour (labour offices) (so-called "deconcentrations"). The creation of district-level deconcentrations was poorly organised and was not guided by any strategic plan (Rys, 2010; Špaček and Neshybová, 2010). Rather, it reflected the power and negotiation skills of certain ministers within their ministries (Pomahač and Vidláková, 2002).

The abolition of the communist-era national committee structure[4] in 1990 also had consequences for the regional level of administration (Špaček and Neshybová, 2010). With the regional national committees no longer in existence, their powers were either transferred to the new district offices or to the central state administration. In 1997, a Constitutional Act No. 347 "On Regions" envisaged the creation of fourteen territorial units (thirteen regions plus the Capital City of Prague), effective from January 2000. After protracted, highly partisan debates about the proper number of regions (eight or fourteen) and the competencies of the newly formed regional administrative units, subsequent legislation defined the legal status and administrative powers of fourteen new regions and their regional offices in 2000 (Potěšil, 2007).

Following their establishment, the regional offices began to exercise their statutory powers, and in some cases other powers that were delegated from the state level. It should be noted that some administrative tasks, along with physical infrastructure, were transferred to the regional offices from the district offices, which were abolished altogether in 2002 (for details on regional developments of that time, see Marek, Pánková and Šímová, 2004).[5] Reportedly, 2,076 former district officials found new employment in regional bureaus while another 12,984 former district officials were employed in municipalities with extended responsibilities (Ministerstvo vnitra, 2016a, p. 20). The municipal and regional offices

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3   The majority of which has less than 500 inhabitants (Špaček, 2014, p. 88).
4   The structure of the Communist national committees at the local/municipal, district and regional level was legally abolished in 1990 (Vidláková, 1993a).
5   Other parts of the administrative load of the districts were shifted to the central authorities or newly established bodies with extended (state administration) responsibilities.