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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Comparing ministerial advisers across politicization settings: Still hiding in the shadows?

Katarína Staroňová[1] | **Marek Rybář**[2]

[1]Comenius University Bratislava, Institute of Public Policy, Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences, Bratislava, Slovakia

[2]Department of Political Science, Masaryk University Brno, Faculty of Social Sciences, Brno, Czechia

Correspondence
Katarína Staroňová, Comenius University Bratislava, Institute of Public Policy, Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences, Mlynske Luhy 4, Bratislava, 821 05, Slovakia.
Email: katarina.staronova@fses.uniba.sk

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Abstract

The article examines the proposition that the characteristics of ministerial advisers are shaped by specific settings of the politicization of ministerial administration. Four types of politicization settings are identified, resulting from variation in the scope of formal political appointments and appointments into bureaucracy. Using data from an original expert survey and semi-structured expert interviews, the contribution analyses eleven cases from Central and Eastern Europe. It documents that the functional differentiation of advisers from other administrative actors, and their political and policymaking roles, are conditioned by the politicization settings in which they operate. The political roles of advisers are most pronounced where they do not face other formal political appointees, and appointments into bureaucracy are low. Policymaking roles are strongest where formal political appointees manage high politics, and bureaucratic appointments are limited. The article also identifies "invisible" advisers as a new type of player unknown in established Western bureaucracies.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Ministerial advisers (MAs) have become a stable feature of administrative systems around the globe. Their presence and effects have grown so significant that they are often portrayed as a third element in the structure of government, alongside executive politicians and top civil servants. Important academic works have advanced our understanding of how ministerial advisers

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shape various aspects of executive politics in systems with a politically neutral, meritocratic civil service, such as in Westminster tradition (Connaughton, 2010; Craft & Halligan, 2020; Eichbaum & Shaw, 2008), Napoleonic tradition (Gouglas, 2015; Silva, 2017), and Scandinavian tradition (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2020; Askim et al., 2017; Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2017; Christiansen et al., 2016). Research outside these contexts remains scarce (but see Krajňák et al., 2020; Pshizova, 2015). Much of the existing literature examines ministerial advisers' career paths (Askim et al., 2021; Blach-Ørsten et al., 2020), involvement in the policymaking process (Gouglas, 2015), their functions (Christiansen et al., 2016) and roles (Connaughton, 2010; Gouglas et al., 2017).

The institutional context within which the MAs operate—the executive triangle of politicians, civil servants, and political appointees—is still not systematically investigated (but see De Visscher & Salomonsen, 2013; Shaw & Eichbaum, 2015, 2018; Askim et al., 2017). Not only do the structural arrangements within the executive differ, but so do the corresponding roles and types of advisers (Bach & Wegrich, 2020; Ng, 2020; OECD, 2011). For example, ministerial cabinets in Napoleonic administrative systems, staffed with political appointees, produce a different type of advice and conflicts than advisers in countries with no other political staff (De Visscher & Salomonsen, 2013). The systems in which political advisers work alongside different types of political staff (e.g., the state secretaries) matter for their roles (Askim et al., 2017; Christiansen et al., 2016). Yet, we know little about how ministerial advisers function in settings where bureaucracy is not autonomous but depends on the staffing decisions of governing elites.

The functional explanation of the rise of MAs presupposes neutrality and expertise in civil service recruitment. The link between low levels of politicization and the introduction of ministerial advisers is empirically well documented, but it seems to be based on a selection bias, as it draws heavily on the Westminster, continental (West) European, and the US systems. Consequently, civil service politicization is studied as an outcome of the activities and decisions of ministerial advisers.

In this paper, we take a reversed perspective. We seek to explore the variation in institutional settings within which MAs operate, constituted by other formal political appointees, and appointments into bureaucracy. We posit that the scope of other political appointments within the executive, and into bureaucracy, have a bearing on the characteristics of advisers and the type of advice they provide to ministers.

We contribute to the existing state of knowledge theoretically and empirically. We outline an analytical framework for testing the proposition that political responsiveness among political staff and/or formally neutral bureaucracy affects the roles and functions of ministerial advisers. We build a conceptual framework that distinguishes *formal political appointees (political staff)* from *appointments into bureaucracy (patronage)* to assess variation in politicization settings. The resulting four-fold theoretical typology is then empirically tested in eleven understudied countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

Specifically, we explore two issues. Firstly, how solid is the line that separates MAs from bureaucrats in the ministerial executive? Are there formal and functional differences between the former and the latter that would lead to their different functions and roles? Secondly, what are the shared characteristics of MAs operating within four politicization settings of the typology? The roles of MAs are often investigated in the framework that stresses the need for bigger responsiveness of meritocratic bureaucracies to their political masters. What about unconventional settings in which political responsiveness is already secured via other political staff and/or appointments into bureaucracy?

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Firstly, we present a brief overview of the state of the art on the roles and characteristics of MAs and review the concepts of politicization and

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political appointments to construct a new typology. Secondly, we introduce our empirical cases and document variation in their institutional settings. Thirdly, we assess how different types of politicization settings interact with the characteristics and roles of MAs. We conclude by discussing the contribution this article makes, as well as the implications of our findings for future research.

2 | MINISTERIAL ADVISERS: POLITICAL AND POLICY ROLES

We subscribe to a classic definition of MAs as people "appointed to serve an individual minister, recruited on political criteria, in a position that is temporary" (Hustedt et al., 2017, p. 300). As we discuss below, they may or may not coexist with other political staff at the ministries. However, most literature on MAs tacitly assumes that advisers face permanent meritocratic bureaucracy, whose tenure is independent of their political superiors. Unlike advisers, who leave their posts with the ministers who appoint them, such bureaucracy remains intact.

This assumption then frames theoretical explanations of the rise and functions of MAs. The dominant account uses a functionalist logic: Advisers are deployed by ministers to make bureaucracies more politically responsive to their priorities. The bureaucracy is perceived as unable or unwilling to serve the needs of politicians in the executive branch. MAs are thus needed to secure political responsiveness.

The political responsiveness category may cover several tasks, including alerting MAs' political superiors to political risks, communicating with the media, and shaping the public image of their bosses. MAs also offer ministers tactical political advice, for example, how to push a policy through and get credit for it, or how to tackle political opponents (Christiansen et al., 2016; Craft, 2015; Ebinger et al., 2019). Strategic communication in the context of the mediatization of politics has become an important part of MAs' roles (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2020). In coalition governments, the MAs may be crucial in facilitating inter-party control and cooperation, acting as watchdogs, or even spies on behalf of their parties (Askim et al., 2018). Literature also investigates whether MAs threaten bureaucratic impartiality and interfere with the tasks and roles of bureaucracy (Christiansen et al., 2016; Ebinger et al., 2019; Hustedt et al., 2017).

Emphasis on political responsiveness naturally raises the question of to whom advisers are responsive: Whether to the individual ministers who appoint them or to the party that nominated the ministers. Some MAs are "predominantly appointed thanks to party political affiliation" (Connaughton, 2015, p. 39), while others have strong personal ties to their ministers. Either way, we witness the rise of 'partisan policy professionals' (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2020, p. 3), that is, ministerial advisers who affect policies but are not accountable for their actions to the public.

The substantive aspects of policy-related activities of MAs integrate rational, evidence-based policymaking and substantive expertise, including agenda setting, policy development and policy implementation, as the core policy-related roles of MAs (Connaughton, 2010; Maley, 2015). Some authors scrutinize how advisers and bureaucracy interact in generating innovative policy ideas (Bach & Wegrich, 2020). Others show how MAs play a strategic role in the policy process, such as in vertical and horizontal policymaking coordination (Craft, 2015; Maley, 2015) and in managing networks and stakeholders (Gouglas, 2015; Maley, 2015).

The exploration of the activities of MAs resulted in several typologies of advisory roles. Connaughton (2010, 2015) identified four types of MAs roughly subdivided according to politico-tactical and substantive policy domains: expert, partisan, coordinator, and minder. Another typology (Maley, 2011, 2015) elaborates policymaking activities of MAs within three

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arenas: working with the department, other ministers (within the political executive), and stakeholders. The engagement of MAs in various roles has been tested in several settings across administrative traditions (Craft & Halligan, 2020; Gouglas et al., 2017).

The literature also recognizes that MAs' roles need to be understood within a broader setting of executive actors. Such actors vary in levels of seniority, number, and types and often are lumped together, alongside MAs, under the label "political staff". Hence, various authors assess the bargains and relationships of MAs with state secretaries (cross-partisan appointees, see Askim et al., 2018), permanent secretaries (Christiansen et al., 2016), political civil servants (Ebinger et al., 2019) and within ministerial cabinets (Gouglas et al., 2017). Political staff's rank and title (e.g., state secretary vs. political adviser) matter: Higher rank usually means one exercises more power (Askim et al., 2017). The formal position of MAs in the ministerial hierarchy and an explicit distribution of power (Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2017) effects how strong MAs are in executing roles vis-a-vis other actors. Clear formal differentiation between MAs and other political staff may ensure cooperation and mutual respect, whereas overlapping competencies may cause rivalry (De Visscher & Salomonsen, 2013). In cases where MAs come from the ranks of civil servants who become 'temporary partisans' and move back after the termination of their advisory mandate, transparent rules also reduce value conflict (Maley, 2017).

The academic discussion does not exhaust the intra-executive context that shapes the activities of MAs. We see two main gaps in the literature. Firstly, existing accounts offer little guidance for understanding the cases where MAs face bureaucracy that is not merit-based. For example, bureaucrats may be de facto political appointees in de jure meritocratic civil service regimes, as in many countries of Latin America (Panizza et al., 2022) and Central and Eastern Europe (Meyer-Sahling & Toth, 2020). When ministers fire and hire ordinary bureaucratic personnel, bureaucracies are, in fact, responsive to governing elites. That, in turn, has consequences for interactions between MAs and bureaucracy.

Secondly, as the presence (or absence) of high-ranking political staff affects MAs' functions and responsibilities, we need to consider their mutual interactions in a more systematic manner. What is needed is a framework that is more flexible and thus able to incorporate a greater variation in the coexistence of MAs and other political staff. Thus, for this article, MAs narrowly denote remunerated political employees with an officially acknowledged advisory status appointed by ministers. This term excludes other political staff at the ministries, such as the state secretary, permanent secretary, PR/communication officer, or political civil servants. The present contribution attempts to reflect variation in the character of the bureaucracy and the coexistence of MAs and other political staff. Taking ministerial advisers as the unit of analysis, we consider them in a comparative framework comprising various institutional settings: with or without other political staff and with or without meritocratic bureaucracy.

3 | RETHINKING POLITICIZATION SETTINGS

Before introducing our heuristic typology of politicization settings, we need to turn to the concept of politicization. The literature sees politicization primarily as a result of the existence and activities of advisers.

The first stream of literature sees politicization in the emergence of MAs (and other political staff) but also as a direct consequence of their presence (Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2014; Shaw and Eichbaum, 2018). Researchers focus on political appointments: The very existence of MAs brings about politicization, as it magnifies the conflict between "responsibility and responsiveness"

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(Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2014). This type of politicization does not lead to gaps between formal rules and informal practices. Rather, new political positions in the ministerial hierarchy are created, or vacant posts are filled. Numerous studies document the growth of political posts, including MAs, across administrative traditions (Askim et al., 2021; Hustedt et al., 2017; Silva, 2017). Ministers use their discretion to hire or promote individuals who are politically loyal and may have a track record of service in the public sector (Dahlström 2009; Maley, 2017; Bach & Veit, 2018).

The second line of works relates politicization to the change in behavior of bureaucracy either in response to activities of MAs and other political staff or independently of them (Christiansen et al., 2016; Salomonsen et al., 2016). In a seminal work on the topic, Eichbaum and Shaw (2008) introduce the concept of administrative politicization. It highlights how the activities of MAs constrain civil servants in their effort to provide ministers with free, unbiased, and honest policy advice. Relatedly, the bureaucracy itself may become politically sensitized and actively engaged in providing political advice. The most distinctive feature of this "functional" politicization is its endogenous nature: it "bubbles up from within the civil service" (Shaw & Eichbaum, 2020, p. 843; see also Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2014; Van Dorp, 2022) because it is civil servants themselves who change their behavior. However, Salomonsen et al. (2016) note that some became engaged in strategic political communication due to their awareness of increased mediatization rather than being prompted by political staff. Alternative accounts maintain that many political appointees and/or the introduction of ministerial advisers may decrease the politicization of meritocratic bureaucracy (Christiansen et al., 2016; Shaw & Eichbaum, 2020) because civil servants are not expected to supply political competency.

These understandings of the concept of politicization, however, have limited use if we want to explore settings without meritocratic bureaucracy. Eichbaum and Shaw (2008: 341) note that the notion of politicization that focuses on MAs' appointments often assumes that ministerial discretionary powers to appoint "at-will" do not normally go below the highest levels of the administrative hierarchy. That is, however, an empirical statement that does not reflect other types of intra-administrative settings. We need to return to, and expand on, the original concept of politicization that centers on appointments and also includes direct politicization of bureaucracy (Peters, 2013; Peters & Pierre, 2004), as seen in many countries of Latin America and Central and Eastern Europe. Otherwise, we omit situations where appointments into nominally meritocratic bureaucracy are a mere *façade* for fully discretionary at-will appointments. Governing elites may either fire and hire regular civil servants because they have legal powers to do so or can bend, break, or ignore existing regulations. This type of politicization is challenging to measure, but studies have estimated its extent by expert surveys (Kopecký et al., 2016; Cooper, 2021), by frequency of organizational changes (Zankina, 2017), or by measuring administrative turnover rates (Staronova & Rybář, 2021). We would thus embrace Peters and Pierre's (2004:2) classic definition of politicization as a substitution of political criteria for merit-based criteria in the selection of the public service. That definition is especially pertinent in distinguishing merit and non-merit bureaucracies. Thus, to map out the settings of politicization in which MAs operate, we propose to differentiate between *formal political appointments* and *appointments into bureaucracy*.

Formal political appointments are politically recruited actors who come and go with governments. These appointments are legal and legitimate; the existing regulations typically foresee that some positions in the state administration hierarchy are filled on political criteria. These appointments comprise posts just around/below the ministers and create the nexus between politics and administration. They may include political staff around the ministerial office (such

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TABLE 1 Typology of politicization settings

Formal political appointments		Appointments into bureaucracy	
		LOW meritocratic bureaucracy	HIGH discretionary appointments
	LOW	Type I	Type IV
	HIGH	Type III	Type II

Source: Authors.

as ministerial Cabinets), cross-partisan appointees (such as state secretaries), and/or chiefs of administration. Formal political appointments are to ensure that key decision-making posts are staffed by officials whose preferences and priorities are similar to those of their superiors: filled by cross-partisans as part of coalition bargains (Askim et al., 2018), selected by the ministers and/or their parties (Connaughton, 2015), or appointed as the ministerial Cabinet (Gouglas et al., 2017).

In contrast, *appointments into bureaucracy* refer to the ability of political elites to shape the composition of the civil service. Formal merit criteria in selecting civil servants may exist, but the appointment decisions rest with political executives rather than an autonomous administrative body. Thus, political executives have wide powers of firing and hiring the nominally merit-based bureaucracy by manipulating, bypassing, or ignoring civil service laws. They can thus achieve desired levels of penetration and turnover within the ministerial administrative hierarchy.

The existing literature often treats these two dimensions as a single phenomenon, typically under the label "patronage" (Kopecký et al., 2016; Panizza et al., 2022). Patronage appointments often refer to turnover among senior civil servants who often are de jure political appointees, such as political civil servants in Germany (Bach & Veit, 2018) or political appointees in the US (Waterman & Ouyang, 2020). At the same time, patronage appointments also refer to the malpractice of penetrating bureaucracy at the discretion of a politician, rarely seen in West European or Westminster countries.

Across administrative systems, variation exists in both the extent of formal political appointments and appointments into bureaucracy. By keeping the two dimensions analytically separate and combining them into a typology, we can construct four different settings of politicization (Table 1). We expect each setting (type) to produce different institutional incentives for how MAs (our unit of analysis) operate.

Type I setting is characterized by the low level of political appointments into meritocratic bureaucracy and by the low presence of political staff. This is a classic Western three-element institutional setup where MAs provide flexible combinations of political and policy advice. Existing literature suggests that such intra-administrative interactions generate MAs as a distinct category of actors. Various governing frameworks and formal rules (Maley, 2017) further strengthen mutually exclusive identities between civil servants and advisers. The literature also suggests an increase over time in the number of MAs (Hustedt et al., 2017; Shaw and Eichbaum, 2018).

Type II captures an "unconventional setting" with a high level of appointments into bureaucracy, thus violating the merit criterion. Bureaucrats are made politically responsive by their selection and de-selection during the governmental (or ministerial) change. At the same time, there is a high level of formal political appointees. Limited exploration of such settings suggests that the increase in MAs is not observed, and the regime around MAs is often informal (Krajňák et al., 2020; Pshizova, 2015).

Type III politicization setting is where appointments to regular bureaucracy are low, but the degree of formal political appointments is high. This type becomes increasingly prominent in studies exploring MAs' relative power. For example, Askim et al. (2018) find that interactions

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between MAs and other political staff are affected by their relative power resources, chiefly by their standing in the hierarchy.

Finally, Type IV politicization setting is where the extent of formal political appointments is low, but the level of appointments into regular bureaucracy is high. We are not aware of any recent academic exploration of such a setting. The absence of formal political appointments may suggest that MAs are involved in political tasks. Yet, party control over permanent bureaucracy may lead to various interactions between MAs and bureaucracy.

4 | RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA

Our study focuses on MAs in eleven countries of Central and Eastern Europe, namely Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Two selection criteria were chosen: All cases had to be part of the Soviet-dominated Communist bloc before 1989, and all of them had to join the EU in the Eastern enlargement wave of 2004/2007/2013.

To investigate the link between the type of politicization setting and characteristics of MAs, the present study utilizes a sequential multi-method approach. In most of our cases, the data on MAs are non-existing and direct access to MAs is extremely difficult (see below). Hence, to explore the characteristics of MAs, we opted to conduct an expert survey (February to May 2021) with leading national experts from academia and think tanks who have studied MAs. We distributed our questionnaire among 340 experts on public administration and politics. All respondents claimed direct experience with the work of MAs in their country in the past 5 years. We received 143 fully completed questionnaires (response rate of 42.1%). The number of responses varied between seven (Hungary) and twenty-three (Latvia), with just two countries with less than ten respondents (Hungary and Poland).

To interpret and further explore the results of the expert survey, we subsequently conducted 31 semi-structured interviews (May to November 2021). All interviews were conducted by authors online (via Microsoft Teams) and recorded. Experts were asked to reflect on MAs' characteristics in the past decade (2010–2020). Expert interview data reached saturation despite a limited number of interviews (typically three per country).

As explained above, our typology of politicization settings resulted from a combination of two variables: appointments into bureaucracy and formal political appointments. To operationalize the former, we use expert survey data from the Quality of Government Survey (Nistotskaya et al., 2021). Specifically, we use the variable "patronage" that reflects experts' answers to the question, "To what extent are appointments to bureaucratic positions in central government based on the political and/or personal connections of the applicant?" We then used a simple dichotomy of low versus high levels of appointments into bureaucracy, with value 0 as a cutting point (see Figure 1).

Data on the second dimension (*formal political appointments)* were retrieved from legal documents and country reports and were also consulted in the expert interviews. Again, a simple dichotomy of low versus high number of appointments was used. If less than two formal political appointees per ministry existed, the variable was classified as "low"; two or more formal political appointees counted as "high". *Formal political appointments* do not exist in Estonia and Latvia and are limited to one post per ministry in Hungary. All the other cases have a "high" level of such appointments. The distribution of these posts (typically up to five in each ministry) is decided during government formation. It often functions as a side payment to parties that did not get their preferred portfolios. In most cases, these state secretaries are appointed collectively

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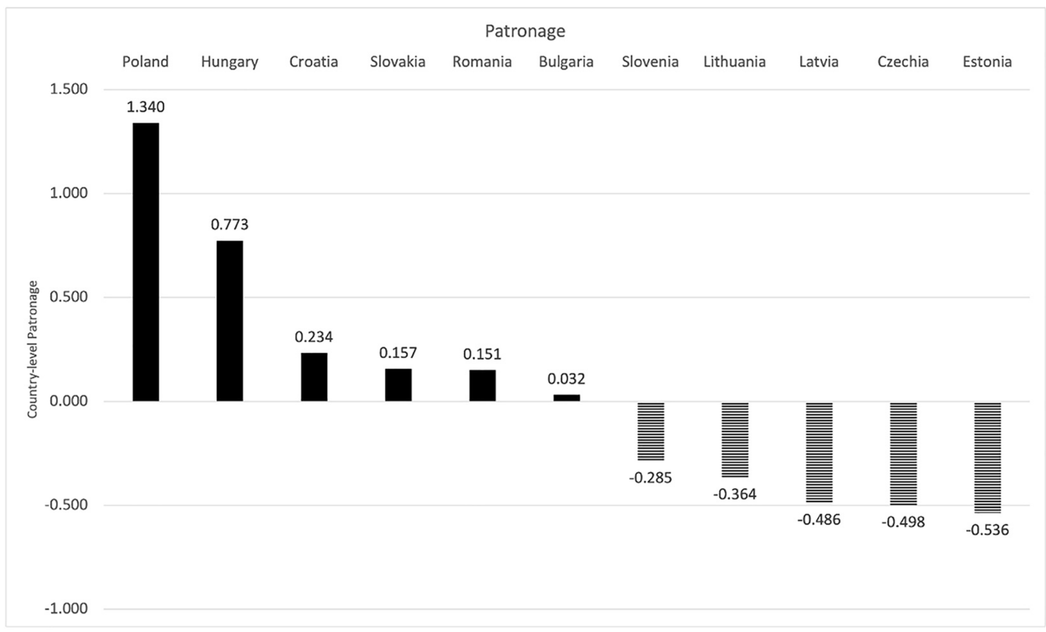

FIGURE 1 Political appointments into bureaucracies. *Source*: Data from the quality of government survey (Nistotskaya et al., 2021).

by the cabinet (Croatia, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia) or appointed by the prime minister (Poland and Bulgaria), following the binding deals among the coalition partners. Besides these high-profile political appointees, ministers in these countries appoint a limited number of political staff whose task is to run the ministry (human resources, administrative affairs, etc.) in Bulgaria, Czechia, Croatia, Lithuania, Slovakia, and Slovenia, further adding to a high number of formal political appointments.

In a nutshell, Type I politicization setting can be found in Estonia and Latvia; Type II politicization setting exists in Bulgaria, Croatia, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia; Type III politicization setting exists in Czechia, Lithuania, and Slovenia; and Type IV in Hungary. To investigate whether a type of setting corresponds to shared characteristics of MAs, we now turn to the empirical results of our research. We discuss the expert survey results and interpret them with additional insights from the expert interviews.

5 | MINISTERIAL ADVISERS IN VARIOUS POLITICIZATION SETTINGS: RESULTS

We begin with the issue of formal and functional differentiation between MAs and bureaucracy across the four politicization settings. Publicly available information on executive actors encourages them to observe the formal rules because it increases effective scrutiny of their actions. Similarly, the existence and observation (or otherwise) of rules regulating the movement of staff between civil service and advisory posts affects the balance between responsiveness and neutral competence in public administration (Maley, 2017).

In the expert survey, we asked about the availability of public information on advisers (names, qualifications, and contact details). The results show important differences across politicization settings (Figure 2). The lack of information about MAs is most acute in the country within a *Type*

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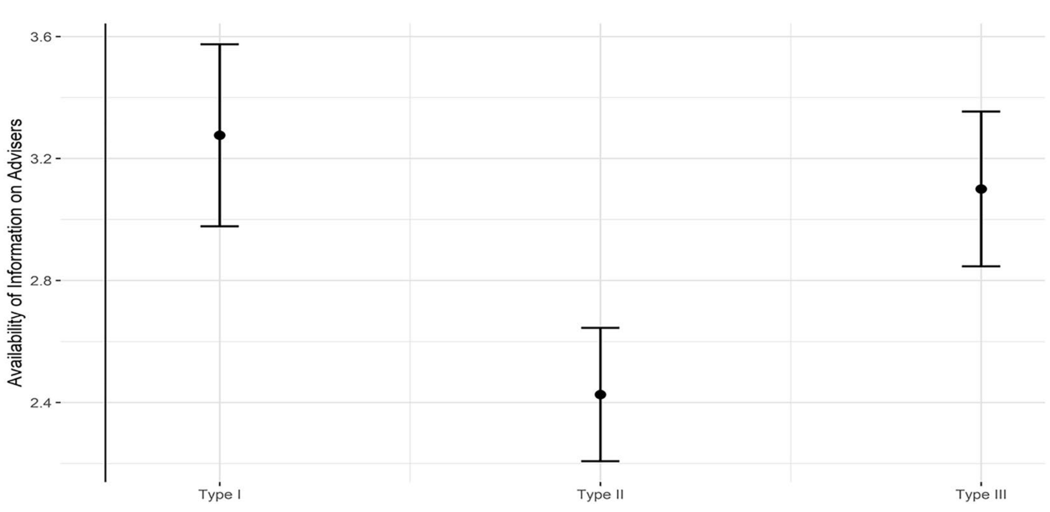

FIGURE 2 Availability of Information on Ministerial advisers (MAs). *Note* 1: F (2, 120) = 13, $p < 0.001$. *Note* 2: A simple ANOVA test did not show significantly different averages among the four types. However, we rerun the test without data on Hungary, and the results indicate statistically significant differences. *Source*: Expert survey conducted by the authors.

IV setting, closely followed by *Type II*. In contrast, countries within *the Type I setting* display the highest public availability of information on MAs, with the *Type IV* countries being placed in between.

During the interviews, we further discussed formal rules and informal practices regarding the permeability of the line dividing the MAs and civil servants. Information about MAs in *Type I setting* is proactively provided: Their names, contact details, essential qualifications, and formal responsibilities are published on the websites of ministries. In Latvia, the declarations of income of MAs are publicly available, and a similar arrangement exists in Estonia. The principles of open government are anchored in several transparency regulations, including Free Access to Information laws. Estonia and Latvia adhere to high standards of administrative transparency and openness and introduced codes of conduct for advisors. Our respondents agree that the push for transparency predates the EU accession and is further accelerated by businesses who perceive it as a sign of higher efficiency (LV-01, LV-02, EE-01).

In contrast, the authorities in countries within *Type II setting* do not proactively provide information about MAs. Their governments are highly restrictive in applying General Data Protection Regulation, and Free Access to Information (FOIA) requests. FOIAs are frequently denied, or information provided is incomplete (see also Krajňák et al., 2020). The culture of secrecy dominates in Hungary (*Type IV setting*). As in Croatia, Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia (*Type II*), information requests are often rejected on formal grounds, the information provided is incomplete or postponed, and legal exceptions and loopholes are explored to make access to official documents complicated (HU-03). Information on MAs in *Type III* setting is made public, but primarily because of the efforts of media, opposition parliamentarians, and watchdogs who utilize FOIA. They are subsequently medialized, and thus lists of MAs become available for public scrutiny, particularly in Czechia and Slovenia (SL-03, CZ-03). In Lithuania, a central registry of MAs exists but is incomplete or difficult to navigate, making the identification of formal advisers time-consuming.

Concerning the question of how *types of politicization settings* relate to the roles of advisers, our expert survey contains data about two broad categories of advice: 1. 'substantive' policy advice

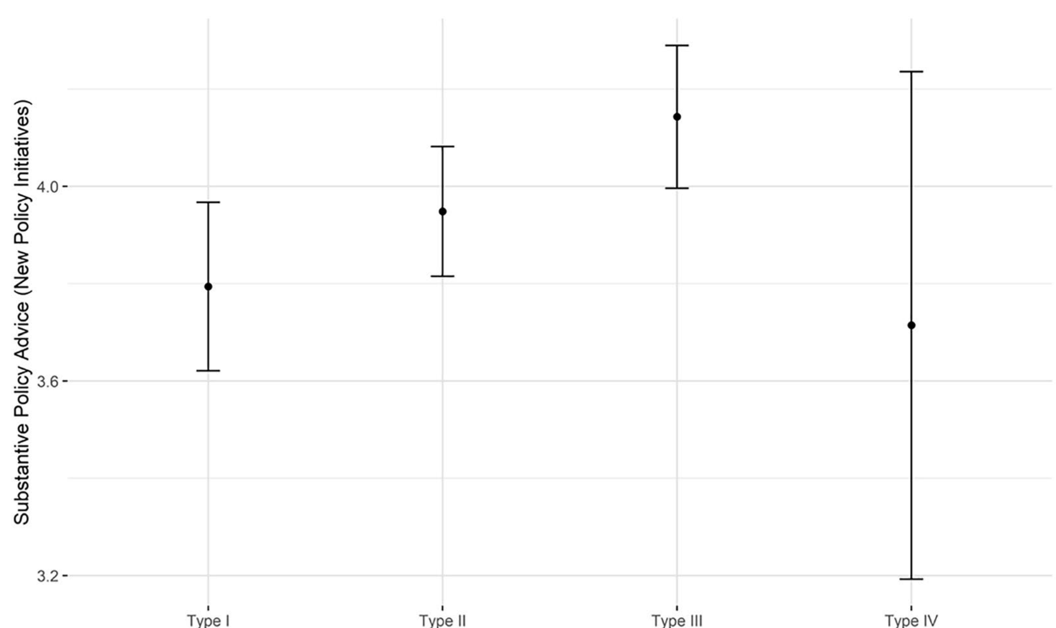

FIGURE 3 Substantive policy advice (New Policy Initiatives) by Ministerial advisers (MAs). *Source*: Expert survey conducted by the authors.

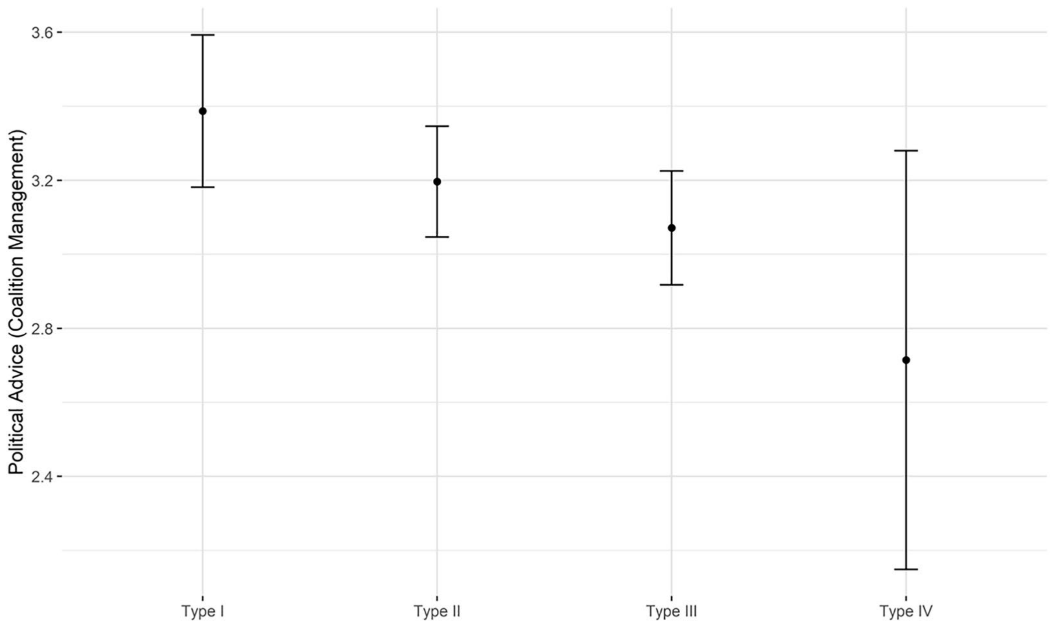

FIGURE 4 Political advice (Involvement in Coalition Management) by Ministerial advisers (MAs). *Source*: Expert survey conducted by the authors.

(Figure 3) and 2. "political" advice (Figure 4). Four issues stand out (and we further explore them below). Firstly, comparatively speaking, MAs in *Type IV setting* play the least significant roles in both policy and political roles. Secondly, MAs in *Type I setting* (Estonia and Latvia) provide the least substantive advice but are most intensely involved in providing political advice. Senior civil

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servants there have highly technocratic attitudes (Raudla et al., 2021), which is consistent with them supplying limited political advice. This, in turn, may create demand for MAs with explicit political skills and roles. Thirdly, MAs in *Type III setting*, who coexist with other formal political appointees, are much less involved in providing political advice but are strongly involved in substantive policymaking. Finally, MAs in *Type II setting* display the medium levels of both political and policy advice. Their activities are constrained by the context, that is, by the high relevance of high-profile *formal political appointees* and by the high level of *appointments into bureaucracy*. The average scores in *Type II* cases place them between *Type I* (Estonia and Latvia) and *Type III* (Czechia, Lithuania, and Slovenia) MAs.

The ANOVA test of expert survey data on political and policy roles shows that the differences between the four groups of countries do not pass conventional levels of statistical significance. However, they indicate a tendency that we further explore in the expert semi-structured interviews. In the following sections, we discuss and interpret the interview data to substantiate some of our preliminary interpretations regarding advisory roles. We demonstrate that each *type of politicization setting* seems to lead to specific characteristics of advisers.

5.1 | Autonomous MAs: Estonia and Latvia

> "Political broilers without working experience outside the political system" (EE-2).

An effort has been made in Estonia and Latvia to formalize the boundaries between MAs and ministerial bureaucracy. In Latvia, a code of conduct was adopted in 2020, following the Council of Europe GRECO Committee's recommendation that relations between ministerial advisers and civil servants be regulated (LV-01). The code enumerates the tasks of advisers that include policy analysis, issue identification, and communication with society, among others (Code of Conduct). The Estonian government also introduced guidelines for ministerial advisers that contain measures of transparency, openness, and corruption prevention (EE-03). Although there is no formal cap, budgetary constraints keep the number of advisers appointed to each ministry in both Estonia and Latvia at 3 to 6.

MAs' involvement in providing substantive policy advice appears to be relatively less pronounced. Specialized and highly technocratic civil servants seem to be responsive to the preferences of elected officials (EE-02), leading to less demand for policy expertise among MAs. Still, policy advice does feature among the tasks performed by some MAs (EE-02, EE-03, LV-01, LV-02). If present, this category of advisers consists of established professionals coming from the private sector and academia. Former parliamentarians and even cabinet members occasionally appear too. They work "like a backup team for the ministers to ensure they are informed about everything happening in their field" (LV-01). Most governing political parties do not have enough policy experts. They are, therefore, keen on hiring experts with no direct links to parties but who are willing to work for a politician (EE-01, EE-03). Overall, these advisers function as "an alternative [source of] knowledge and capacity" (LV-02), a second opinion to the one provided by civil servants. Although our respondents acknowledge that advisers may be destructive to the status quo at the ministries, civil servants are said to understand that "it is in their interest to engage with advisers, to make them understand and adapt to the system, and help them learn fast" (EE-01).

Openly political roles dominate. Young party activists with little experience are hired to work as personal assistants to ministers (EE-01, EE-03, LV-01, LV-02). These junior "umbrella holders" advisers lack extensive professional experience (EE-01) but often are essential for

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coordinating and liaising with the ministers' party headquarters, its parliamentary caucus, and other political actors. They provide an essential connection that helps the coalition machinery to reach agreements. Even though these appointees are partisans, it is usually the ministers themselves, rather than their parties at large, who decides whom to take in, at times with the silent approval of the party leadership (EE-01, LV-01). In addition, some of these MAs are experts in public relations. They specialize in political communication and social media presence on behalf of the minister and coexist with the existing public relations units at each ministry.

In sum, the Type I politicization setting seems to lead to what might be called autonomous MAs: They are directly recognizable, distinct from civil servants, and subject to transparent public scrutiny. Autonomous MAs face technocratic bureaucracy with a low level of appointments by ministers but do not have to deal with other high-profile formal political appointees. Consequently, their participation in proposing new policies is comparatively less pronounced. Instead, they take on distinctively political tasks, namely political advice in coalition politics and political communication.

5.2 | Fuzzy MAs: Bulgaria, Croatia, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia

"A group of trustees more than anything else" (PL-01).

In Type II politicization settings, a lack of clear formal rules separating MAs from bureaucracy spills over to a lack of functional differentiation between the two groups of factors. For example, when advisers were first introduced in Croatia, they could have stayed in civil service after the mandates of their ministers expired. This was contested by bureaucracy, and the Constitutional Court decided that advisors' posts, similarly to those of civil servants, had to be filled in open competition. Even though the legislation was later changed, and advisers now leave with their ministers, open calls for advisory positions still formally exist (CR-01). As one expert commented, "these rules are just rituals; they are not real" (CR-02). In Slovakia, the borderline between regular civil servants and MAs is even more porous: People advising ministers can get either formal advisory posts or a position in the bureaucracy, depending on budgetary constraints and the timing of their hiring (SK-01, SK-02). Some may enter ministerial bureaucracy formally as advisers and continue as civil servants without formal change of their tasks and responsibilities. Similar arrangements exist in Poland (PL-02).

Roles of MAs seem to be rather heterogeneous and fragmented both across and within the countries. If regulation exists, it is intentionally ambiguous. Substantive policy advice is viewed as anomalous, as "substantive policymaking is typically run by [politicized] bureaucracy" (BG-02, BG-03, RO-02). At the same time, some advisers with substantive expertise may work for several successive government ministers (even nominated by different political parties) if their political masters perceive them as unbiased, reliable, and experienced (RO-01, PL-02, SK-01). This effectively makes them functional equivalents of meritocratic bureaucracy, further blurring the line between the two groups of administrative actors. In addition, MAs coexist and interact with formal political appointees (primarily state secretaries) who are often politically superior and engage in high-level coalition bargaining with nominees of other governing parties. That, too, has an impact on the roles of MAs. Taken together, MAs' policy and political advice are often ad hoc or supplied intermittently, on an "as-needed" basis. Thus, the functional separation of MAs as specific actors clearly distinguishable from other politically responsive players is incomplete.

MAs are recruited in multiple environments, but personal networks of ministers are the most common, such as former colleagues and schoolmates. As one of the interviewees stated, "it is

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more about psychology to be able to talk directly about what happened in the meetings and not to worry about any leakage to media" (PL-02). Thus, personal loyalty to ministers features prominently in all five countries. Although party headquarters may sometimes recommend a few advisors, they are exclusively appointed by the minister. In cases where advisers are partisan (Poland, Romania, Slovakia), the minister is usually a non-party technocrat, and the MAs role is "to navigate and control the minister" (PL-02). Several respected academics have accepted advisory positions in all five countries, as advisers' academic background symbolically signals to the public "non-corruption and expertise of the ministers who appointed them" (BG-03). Openly party-political roles predominate in Croatia, with advisers actively searching for political traps endangering the public image of ministers, ensuring public acceptance of ministerial decisions, and actively engaging in negotiations between political parties controlling government ministries (CR-01). Polish MAs are also involved in intra-coalition negotiations over government outputs (PL-03).

Our respondents in all five countries pointed out the existence of a sizeable group of advisers who provide advice informally and hence remain invisible. All respondents agreed that they are influential and powerful. Their interaction with bureaucracy is limited at most. Invisible advisers constitute a highly heterogeneous group of actors with mixed motivations and functions. Some of them act in a pro-bono capacity, others receive only symbolic pay, yet others are renumerated like regular employees or even in a corrupt way, being put "where big money is [distributed]" (BG-01). Invisible advisers may run private consultancy companies and provide advice simultaneously to several ministers. The most significant seem to be those who act in a de facto full-time capacity but do not appear in any public register, often without formal contracts with the ministries they work for. As put by one interviewee, some "do it for money (contracts), others for personal reasons, power reasons, ego reasons, whatever" (RO-03). While some invisible advisers do provide substantive advice and expertise, all our interviewees emphasized that lack of regulation and transparency is a breeding ground for shady deals, backroom transactions, and potentially corrupt behavior.

All in all, the Type II politicization setting appears to lead to fuzzy MAs. One can see a fragmentation of advisory roles because other politically appointed actors carry out both political tasks and work on substantive policy issues. This fuzziness is further strengthened by a wide gap between formal regulations and informal practices that govern the ministerial bureaucracy, further contributing to the heterogeneity of the status of ministerial advisers.

5.3 | Negotiated MAs: Czechia, Lithuania, and Slovenia

> "MAs form a parallel structure that is more important than top civil servants, giving tasks to bureaucracy on substantive issues without formal accountability". (CZ-01).

In the countries that fit *the Type III setting*, formal separation of bureaucracy and MAs is incomplete, although more advanced than in the case of fuzzy MAs. Some interviewees even observe significant ingroup-outgroup thinking: Civil servants believe to possess superior procedural knowledge and perceive advisers as intruders, while the MAs tend to see the bureaucracy as static and overregulated to meet the demands of dynamic policymaking (CZ-02, CZ-03). In Slovenia, some advisers are appointed from among the civil servants, who return to civil service after the end of their mandate. Similarly, there is a tendency for MAs, towards the end of their mandate, to join civil service at mid-level posts to stay below the radar when the government changes (SL-03).

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Many respondents were aware of the possible loopholes MAs use not to appear on official lists of advisers (CZ-3, LT-2).

Substantive policymaking seems to be the most important role of MAs. Respondents in all three countries regard them as top professionals and specialists within their fields, able to provide competent advice. In Lithuania, "it is the highest responsibility of the advisers to be active in policymaking, to bring up new suggestions and find new solutions". (LT-01). In Czechia, MAs are also highly qualified in specific policies. Czech MAs also actively search for "political mines" in the official documents produced by bureaucracy or suggested by other coalition parties (CZ-01, CZ-02), be it policy proposals that contradict the minister's ideology or documents that may be harmful to their reputation (CZ-03). Slovenian MAs formally manage working groups of civil servants (SL-2) when preparing new policy initiatives.

In contrast, advisers are not very involved in political activities that include coalition management and communication with other coalition parties. Such explicitly political tasks are usually performed by formal political appointees (LT-2, CZ-1, SL-1). In some cases, advisers are tasked with protecting the public image of their ministers: In Lithuania, ministers have their PR/media advisers despite the existence of an official PR unit at each ministry (LT-03). In Slovenia, many MAs are former journalists (SL-03). In the Czech case, MAs prefer not to be directly "associated with [coalition] politics" (SL-02, CZ-02) when working for ministers. Being advisers represent a potential reputation problem for their professional careers (CZ-02, CZ-03).

Overall, the number of MAs has not increased since the advisory posts were introduced in all three countries (CZ-01, SL-01, LT-03), with ministries employing 4–5 MAs. Recruitment practices reveal that MAs' links to parties are negligible in all three countries, and few MAs pursue political careers (CZ-02, LT-01, SL-01). Instead, a personal, professional network of ministers is a key pool from which MAs are recruited (LT-03, CZ-03, SL-02).

Countries in *the Type III setting* are thus associated with what we would call negotiated MAs. As other formal political appointees take over the high-level political tasks, coalition management does not feature strongly among MAs' roles. Instead, MAs are involved in a bargaining process with senior civil servants over control of the policymaking process: the roles and powers are not a priori defined but result from complex negotiations that often involve ministerial discretion.

5.4 | Peripheral MAs (Hungary)

> "The system is based on informal arrangements and personal engagements. Only then loyalty becomes important" (HU-3).

Hungary is the only country where advisers operate in the Type IV politicization setting. The formal and functional separation of MAs from bureaucracy is non-existing. Our interviewees unanimously pointed out that, since 2010, frequent organizational changes accompanied by a proliferation of legal documents related to civil service, made the entire system deliberately confusing and untransparent (HU-1, HU-2, HU-3). The distinction between civil servants and MAs is "meaningless, and even the legal definitions do not provide clues, and functional separation is even less obvious" (HU-1). The Civil Service Code has been amended numerous times to the point that "it ceased to exist as a norm functionally different from the Labor Code" (HU-2).

The degree of incongruence between formal and informal practices is more general, however: Formal policy domains of individual ministries overlap or are not binding, as more influential ministers may initiate legislation in areas outside their formal reach (HU-01). Even the most senior bureaucrats are at times caught by surprise to see that government proposes and the

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parliament passes legislative proposals from their policy domains that have not been discussed at the ministries. (HU-03). The central government, including the ministers themselves, is perhaps best described as primarily involved with policy implementation, not policy initiation or agenda-setting (HU-02, HU-03). The real center of decision-making and actual policymaking seems to rest in an informal structure within and beyond the ministerial administration, centered around the party leader and his close associates. Frequent organizational and legislative changes to the ministerial structure generate insecurity and incentives to push most of the decisions to the highest possible level to avoid responsibility (HU-01). The system is sufficiently fragmented to allow inputs from within the administration and state-financed organizations that provide limited advice. However, the advice concentrates mostly on how to best sell the legislative products to the public, based on analyses of opinion surveys and focus group data (HU-02). Policy expertise, in the conventional sense, is of limited supply and demand. Advisory structures, within and without ministerial administration, primarily provide input on what works politically, not policy-wise.

Hence, MAs in this type of politicization setting have a peripheral status, reflected by their modest involvement in political management and substantive policymaking. Our findings indicate that substantive policymaking often takes place outside the ministries, with an active role of invisible advisers. A low level of transparency further deepens the gap between formal rules and informal practice. Peripheral MAs seem to dominate this type of setting.

However, our conclusions are drawn from observing a single country. It is also the country where factors beyond the civil service have the most significant impact, not just on the characteristics of MAs but on broader conditions of politico-administrative interactions. More research is required to establish whether similar dynamics exist in other comparable politicization settings.

6 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Building on a traditional - and broader - understanding of politicization which focuses on appointments (Panizza et al., 2022; Peters & Pierre, 2004; Staronova & Rybář, 2021), this article attempted to integrate the mainstream literature on the roles of advisers, with the study of MAs who encounter highly politicized bureaucracies. While the former mostly take for granted that bureaucracies are permanent and merit-based, we take it as a variable that changes across administrative systems. Furthermore, we also consider the variable coexistence of MAs with other political staff active in the ministries.

Our findings attest to the importance of a broader institutional context of politicization: They show that each type of 'politicization setting' corresponds to a distinctive set of characteristics of MAs. Thus, to understand their roles, scholars should consider both the level of penetration of partisan appointments into bureaucracies and the diversity of political appointees. Our study showed that the four types of politicization settings produced four groups of MAs: autonomous, fuzzy, negotiated, and peripheral. The typology may serve as a useful heuristic tool to study cases across administrative systems.

The existence of unconventional settings where ministers directly appoint their loyalists into bureaucracy raises the question of why fuzzy and peripheral MAs exist in the first place. After all, the tasks and roles played by MAs are often easily taken up by bureaucrats. There is some evidence that fuzzy MAs play a distinct role in which the personal bond of trust to their ministers is central. Ministers may need close aides who provide unconditional support and backing, which is based on personal rather than partisan ties (but see also Panizza et al., 2022). This notion of trust may be difficult to grasp with conventional tools of political analysis. In a sense, it even

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goes back to pre-political and pre-modern, almost "tribal", bonds uninformed by formal-rational interactions. More research is needed, but it seems the provision of trust complements the repertoire of roles performed by Western European MAs.

In addition, media consultancy and "spin" feature among the roles of a part of MAs across types of politicization. The increasing importance of mediatization of politics, reflected in MAs' tasks to protect the image of ministers, is well documented (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2020; Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2017). Interestingly, the settings with peripheral and, to some extent, fuzzy advisers produce an additional twist of media-related advisory roles: Substantive policy proposals are tailor-made by advisers who probe public opinion to identify the most popular governmental initiatives. However, mediatization is not simply used to justify and sell public policies. Public preferences, mapped by the PR specialists, are the primary reason why some policies are launched.

In all CEE cases, we also identify invisible advisers. Acting in a full-time capacity, they wish to remain hidden from public scrutiny. They do not appear in publicly available records, even upon FOIA requests. Although their presence, impact, and motivations differ across countries, they remain a significant part of the executive environment. They seem to thrive especially alongside fuzzy and peripheral MAs. Given the nature of the phenomenon, a systematic exploration of invisible MAs is highly challenging. Some provide technical policy expertise in reforms but do not wish to be openly identified with what they would see as "corrupt politics". Others, arguably, remain invisible to profit from deals that involve untransparent or outright corrupt practices. They often act as an access point linking ministers with the interests outside public administration. There are cases when fuzzy MAs become invisible (and vice versa), but we lack data to assess the magnitude of such shifts. Nevertheless, invisible advisers present a risk to norms of accountability and impartiality and may be seen as a symptom of democratic erosion. There is also evidence that ministers recruit their MAs from their personal networks and not from the pool of candidates supplied by their parties. Many negotiated and fuzzy MAs are recruited in this manner. Future research will have to investigate whether this interacts with the incidence of invisible advisers and how it relates to MAs providing "trust" to the ministers.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest exists for all authors.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ORCID

Katarína Staroňová https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4581-4791
Marek Rybář https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5242-2895

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BG-01. 2021, June 15. Bulgarian academic.
BG-02. 2021, June 22. Bulgarian top civil servant.
BG-03. 2021, June 14. Bulgarian academic.
CR-01. 2021, June 3. Croatian academic and top civil servant.
CR-02. 2021, July 9. Croatian top civil servant.
CZ-01. 2021, June 18. Czech thinktank analyst.
CZ-02. 2021, June 16. Czech academic and former adviser.
CZ-03. 2021, June 21. Czech academic and former adviser.
EE-01. 2021, July 8. Estonian top civil servant and adviser.
EE-02. 2021, June 7. Estonian academic.
EE-03. 2021, June 15. Estonian academic and former adviser.
HU-01. 2021, May 20. Hungarian academic.
HU-02. 2021, May 22. Hungarian academic.
HU-03. 2022, March 25. Hungarian think tank leader.
LT-01. 2021, June 15. Lithuanian academic.
LT-02. 2021, June 8. Lithuanian top civil servant.
LT-03. 2021, June 2. Lithuanian academic.
LV-01. 2021, June 25. Latvian academic and former top civil servant.
LV-02. 2021, June 4. Latvian academic and adviser.
PL-01. 2021, June 11. Polish academic and former adviser.
PL-02. 2021, November 5. Polish academic and former adviser.
PL-03. 2021, October 31. Polish academic and former adviser.
RO-01. 2021, June 4. Romanian academic and adviser.
RO-02. 2021, May 21. Romanian academic.
RO-03. 2021, May 25. Romanian Academic and adviser.
SL-01. 2021, June 25. Slovenian academic.
SL-02. 2021, May 19. Slovenian academic and former adviser.
SL-03. 2021, May 20. Slovenian academic and adviser.
SK-01. 2020, November 25. Slovak academic and adviser.
SK-02. 2021, September 18. Slovak adviser.
SK-03. 2021, May 16, Slovak adviser.

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