

## Chapter 15: The Dynamics of Political Patronage in Central and East European Countries: Post-Accession Divergence<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This chapter examines the phenomenon of political patronage in eleven Central and East European countries, investigating its extent in central state administrations and public agencies. It categorizes countries into high, moderate, and low patronage groups, despite pre-accession reforms aimed at establishing meritocratic civil services. The post EU accession period saw some countries increasing formal political appointments while others maintained stricter merit-based systems, reflecting differing internal political dynamics and levels of commitment to depoliticization. It also explores the impact of historical legacies, party competition, and public administration reforms on illegal patronage practices into bureaucracy, and examines how informal norms persist, leading to a divergence from formal procedures and affecting governance quality and institutional accountability.

**Keywords:** Political patronage, Central and Eastern Europe, civil service reforms, public agencies, EU accession

### Introduction

Academic research indicates that, in comparison to other European countries, Central and East European (CEE) countries exhibit higher levels of politicization, which have even increased since their accession to the European Union (Meyer-Sahling and Veen, 2012; Kopecký et al., 2016; Bach et al., 2020). Nevertheless, CEE countries do not form a homogeneous group, as a variety of administrative paths have evolved since the end of the communist regime. Consequently, the range of types of political appointments in play and penetration within the ministries, agencies, and other public sector organizations differs significantly. Nevertheless, the institutional redesign, including questions regarding the clear division between political and administrative officials, remains a central theme. This is because most of the administrative systems of CEE (perhaps apart from the Baltic countries) remain open to large-scale interference from elected politicians.

Following the collapse of communism, countries in the Central and East European (CEE) region confronted the simultaneous challenges of democratization, marketization, and state-building (Elster, Offe, and Preusse 1998). One of the most significant hurdles was the lack of a professional, depoliticized civil service (CS) in public administration (PA).

In this chapter, the term CEE is used interchangeably with the term NMS, which stands for New Member States of the European Union. The countries included in the CEE region are Bulgaria,

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Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. On May 1, 2004, eight countries from the region were admitted to the European Union (EU). Two additional countries joined in 2007 and 2008 (Bulgaria and Romania), and one joined in 2014 (Croatia).

The rest of the chapter is organized as follows: Firstly, we examine the existing theoretical frameworks of patronage in CEE, with a particular focus on the impact of historical patterns of democratization and party competition on its prevalence. Subsequently, we discuss the formal framework, including the introduction and subsequent modification of legally protected civil service systems designed to safeguard against undue political interference. We then assess the extent and significance of illegal patronage appointments into bureaucracy within the executive branch and other sectors. The chapter concludes by summarizing key findings related to the underlying motivations driving patronage appointments, thereby elucidating the factors that perpetuate this practice in Central and Eastern Europe.

### **1. Historical Legacies and Party Politics as the Explanations of Patronage**

Although sharing many commonalities, particularly rooted in their communist past, the post-communist political transition, economic transformation, and accession to the European Union, the CEE countries exhibit considerable divergence in the manner in which their political elites engage in patronage practices. In some countries, patronage practices are relatively limited, confined to a relatively small subset of public posts. In other cases, the practice is pervasive and extends beyond central state administration to encompass numerous public and semi-public bodies.

The macro-institutional framework of party politics in the examined countries exhibits considerable uniformity. All of the countries are parliamentary systems with limited presidential powers, occasionally featuring directly elected presidents, and are characterized by multiparty systems. Croatia was an exception, although it did also choose to curtail presidential authority following the initial decade of post-communist transition. Consequently, the concentration of national-level patronage power is observed in the central governments and the parties that control them. Only a select few countries, such as the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovenia, managed to establish relatively stable party systems early on. These systems were characterized by a limited number of parties engaging in predictable and enduring patterns of inter-party interactions. Conversely, in the majority of countries, the prevailing norm was the proliferation of organizationally weak parties lacking societal roots. However, even the most stable party systems in the region were affected by the emergence of new, successful challenger parties, which was accompanied by the weakening and collapse of previously dominant parties. In recent years, a number of populist, political-entrepreneurial, and far-right parties have emerged and, in some cases, assumed power in central governments.

Several distinctive characteristics distinguished the countries of Central and Eastern Europe from other regions engaged in the third wave of democratization, with important consequences for political patronage. Notably, these countries exhibited poorly articulated interests within political parties, a relatively weak civil society, and a general public disaffection towards organized political

parties. These factors contributed to the emergence of structurally frail political parties characterized by a limited base of rank-and-file members who could potentially be mobilized or incentivized through extensive patronage systems. This specific political and social landscape significantly influenced the utilization and effectiveness of political patronage in the region.

Several analytical frameworks explain variations in patronage practices and state politicization. Martin Shefter (1994) argued that if mass party politics emerged before state-building efforts were complete, parties would exploit patronage to expand their organizational base. Conversely, if state institutions were consolidated first, they could resist the influence of emerging parties. However, Shefter's argument is less applicable to post-communist politics. While it explains differences in southern and eastern Europe during the third wave of democratization (van Biezen 2003), it does not account for variations in Eastern European cases with similar nation-building and state-building sequences. Even considering broad state consolidation to address issues of stateness (Linz and Stepan, 1996), such as in newly independent Estonia, Slovakia, and Slovenia, and fully consolidated states like Bulgaria and Romania, inconsistencies in patronage utilization remain. Romania and Bulgaria, with no stateness issues, heavily rely on patronage, while Slovenia, Estonia, and Slovakia, independent since the early 1990s, show varied approaches to patronage politics.

Focusing on the role of political parties and party competition, Grzymala-Busse (2007) and O'Dwyer (2006) identify a link between the robustness of party competition in the early phases of post-communist transformation and the extent of state exploitation by ruling parties. Grzymala-Busse argued that robust competition prevented any single party from dominating the political scene, as stable opposition parties could credibly threaten incumbents in elections. She found that in the early 1990s, dominant parties in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Latvia, and Bulgaria faced weak opposition, allowing extensive state politicization and patronage. In contrast, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, and Slovenia had a more balanced power distribution, which largely protected them from state exploitation by political parties. O'Dwyer also highlighted the critical importance of party competition. However, he argued that merely dispersing political power among parties was insufficient. Effective prevention of "runaway state building" required a strong institutionalization of political parties. O'Dwyer noted that short-lived parties in complex coalitions might exploit governing spoils, including patronage appointments, while blaming coalition partners for ineffective measures to limit state exploitation.

With respect to the objective of this chapter, two aspects merit attention. Firstly, the works discussed examine state politicization, broader and more complex than the patronage defined here. Grzymala-Busse, for instance, also studies regulatory frameworks for party finances, while O'Dwyer looks at new state administration layers for partisan purposes. Their different focuses lead to varying (and, at times, contradictory) categorizations of CEE cases, such as differing assessments of the Czech Republic, Slovenia, and Poland. Secondly, party competition's impact on state politicization diminishes over time. By the second post-communist decade, new parties emerged, leading to the decline of once-dominant parties across CEE nations. Haughton and Deegan-Krause (2020) observe that new parties often led to even newer entities, forming "new-party subsystems." Some older parties maintained voter allegiance, and newer entities consolidated

electorally through three strategies: organizational development, leading ideological divides, and balancing strong leadership with mechanisms to remove detrimental leaders (Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2015). Despite increasing party numbers and complexity, some countries (notably the Baltic states) reduced patronage, while others (like Slovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria) retained high levels. Clearly, factors beyond electoral competition have shaped patronage politics in CEE.

## **2. Public administration reforms: separation of politics and administration as a myth**

Central and Eastern European countries are defined by a legacy of the Soviet system (Kotchegura, 2004; Meyer-Sahling, 2009b), characterised by a high level of political control and the pervasive influence of a dominant political ideology (communism). This legacy is evident not only in the civil service, but also throughout society. The essence of the Soviet legacy can be defined as an undemocratic political system dominated by a single party, a centrally planned economy, a weak rule of law, low administrative capacity, and widespread corruption. The Communist personnel policy, designated the nomenklatura system, guaranteed partisanship and political reliability among state administration members (Goetz, 2001; Kotchegura, 2004). This system required political reliability and loyalty to the Communist Party from all state employees, with the Party exerting control over all key appointments within the state administration. However, several observers (e.g., Goetz, 2001; Beblavy, 2001) have noted that the emphasis on political criteria in appointments varied across countries, time periods, and proximity to the executive center. In some countries, political reliability was a highly rigorous criterion for appointment and advancement. Frequently, policy expertise was situated outside the core administration, such as in academia, which frequently provided personnel for early post-communist governments. In contrast, in other countries, this criterion was more flexible, as evidenced by the experiences of former Yugoslavia, Poland, and Hungary (see Kitschelt et al., 1999).

Following the demise of the communist regime, CEE countries underwent extensive political, economic, and administrative reforms while simultaneously establishing fundamental institutional frameworks and crucial new rules and institutions. This process has been famously described as "rebuilding the ship at sea" (Elster, Offe, and Preuss, 1998). In the context of the CEE countries, the politico-administrative reform process can be conceptually divided into two phases. The initial phase of the process involved the establishment of a new formal civil service system, anchored in the legal framework, with the objective of supporting the introduction of career civil servants who were not subject to the influence of politicians. This phase was largely externally driven by the desire to enter the European Union. The second phase entails the integration of civil service components, such as recruitment and dismissal practices, into routine operations. This phase was largely driven by external factors, primarily the desire to join the European Union. The second phase pertains to the consolidation of civil service components, such as recruitment and dismissal practices, into everyday practice. Following the countries' accession to the EU, this phase lost momentum and was left to the internal drive of the NMS, which was far less significant.

Despite significant variations in legacy and context across CEE countries (Meyer-Sahling, 2009b), post-1989 "consensual politics" was predominantly oriented towards EU accession. Consequently,

the benchmarks of EU accession conditionality and assistance became the primary orienting and driving forces behind the reforms. As Verheijen (1999) notes, officials from the European Commission underscored the importance of developing a professional, depoliticized civil service as a prerequisite for membership. The pace and trajectory of reforms exhibited considerable variation among countries. Some, such as Hungary, initiated gradual changes in the context of regime transitions, while others, like Slovakia, underwent rapid reforms driven primarily by EU pressure. Nevertheless, the achievement of EU membership resulted in a reduction in the influence of accession conditionality, and the separation of politics and administration remained incomplete (Verheijen, 1999).

### **2.1. Post-communist Transition Pathway to European Union enlargement: Civil Service Law as Institution Building (1989 – EU entry)**

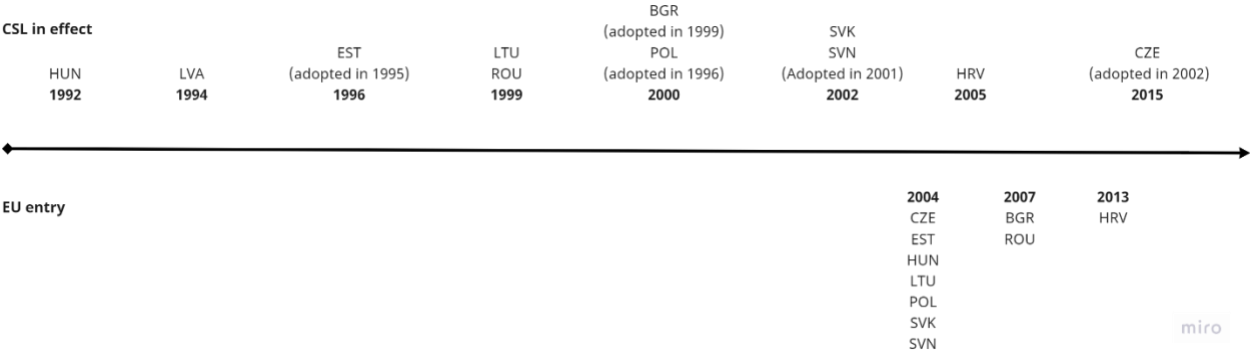
The institutionalization of laws on public administration and the civil service has been a pivotal starting point for the reform of post-communist state administrations, as these lacked a civil service and were reliant on a general labor code applicable to all employees (Dimitrova, 2002). Consequently, the post-Communist transition initially entailed the construction of the civil service system from scratch, with the objective of delineating the boundaries between the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. The main impetus for reforming politico-administrative relations for most of the CEE countries was external (Grabbe, 2003; Meyer-Sahling, 2009; Staronova and Gajduschek, 2013). This resulted in a lack of domestic ownership of the process, with possible exceptions of Hungary (Staronova and Gajduschek, 2013) and Estonia (Meyer-Sahling, 2011).

The EU requirements served to reinforce the modernisation processes in a manner that reflected a traditional Weberian ideal of strict politico-administrative division (Verheijen and Kotchegura, 1999; Goetz, 2001; Dimitrova, 2002). The model was introduced to CEE with the expectation of converging civil service frameworks, yet without any substantial political discourse preceding it. The European Commission initially did not provide administrative criteria for the *acquis*. Instead, it requested the assistance of SIGMA to specify a set of common criteria in what became known as the European Administrative Space and European Principles of Public Administration (SIGMA 1999). These standards served as baseline assessments of the administrative capacities of the candidate countries. They included the adoption of civil service laws to guarantee independence, the establishment of a career system, pay reform, and training. These were utilized by the EC to draft regular reports, documents issued annually by the EC on the preparedness of each country to join the EU, as well as the 1999 progress reports, which included recommendations on the matter (Dimitrova, 2002, p. 179). Thus, the application of the EU enlargement toolkit was intended to reverse the politicization of processes. The most fundamental legal obligation of the European Principles was to guarantee a transparent, non-politicized, and merit-based civil service administration through the enactment of civil service legislation.

Following Hungary's example, the Baltic countries also initiated similar reformation efforts, driven by the necessity to transform post-Soviet, Russian-speaking dominated institutions into professional civil services that would represent the newly established nation-states. Other CEE

countries, more externally motivated, followed at various speeds and with differing contents. Despite the observed variability, all CEE countries adopted civil service laws prior to EU accession. Czechia was the sole EU member state lacking specialized legislation safeguarding civil servants. Although the Czech Republic passed a civil service law in 2002, prior to its accession to the European Union, it did not come into effect until 2015.

Figure 1: Civil service laws adoption in CEE vis a vis EU entry



Source: authors

As a result, just before EU accession, most CEE countries formalized politico-administrative relations and introduced constraints on politicians' discretionary patronage appointments and dismissal of senior civil servants. The implementation of new civil service laws marked a significant achievement, establishing new rules for managing the civil service. These rules aimed to create bureaucracy with a clear division between political functions and bureaucratic career posts, thereby securing the depoliticization of the administrative level of civil service. Key features of these reforms included a significant reduction in the number of politically appointed positions within the executive branch and the implementation of meritocratic recruitment processes (Verheijen, 2002; Meyer-Sahling, 2009a; Staronova and Gajduschek, 2013; Nakrošis, 2022). In practical terms, these reforms led to a decrease in the number of top-level political positions within ministries. For example, in Lithuania, the number of explicit formal top-level political positions was reduced to that of Deputy Minister. In Slovakia, the number was reduced to two state secretaries, while in Hungary, it was limited to two political state secretaries. Estonia went even further, eliminating all such explicit political appointments at the top level. These measures collectively contributed to a more professional and less politicized civil service across the region.

An additional tool employed to depoliticize the civil service and centralize overall human resource functions was the creation of independent central structures for civil service management (Verheijen, 2002; Meyer-Sahling, 2009a). The institutionalization of these central structures, tasked with regulating, safeguarding, and managing various civil service functions, became a crucial next step for CEE countries, alongside the implementation of civil service laws. However, the lack of clear guidance regarding the competencies and authority these structures should possess resulted in significant variation in their location, capacity, and stability (Meyer-Sahling, 2009a). Some CEE countries established independent civil service offices, such as in Slovakia and Poland, or civil service councils, as seen in Slovenia. Others incorporated these

functions into existing ministerial structures, as in Hungary and Lithuania, or placed them under the Prime Minister's Office, as in Latvia. Despite these structural reforms, the real change in the "rules of the game" depends on the behavior of politicians and civil servants. The mere adoption of legal frameworks to limit politicization did not automatically lead to a consistent and effective implementation of these principles. The success of depoliticization efforts ultimately hinges on the adherence to these frameworks by those in power.

## **2.2. Post-EU accession and reform reversal**

Upon joining the European Union, the pressure exerted by the EU on CEE countries diminished, marking the onset of the post-accession phase where internal factors gained prominence. This phase witnessed a rapid regression in reforms, particularly in civil service systems and the reinstatement of formal political appointee positions. This regression is evident in three main areas: the reduction or abolishment of central structures for civil service management; the transformation of key positions directly supervising substantive civil servants back to political appointees or an increase in their number, such as chief of administration in ministries and heads of agencies; and the decrease in the protection of formally meritocratic civil servants. These changes became key tools to make positions in public organizations open to patronage (discussed in the Section 3).

As a first step, many countries saw robust and independent central structures for civil service management either abolished (as in Slovakia), losing their independence (as in Poland and Hungary), restructured into subordinate agencies and thereby losing their powers (as in Lithuania), or never fully established (as in the Czech Republic). Consequently, any checks and balances on politicians' authority to appoint senior civil servants effectively disappeared. For example, after dismantling the central structure for civil service management in 2006, Slovakia transferred the authority to hire and fire senior civil servants to the chief administrative heads of ministries, who themselves became political appointees, thereby facilitating greater patronage (Staronova and Gajduscek, 2013). The head of the central structure in Poland was turned into a political appointee, no longer requiring any professional or managerial experience (Mazur et al., 2018). Paradoxically, the reform reversals in Slovakia, Czechia, and Poland were orchestrated by the outgoing governments that had also been in power during the pre-accession period when these reforms were initially implemented. In Hungary, the reversal of reforms is linked to the overwhelming victory of Viktor Orbán in 2010, who introduced significant changes to the civil service laws, enabling the dismissal of civil servants at will (Hajnal et al., 2018).

Second, the transformation of key positions into political ones is noticeable on several layers (Table 1). In Lithuania and Hungary, the top layer within the Ministry, which had been career civil servants prior to EU entry (the state secretaries and secretary generals, respectively), became formal political appointees (Hajnal et al., 2018; Nakrošis, 2022). In Poland and Slovakia, the chief administrative heads responsible for running the ministry, including personnel, became political appointees again (Staronova and Gajduscek, 2013; Mazur et al., 2018). In Hungary, the prime minister started to oversee all senior appointments throughout the central administration, including

state secretaries and government commissioners (Hajnal et al, 2018). In Poland, the transformation of agency heads into public servants reverted to political appointees (Profireiu and Negoită, 2022).

Finally, civil service laws designed to protect civil servants from patronage (see Table 1) were gradually dismantled across most CEE countries (Dimitrova, 2002; Fink-Hafner, 2005; Kohegura, 2008; Verheijen, 2011; Meyer-Sahling, 2009a; Meyer-Sahling, 2011). One key amendment of the CSLs across the region was the possibility to dismiss formally meritocratic civil servants at any time without giving a reason, which was introduced in Bulgaria, Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary (Staronova and Gajduscsek, 2013; Mazur et al., 2018; Hajnal et al., 2018; Zankina, 2017). Structural politicization, whereby politicians have the power to create, restructure, close, or move any civil service position without supervision and/or consultation of the central structure for civil service management and without being forced to provide reasons, provides them with an opportunity to control staffing and design of public bodies. In practice, this means that career civil servants are fired due to organizational changes to circumvent CSLs (Zankina, 2017; Staronova and Gajduscsek, 2017; Mazur et al., 2018; Nakrošis, 2022). This is not possible, for example, in the Baltics or in the Czech Republic, where any reorganization has to be conducted only on January 1st and under the supervision of the central structure for civil service management.

A fundamental feature of many such significant formal changes that incrementally dismantle meritocracy and protections of the bureaucracy is their fast, non-transparent, and invisible nature, such as bypassing the regular legislative process (Mazur et al., 2018; Hajnal et al., 2018; Staronova et al., 2023). These practices have been reported anecdotally from Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia, though systematic data are scarce. Still, Staronova and her team (2023) showed how COVID-19 has been misused to utilize fast-track procedures (thereby omitting both societal and administrative consultations and regulatory quality oversight) for non-pandemic issues, and how such practices have been normalized in the post-pandemic era. In their study, they pointed out one such "emergency" amendment that allows the firing and hiring of civil servants without any justification, passed in less than two days (Staronova et al., 2023).

Table 1: Formal rules and opportunities for patronage as of 2024

	<b>Political Appointees (Coalition related)</b>	<b>ministerial advisers (formal anchoring)</b>	<b>Chief of Administrative run of Ministry</b>	<b>Formal protections of meritocratic top civil servants</b>
<b>Bulgaria</b>	yes	exist, but not regulated	top civil servant (patronage)	limited (patronage)
<b>Croatia</b>	yes	general regulation	top civil servant (patronage)	limited (patronage)
<b>Czech republic</b>	yes	exist, but not regulated	top civil servant (meritocracy)	existing (meritocracy)
<b>Estonia</b>	no	Code of conduct	top civil servant (meritocracy)	existing (meritocracy)



<b>Hungary</b>	yes	exist, but not regulated	top civil servant (patronage)	limited (patronage)
<b>Latvia</b>	no	general regulation	top civil servant (meritocracy)	existing (meritocracy)
<b>Lithuania</b>	yes	Civil service regulation	top civil servant (meritocracy)	existing (meritocracy)
<b>Poland</b>	yes	general regulation	political appointee	limited (patronage)
<b>Romania</b>	yes	Code of conduct	top civil servant (patronage)	limited (patronage)
<b>Slovakia</b>	yes	Civil service regulation	political appointee	limited (patronage)
<b>Slovenia</b>	yes	Civil service regulation	top civil servant (meritocracy)	existing (meritocracy)

Source: authors

Besides regular positions at the ministerial executive level, there can be a number of additional political appointees, such as ministerial advisers, plenipotentiaries, commissioners, etc. However, the number and regulation of these positions are often highly nontransparent and difficult to identify. A good example of the variance across CEE countries in regulating ministerial advisers (MAs) was provided by Staronova and Rybář (2024) when examining their institutionalization. They range from no regulations whatsoever (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary), to general regulations mentioning the position of a ministerial adviser without any further specifications (Croatia, Latvia, and Poland), to including MAs into civil service regulations with certain obligations linked to that position (Lithuania, Slovakia, and Slovenia), and to specific regulations and/or codes of conduct detailing behavior (Estonia, Romania).

Only Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania seem to have built resilient regulations on merit principles that not only adhere to high standards of administrative transparency, openness, and the rule of law but also have introduced fundamental changes in the values, attitudes, and beliefs of politicians and senior civil servants. For example, Estonia has developed an integrity management system (Saarnit and Sarapuu, 2024b) nurturing ethical values rather than pure compliance. The picture is much more nebulous with Lithuania. Still, it seems no U-turns in public service institutional structures occurred in the Baltics (Meyer-Sahling, 2011; Randma-Liiv). Observers (Saarnit and Sarapuu, 2024a; 2024b) argue that the small size of the country and proximity to Scandinavia play a crucial role, since the public sector has to compete harder for scarce "qualified human resources," allowing flexible decisions and investment in development rather than political interference.

Thus, the first years after EU accession witnessed attempts to formally repoliticize the bureaucracy, often leading to a U-turn towards political influence and patronage in top-level appointments in most CEE countries. This trend is currently particularly evident in Hungary (Hajnal et al, 2018; Meyer-Sahling and Toth, 2020), Slovakia (Staronova and Gajdushek, 2013; Staronova and Rybář, 2021), as well as in Bulgaria (Zankina, 2017) and Romania (Radu and Radu, 2023). As a result, the formal structural barriers to patronage appointments vary significantly across CEE countries

(see Table 1), ranging from regulations, transparency rules, and registries on political staff to soft instruments or guidelines that set out expected behaviors, to the absence of such rules, protections and/or oversight altogether.

### **3. Scope and Depth of Patronage: Variance in CEE countries in reality**

#### **3.1. Depth of Patronage Appointments in the Executive**

Studying depth and scope of patronage empirically presents significant challenges due to notorious problems with data access, high informality and often semi-legal nature of appointments, utilizing loopholes and structural politicization. Few politicians openly admit to engaging in patronage practices, resulting in a scarcity of data and a lag in the comparative assessments of the phenomenon. Consequently, scholars rely on various proxy measures or employ indirect methods of investigation. To our knowledge, longitudinal data and repeated observations of patronage are limited to a few country studies, notably Slovakia, Hungary and the Czech republic.

One proxy measure for patronage is the turnover of top officials within central state administrations. Staroňová and Rybář (2021) analyzed biannual data on turnover in civil service positions within the Slovak ministerial bureaucracy in the period of 2010-2017 covering three different types of government alternations. They documented a statistically significant increase in turnover following not only governmental alternations but also minister change, suggesting personalization of patronage. Moreover, the depth of illegal patronage penetration is substantial – in the first months following the installation of a new government (or a new minister from the same party), close to 30% of changes on three hierarchical levels of formally meritocratic (and permanent) bureaucracy are observed, namely directors general, directors, and heads of units. In years of non-event (no government or minister alternation), the natural bureaucratic turnover rate is 8% which may serve as a benchmark for future research in other countries as well. Kopecký et al. (2022), on the other hand, examined turnover in formally political position of a state secretary in Hungary, finding a rise in appointees with direct political ties to the ruling party, following the Orban take-over in 2010, suggesting party polarization. In contrast, the introduction of civil service legislation in the Czech Republic in 2015 resulted in a marked decrease in partisan appointees and an increase in the appointment of career bureaucrats to top civil service positions, as evidenced by turnover and biographical data analyzed by Rybář and Podmaník (2020).

The existing comparative research typically provides a snapshot of perceived patronage by interviewing/surveying experts, and also by surveying public servants. For instance, based on an expert survey, Meyer-Sahling and Veen (2012) found considerable differences in the level of politicization within the senior civil services: The Baltic countries, especially Estonia, showed minimal politicization. In contrast, Slovakia and Poland had the highest levels. Slovenia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary were situated in the middle. Similarly, Kopecký and Spirova (2011) used expert survey and expert interviews to examine patronage in three post-communist cases. Their analysis concluded that Communist legacies shaped patronage practices: Bulgaria's patrimonial past led to reward-driven patronage, the Czech Republic's bureaucratic past to control-oriented patronage, and Hungary showed a mix of both. Kohoutek and Nekola (2020) examined a survey

among the Czech civil servants to conclude that perceived politicization is more prominent at the top management level, with lower and middle management positions being less affected. Importantly, functional politicisation, which refers to the impact of political interests on routine tasks, was generally seen as minimal by the majority of Czech civil servants, particularly those in lower and middle management roles.

While comparative research to date has not systematically tracked developments over time or across the CEE region, numerous studies indicate that CEE countries can be categorized into clusters with similar levels of patronage practices. Furthermore, the properties of patronage in most countries remain consistent over extended periods. Thus, it is our contention here that the CEE countries can be meaningfully categorized into three groups exhibiting low, moderate and high extent of patronage practices (see Table 1).

Table 1: Overview of comparative studies on patronage across CEE countries

Study	Method	Data	BGR	CZE	HRV	EST	LTU	LVA	HUN	POL	ROU	SVK	SVN
Fukuyama et al (2022)	Direct survey of Public servants	Global Survey of Public Servants 2017-2021	-	-	M	L	M	-	-	-	L	H	-
Bach et al (2020)	Survey of senior managers in central government	COCOPS 2012-15	-	-	H	L	L	-	M	-	-	-	-
Meyer-Sahling and Mikkelsen (2016)	Survey of central government officials	2011	-	-	H	-	-	L	-	M	-	-	-
Kopecný et al (2016)	Expert interviews	Party patronage index 2007-10	H	M	-	-	-	-	M	-	H	-	-
Volintiru (2015)													
Kopecny, Mair and Spirova (2012)	Expert interviews	Party patronage index 2007-8	H	M	-	-	-	-	M	-	-	-	-
Meyer-Sahling and Veen (2012)	Expert survey	2007-8	-	M	-	L	L	L	M	H	-	H	M

Source: authors

Note: H- high, M-moderate, L- low degree of patronage

Specifically, Bulgaria, Croatia and Slovakia have been consistently categorized as countries with high levels of patronage. This was also confirmed by country studies: in Slovakia by longitudinal research on turnover of senior civil servants in 2010-2017 period by Staronova and Rybář (2021), and in Bulgaria by structural changes (bureaucratic reorganizations) by Zankina (2016). Table 1 also show some variation in Romania, and Poland, where the extent of patronage fluctuates between medium and high, depending on the timing of the data collection. Radu and Radu (2023) note that in Romanian central administration, the line between political and bureaucratic positions

is frequently indistinct, with civil servants often being appointed based on political connections and loyalty. Polish central administration has also been subjected to extensive patronage control (Staroňová and Rybář, 2024), the trend further exacerbated by democratic backsliding under the rule of the Law and Justice Party.

In these countries, patronage remains high as informal rules have undermined the consolidation of (often failed) formal procedures established through democratic practices or accession to the EU. This has been reported in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia (Zankina, 2017; Gajdushek and Staronova, 2023; Volintiru and Zgut-Przybylska, 2024). However, due to a lack of self-improvement efforts, institutions continue to be strongly influenced by informal norms and practices. As a result, formal and informal norms have continued to diverge (Gajdushek and Staronova, 2023), leading to a superficial consolidation of institutions.

In high patronage countries, governing political parties may not be the principal agents controlling patronage appointments. Staroňová and Rybář (2021, p. 651) found out that patronage in Slovakia is often exercised autonomously by ministers, independently of their political parties: A change of minister, the political superior of senior civil servants, has a similar effect on bureaucratic turnover as the alternation of government following elections. Furthermore, the power to appoint, which can be considered a personalized power resource, extends beyond the minister's direct appointees, as it enables these appointees to make further appointments. This phenomenon, defined by Meyer-Sahling and Jáger (2012) as 'cascading patronage,' refers to the subsequent appointments made by the minister's initial appointees.

In contrast, the Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania - are consistently categorized as low patronage countries. In these countries, civil service structures have shown greater transparency and resilience, maintaining more robust protections against political interference. In addition, selection and promotion of civil servants is strongly meritocratic, leading to highly technocratic and policy-oriented bureaucracies. A number of measures have been adopted in the three countries to increase transparency, and the demarcation between bureaucratic and political posts in the state administration has been maintained.

Finally, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and (pre-2010) Hungary are characterized as moderate patronage countries. Political pressures and politically motivated changes in the central state administration have existed but they were typically limited to the highest tier of civil servants. Patronage appointments below the top level of bureaucracy were limited. The Czech parliament enacted civil service legislation only in 2014, curtailing the sphere of political appointments within the central state administration and introducing tenure for the majority of civil service positions. Subsequent to this reform, there was a notable increase in the proportion of career civil servants among top-ranking officials, accompanied by a significant decline in the presence of bureaucrats with partisan affiliations (Rybář and Podmaník, 2020). The electoral decline of two dominant political parties during the 2010s ensued in response to multiple allegations of political corruption pertaining to public procurement and party financing (Klíma, 2020), prompting civil society-backed initiatives aimed at enhancing transparency. In Slovenia, party patronage within the civil service remains relatively limited, particularly in comparison to other CEE contexts. While politicians exercise informal discretion in the appointment and dismissal of senior civil servants (Čehovin and Haček, 2015), the permanent civil service retains a degree of autonomy.

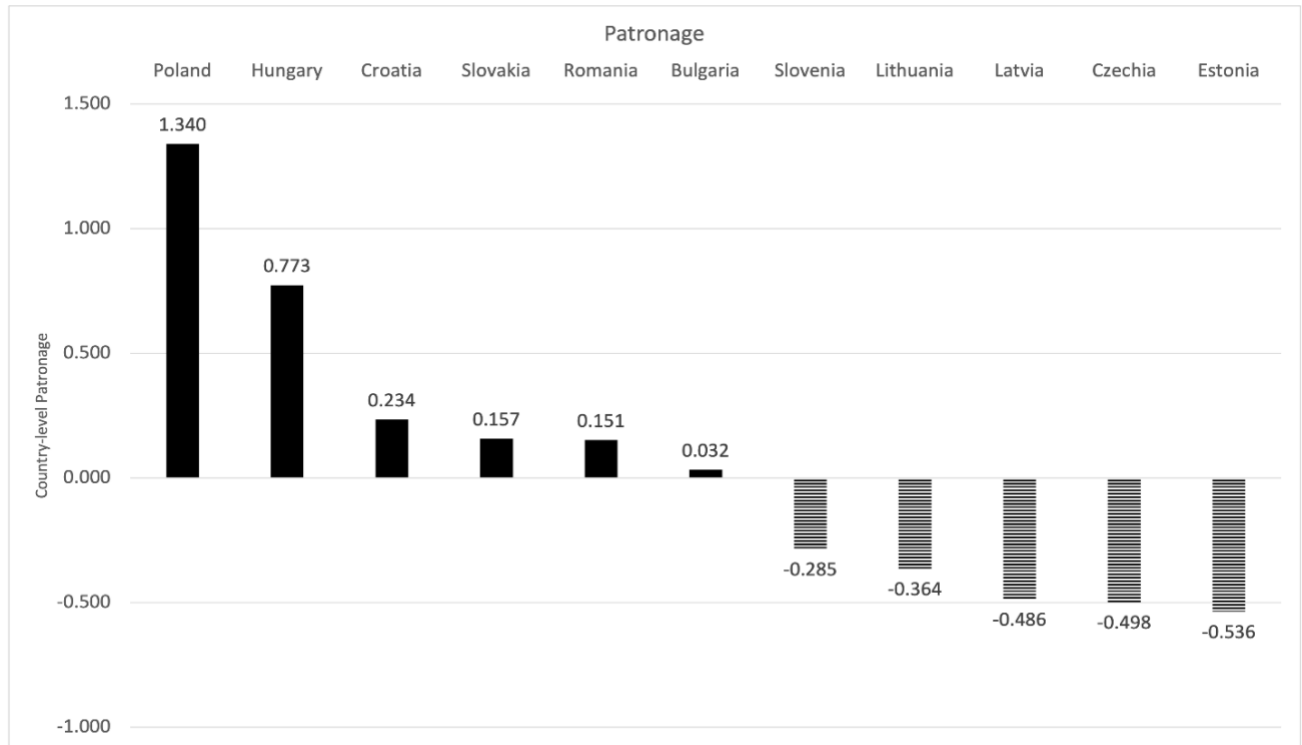
Analogously to the Czech Republic, the erosion of established political parties and the recurrent success of emergent parties precipitated a fragmentation of the party-political landscape and the implementation of measures aimed at bolstering transparency. Hungary is a unique case in CEE where the scope of patronage practices has changed significantly over time. Initially, Hungary was a regional frontrunner in establishing a legally protected civil service in the early 1990s. However, since 2010, the country has experienced democratic backsliding, accompanied by the "hyperpoliticization" of the public sector, particularly within central state administration. This advanced democratic backsliding acts as an external factor influencing the development of patronage, explaining Hungary's significant departure from its earlier trajectory.

The three groups of countries—with high, moderate, and low levels of patronage—shown in Table 1 overlap significantly with the groupings in Figure 2. This grouping is based on expert opinions from the Quality of Government Survey (Nistotskaya et al., 2021). Experts were asked, "To what extent are appointments to bureaucratic positions in central government based on the political and/or personal connections of the applicant?" While the wording can confuse political and personal connections, potentially conflating party politics and nepotism, it provides a useful snapshot to illustrate the variation among CEE countries. Staroňová and Rybář (2024) used the QoG data as a proxy for patronage appointments to bureaucracy, the first dimension of their typology of settings of politicization. The second dimension covers regulatory institutionalization of the number of formal political appointees, i.e. whether there are other senior positions in the state bureaucracy (other than advisers to individual ministers) to which governing parties may appoint their nominees. Such positions, variously called as state secretaries, deputy ministries, vice-ministers and so on, feature prominently across the region. Crucially, their powers vary but they often represent an important element in coalition governance and patronage politics. Interestingly, all five cases with high patronage (Bulgaria, Croatia, Poland, Slovakia and Romania) also have a number of such formal political appointees. In contrast, Estonia and Latvia, low patronage countries, did not have any legally defined formal political appointees. Finally, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, (and Lithuania) represent a hybrid model that integrates limited patronage within the regular bureaucracy alongside the presence of top-level political appointees. While the existence of these appointees might suggest additional opportunities for patronage, their primary function is to consolidate party control over state administration and to allow coalition parties to monitor processes in ministries overseen by their coalition partners.

The three clusters of countries also differ in the ways how ministerial advisers fit into the broader process of patronage and politicization. In the hybrid/high patronage countries, ministerial advisers represent a fuzzy group of actors that are not always distinguishable from other bureaucratic actors. In addition, invisible advisers without formal links to the ministries potentially represent a gray zone open to illicit behaviour and corruption deals (Staroňová and Rybář, 2023). In contrast, advisers are clearly distinguishable from other bureaucratic actors, regulated and open to public scrutiny in the low-patronage Baltic countries. Finally, in the moderate patronage/hybrid settings of the Czech Republic and Slovenia, advisers are distinguishable from other administrative players, but their activities are less regulated and often occur out of public view. Instances have been reported where ministerial advisers transitioned into permanent state bureaucracy positions

just before their tenure expired (Staroňová and Rybář, 2023), highlighting the ongoing significance of patronage practices in this realm.

Figure 2: Penetration of Patronage Appointments across CEE Countries



Source: Data from the Quality of Government Survey (Nistotskaya et al., 2021)

### 3.2. Scope of Patronage: Separation of Politics and Administration in Agencies and State-owned Enterprises?

The initial civil service laws had a narrow understanding of career civil service positions, limited to the core government. In many CEE countries, a number of top administrative positions were left for formal political appointments (and de facto patronage), such as the heads of agencies, local state governments, and state firms. As Beblavý (2002) argued in a study of agencification in CEE, the true communist legacy lies in the inherited system of an extensive but highly fragmented and incoherent administrative apparatus. This apparatus consisted of a very high number of individual organizations with highly autonomous heads who behaved like corporate managers in a chaotic environment between the real rules and the official ones. These organizations were not part of a centralized, horizontally and vertically well-integrated hierarchy, but rather an amorphous system, often designed according to the personal and institutional interests of the nomenklatura of the Communist Party. During the transition, instead of addressing the institutionalized fragmentation, the agencies' autonomy was further reinforced by the EU sectoral approach in the *acquis*. In addition, agencification promoted by New Public Management (NPM) reforms coincided with the overall transition (Randma-Liiv and Drechsler, 2017). Both trends deeply influenced the public

sector's formal structure, particularly with a number of political appointees as heads of agencies and state firms.

Many CEE countries did not opt for an integrated public service with a single legal, institutional, and financial framework covering all public organizations and agencies. Instead, they maintained a fragmented system with sectoral public service systems, where non-core public employees often have a different status than core civil service employees. As a result, the heads of agencies are formal political appointments susceptible to party patronage, with CEE countries being among the most "agencified" in the world, delegating more tasks to agencies than any other countries (van Thiel, 2011).

For example, the number of positions in agencies (formal political appointments) increased in Slovakia from 60 in 1993 to 160 in 2007 (Beblavý et al., 2012). The number of agencies decreased slightly during the wave of de-agencification after the financial crises in 2008-10, and significantly in the Baltics (Sarapuu, 2012; Nakrošis, 2022). Still, the number of positions that can be filled by patronage at the sub-ministerial level has increased over time.

The proliferation of agencies, coupled with the absence of a universal regulatory framework governing agencies, as noted by Musa and Kopic (2011), Hajnal (2012), and Beblavý et al. (2012), meant that most agency heads did not have civil service status (and thus protections). In addition, those agency heads whose status was under civil service law protection were changed into political appointees as a result of structural politicization (Beblavý et al., 2012; Staronova, 2016; Nakrošis, 2022; Bayerová, 2024). Government and ministerial alternations created opportunities for party patronage that were exploited for appointing party or personal loyalists.

This issue is particularly pronounced in countries like Croatia, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary, where heightened political polarization and politicization have led to systematic patronage in appointments, potentially creating illegal sources of influence and income, or simply securing employment opportunities. This pattern is highlighted by researchers such as Randma-Liiv et al. (2011), Musa and Kopic (2011), Hajnal (2012), Beblavý et al. (2012), and Bayerová (2024). Similarly, in Poland and Romania, the dynamic nature of agency existence—including frequent mergers, terminations, and creations—along with low stability in office and reshuffling following political changes, suggests that patronage is used as a means to exert more control over agencies (Profiroiu and Negoita, 2022). In Slovakia, for example, there have been attempts to introduce formal meritocratic selection procedures for heads of agencies; nevertheless, this did not have any significant effect when measured by career paths (Sloboda and Beblavý, 2020; Bayerová, 2024). There seems to be an embedded pattern related to patronage appointments for these positions, notably requirements for political and/or personal links.

In the Baltic countries, agency heads are generally more technocratic, even compared to older EU countries (Randma-Liiv et al., 2011; Sarapuu, 2012; Raudla et al., 2021). In addition, structural politicization is less apparent (Sarapuu, 2012). This technocratic approach results in a limited ability of ministries to exert control over their agencies through patronage, reflecting a different governance dynamic in these countries. In fact, Estonia has informally incrementally developed a competency model for top officials that included directors general from executive agencies

(Gajduschek and Staronova, 2023) before launching a formal civil service category of top civil servants, under special regulation with a fixed five-year service, recruitment, selection, assessment, and development (Randma-Liiv et al., 2015).

The non-transparent nature and insufficient regulation of political appointments are particularly concerning within state-owned enterprises, a sector characterized by a notable scarcity of empirical research due to limited data availability. However, a study by Katarzyna Szarzec and her team (2020) provides some insight into the scale and intensity of patronage within approximately twelve thousand joint-stock companies in Poland from 2001 to 2017, based on their ownership structures. Their findings indicate that changes in managers and supervisory board members at state-owned enterprises correlate significantly with political elections, illustrating a clear example of state capture by politicians. Further, research conducted by Clara Volintiru and her colleagues (2018) in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, and Romania underscores the misuse of resources from state-owned companies by political actors as a strategy to secure electoral victories. This misuse points to a broader issue of a lack of accountability in managing public resources, which they argue poses a serious threat to the quality of democracy.

## **Conclusion**

The chapter pointed out that countries in Central and Eastern Europe exhibit significant variations in patronage practices despite having adopted similar meritocratic civil service laws in the pre-accession period. We examine a relatively homogeneous group of countries that are economically advanced, integrated into the European Union, and generally adhere to liberal democratic norms. Prior to EU accession, their merit legislation on civil service and practices converged towards a Weberian model of bureaucracy, emphasizing meritocratic selection and promotion of civil servants, and the separation of political and administrative careers, often driven by the EU's political conditionality. In this way, a large set of formal norms and procedures were transferred to CEE states as part of the pre-accession process. However, post-accession departure from "mimicking the EU model" meant that notable differences have emerged in practice, making it meaningful to distinguish between distinct modes of patronage practices.

To understand this variation, we follow the analytical distinction between regular bureaucracy positions and legal-formal political appointments in ministerial hierarchies (Staroňová and Rybář, 2024). Accordingly, we identified three categories: low patronage countries (the Baltic states), hybrid cases with moderate patronage (Slovenia and the Czech Republic), and highly politicized cases (Bulgaria, Croatia, Poland, Slovakia, and Romania). Hungary, marked by significant democratic backsliding (see Chapter on Hungary), is a unique case where initial patronage practices evolved into extensive exploitation by the dominant political party.

In the Baltic states, patronage in the permanent bureaucracy is minimal, and opportunities for formal political appointees are heavily restricted. Political elites in these countries prioritize transparency, predictability, and the technocratic nature of civil servants. In hybrid cases, patronage in the permanent bureaucracy is reduced, though some top-level appointments are politically motivated. Formal political posts in the administration exist, where governing parties appoint loyal representatives, often recruited from programmatic technocrats and party apparatchiks due to their roles in coalition politics.



In the high patronage countries, partisan patronage is placed at the core of nominally autonomous public institutions and bureaucracy. There is a high number of formal positions at the top of the bureaucratic hierarchy (for example, heads of agencies) openly reserved for political appointments. Patronage roles in these countries encompass a wide range, including apparatchiks, programmatic technocrats, and political agents. Additionally, patronage is often personalized, with control exercised by individual ministers rather than party headquarters. Patronage practices are apparent across the ideological divide of pro-reform/anti-Russian versus anti-reform/pro-Russian. A common denominator for both sides is deep distrust towards bureaucracy as a potential spy and enemy of the other side, which makes them resort to trusted appointees based on personal or party affiliations. The prevalence of informal rules and practices that erode established rules from before the accession influences the quality of governance and distorts the accountability mechanisms related to public decisions and resources. Nevertheless, "islands of excellence" in CEE administration can be found where no patronage practice occurs and instead expertise is nourished.

Finally, compared to other European countries, evidence on patronage in CEE countries is much more difficult to obtain due to restrictions on public availability of administrative data, proactive data protection, and strict GDPR interpretations that prevent researchers from systematic work on data.

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