

# Three decades, four phases

## Public administration development in Central and Eastern Europe, 1989-2017

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to provide a comprehensive overview of the public administration (PA) development in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) from an *ex post* perspective covering the past three decades.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper reviews prior literature on CEE and PA paradigms. The authors propose to distinguish between four main phases of public sector development in new democracies: post-communist transition, EU accession, post-accession fine-tuning, and e-governance.

**Findings** – There were many common features in the polities and PAs of the CEE countries at the beginning of the 1990s because of their common communist legacy, and also during the EU accession period, stemming from the “administrative capacity” requirement by the EU. However, domestic decisions of individual CEE governments following accession have moved them apart from each other. While some CEE countries face reversals of democratic public governance reforms, others are leading e-government initiatives – the current phase of public sector development.

**Research limitations/implications** – The choice of countries is limited to the new member states of the European Union.

**Originality/value** – The paper shows that it is increasingly difficult to generalize findings, let alone to offer recommendations, that apply to all CEE countries. This is likely to lead to an end of a specific CEE administrative tradition as previously conceptualized in academic literature.

**Keywords** E-governance, Central and Eastern Europe, New public management, Neo-Weberian State, New EU member states, Post-communist transition

**Paper type** Research paper

### 1. Introduction

As this anniversary issue of the *JPSM* is devoted to the development of public administration (PA) during the past 30 years, it actually coincides with the democratic changes in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) which started with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. It is therefore a very fitting place to attempt to draw summary of this very interesting, and lesson-rich, well-demarkated regional series of iterations in PA(s). Serious comprehensive evaluations of the CEE countries in PA from an *ex post* perspective are still infrequent (but see e.g. Drechsler, 2003; Randma-Liiv, 2009; Nemeč, 2010; Dan and Pollitt, 2015; Verheijen and Rabrenovic, 2015), and so we hope to contribute to this body of literature.

In the present context, we use CEE interchangeably with the term NMS, i.e. the new member states of the European Union: Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia, although as a region and in general parlance, CEE is larger, sometimes even blurring with the entire “Second World”. With all difference and specificity of the NMS countries and their very varied legacies and contexts acknowledged (see Meyer-Sahling, 2009), and with all the problems of lesson-drawing as such realized (see Randma-Liiv, 2007, specifically about CEE, we can still



say that there have been some crucial common factors and principles in their story, even if fading across the decades. And these become apparent if we – always provisionally – try to sub-divide these 30 years into rough, approximate, overlapping phases, denoted both by specific themes in governance generally and in PA particularly.

With the benefit of 2017 hindsight, we suggest that it is possible to distinguish between these four main phases of public sector development in CEE (Table I):

- (1) The immediate post-communist transition (1989-1996) witnessed broad-based political, economic and administrative reforms and the modification of a legislative and institutional administrative framework. The PA paradigm was the New Public Management (NPM).
- (2) During the EU-accession period (1997-2004/2007), several reform initiatives were strongly impelled and shaped by the EU accession criteria and “conditionality” set by the European Commission (Meyer-Sahling, 2011; Sedelmeier, 2012). This is the time of post-NPM and even a Weberian re-establishment.
- (3) In the post-EU-accession period (starting in 2004/2007 and stretching into the recent years), the NMS have been focusing on continuous “fine-tuning” of the public sector. This is the phase of the Neo-Weberian State (NWS) and other “paradigmattes” such as new public governance (NPG), joined-up government (JUG), and whole-of-government (WoG).
- (4) Most recently, some CEE countries have even become models for the “First World” regarding e-Governance (e-Gov), Smart City concepts, and the use of Big Data in the public sector, bringing us into the present. The most fashionable PA term in our time is probably public sector innovation (PSI).

This periodization, as goes without saying, is not only stylized and sweeping but also unspecific as regards countries (see Drechsler and Randma-Liiv, 2016), and there are many other significant elements as well. However, we propose that heuristically, it does have some value, even if in many, perhaps even in most instances the generalization does not hold. Once we recognize this, we can recognize some patterns and trends that do make up the story, even the shape, of PA development during the last three decades.

Starting from there, we will try to outline this story in a comprehensive way below, based on our own experience within CEE PA development along these decades. In doing so, we will only reference publications of our own in which we present more discussion and data (most recently, Drechsler and Randma-Liiv, 2015, 2016), as well as academic contributions by colleagues to whom a specific insight or concept is owed – we do not give an overview of the relevant literature, nor do we address PA as a scholarly discipline and the academic discourse, such as it was, in and about the region.

## 2. Four periods of PA development in CEE

### 2.1 Post-communist transition and NPM

When (and if) people think of the “Second World,” the image is usually one of a big, powerful state with an overbearing, dominating bureaucracy. The pre-transition

Phase	Time	Public sector context	PA paradigm
1	1989-1996	Transition	NPM
2	1997-2004/2007	EU accession	Post-NPM
3	2004/2007-2014	Fine-tuning	NWS, NPG, etc.
4	2014-today	e-Governance	PSI

**Table I.**  
Four periods of PA  
development in CEE

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governments of CEE were certainly big, in the sense of carrying out many more functions than their Western counterparts. This, however, did not mean that they were strong in the sense of having the capacity to formulate and implement policies, or to efficiently perform routine administrative functions – in several respects (such as *vis-à-vis* the parallel party structure), they were not even meant to be. Moreover, due to their overly intrusive and politicized nature, the pre-transition governments were associated with the negative view toward regulation and steering through central bodies. What was generally true for the communist PA was that it was a cadre administration before the 1989/1991 revolutions; members of the cadre “were professional administrators, but with politically and ideologically defined qualifications” (König, 1997, p. 215). This means that, after the crash of the system for which they had been conditioned, their experience was not necessarily valid. In addition, many fields of administration – from fiscal to municipal – were generally lacking.

So, contrary to some expectations at that time, the question was not only, or even primarily, one of downsizing, but rather one of building, instead of reforming, a functioning democratic public administration system, and that is in fact what happened – to the surprise of many observers, the civil service in the NMS expanded (Drechsler, 2003). It also means that at the beginning of the 1990s, as compared to countries with long civil service traditions and well-established administrative cultures, much weaker bureaucratic restraints existed in CEE that could be obstacles to administrative reforms. This created a critical juncture in the institutional development, allowing, by and large, for a new start and opening up an opportunity for the selection between different public administration models.

And at that time, in general, donors, advisors, consultants, and international organizations pushed for NPM, quite irrespective of context (which is more generally an NPM feature). Of course, older layers of contexts and legacies reasserted themselves to some extent as well (see Meyer-Sahling, 2009). One now sees more clearly that it is not exactly a good thing to have a blue-ocean approach to public administration reform, but in the early 1990s, in the general discourse, this was much less obvious than it is now.

Arguably, the main challenge for the immediate post-communist transition was not so much the structural setup of PA, but people whose commitment, values, and loyalty cannot be changed overnight. The main problem during the transition, in other words, was the shortage of well-qualified, motivated civil servants. Good PA, a high-quality civil service and a good understanding of the concept of state are interdependent: if one element is bad, the other two will suffer as well (Drechsler, 2000, p. 5). PA appears to require a special virtue – loaded though that word is – on the part of its main protagonist, the civil servant, in order for the system to function well or even at all. This virtue cannot be created artificially and is, once again, highly dependent on tradition, at least in the short run.

How, then, to get a good civil service if there is neither good tradition nor ethos, which after all was generally the post-communist situation in the years of transition? High civil service pay would be one of the mid-run answers, and at least some short-term remedy, as well, but in most of the CEE countries, the consensus was that this cannot be afforded – or that the civil service is paid far too well anyway. Thus, one had to go back to the old insight that the state must offer what the state can offer best: the classic virtues of security, honor, stability, civility, and fulfillment – the opposite of NPM measures.

At this point, one has to recall that NPM was conceived as something of a house-cleaning concept; it was a reform movement within a well-working if too expensive and bureaucratic (sic!) system (Peters, 2001, pp. 164, 176). The problem for CEE was that there was no house to be cleaned, but rather one to be built, if “house” is the metaphor for the public sector as such. To start cleaning before building may be putting the cart before the horse, and that is one of the key insights regarding the transferability of NPM coming from the CEE experience. As Hesse (1998) put it then, “the introduction of business approaches in PA, as advocated by NPM concepts, may well prove disastrous in systems based on a continental

European tradition in which either the preconditions may not be in place or where they may be rejected due to their inherent logic” (p. 176). After all, deregulating “the public service may not be viable before there is a set of values that will permit government to operate in an accountable and non-corrupt manner without the existence of formalized controls” (Peters, 2001, p. 167). In a situation where unpredictability is already high in society because of transition, rules, and regulations are needed in order to counterbalance. Imposing additional rules might be counterproductive in stable and highly developed countries where generally accepted public values and principles are already in place, but it is unavoidable in countries where the rule of law is not yet in place, as in CEE in the 1990s.

A problem with the “deregulation” agenda of NPM was then that in the context of the new market economies of CEE, “rules of game” such as basic constitutional framework, private property rights or an independent court system were needed if markets were to function at all. Unless contractual rights are enforced by central authorities, market participants cannot conclude contracts with any certainty that they will be fulfilled. Creating, through constitution and laws, the basic institutional framework under which exchanges between different actors may take place has therefore been seen among the first tasks for transition countries. Only a strong and capable state, not deregulated networks can adopt such a framework and, even more importantly, guarantee the implementation of this framework in practice.

In addition, transitional countries require more regulation than NPM presumes because more rules are required to create conditions for the elimination of nepotism (Peters, 2001, p. 176). For instance, high discretion in personnel management may prove to be risky because of an insufficiently developed legislative framework, little experience of high- and mid-level managers, unsettled administrative culture and insufficient control mechanisms. Verheijen (1999) argued that the liberalization of employment conditions in the post-communist context may lead to a further increase in politicization, enhance rather than eliminate instability and increase levels of corruption, and arguably, this was indeed the case.

Looking at what actually happened in CEE during the post-communist transition, it is not surprising to therefore see an overwhelming goal to develop a solid Weberian basis, rather than NPM-oriented position-based civil service systems: “Classic continental career systems appear to be the main source of inspiration for CEE states. The German model is emerging, at the current time, as a dominant influence in most states. [...] In general [...], there appears to be a clear tendency to return to the ‘continental roots’ of pre-1945” (Verheijen, 1999, pp. 330-331). At the start of the post-communist transition, basically a Weberian trajectory was chosen in many CEE states.

However, the prevailing NPM fashion in the West at this time also influenced the adoption of similar ideas in CEE (Randma-Liiv, 2007; Nemeč, 2010). NPM as a model and its underlying neo-liberal ideology sat very well with most CEE countries, which started to reform their big state apparatuses, abolished their one-sector economies and carried out large-scale privatization and decentralization. Because of the urgency of transition, CEE governments faced significant pressure to adopt popular policies and approaches, often without having enough time and professionalism to analyze these ideas in depth. As there was a shortage of competent domestic policy-makers, especially in the critical state-building time of the 1990s, it was difficult for CEE governments to judge foreign experience, compare various models and say no to Western advisors, donors, and international organizations, even if the blatant self-interest of the latter to push for certain reforms was obvious, which was not always the case (Randma-Liiv, 2007). One of the consequences, which sometimes has confused scholars from outside CEE, was to adopt an often strong NPM rhetoric, to placate those pressuring for it within and without the country, while at the same time adopting a Weberian PA, so as to ensure a working public sector.

At the same time, it seemed sensible to adopt NPM tools to show one’s willingness (and to save money, so one thought), without always checking whether they were

compatible with the public administration system as practiced and envisioned or not. This, and a general under-conceptualization of public administration reforms, led to a piecemeal approach to public administration development and “the failure to understand the logical basis of reforms and to make them compatible with what else is being tried in a government” (Peters, 2001, p. 64). CEE countries were keen to look at the Western practices with the aim of emulating individual policies and tools. This led to a West-East policy transfer, including the development of individual instruments from the traditional NPM toolbox, such as pay-for-performance and contracting-out. However, this piecemeal approach to reforms hampered the build-up of a solid basis for PA and often made the reforms undertaken inconsistent and unsustainable.

Altogether, as we have argued, against a recent piece by Dan and Pollitt (2015), NPM as a paradigm did not work in CEE; if anything, the NMS provide case studies of why NPM does not make sense generally and is highly context-specific regarding any chances of success as far as the tools are concerned – we can say that in some CEE countries, some NPM tools sometimes worked (and work), but not more (Drechsler and Randma-Liiv, 2016). But during the transition time, NPM did seem to provide some helpful functions, and the importance of the fashionability of the concept in the global-Western PA community at that time, albeit a vulnerable one for CEE leaders, cannot be overestimated.

## 2.2 *The EU trajectory and post-NPM*

In addition to the transition experience, the EU trajectory has been the second key feature for all NMS, both in significance and chronologically. The EU “conditionality” in public administration development was particularly emphasized during the Eastern enlargement in 2004 and later, as the accession countries had to systematically demonstrate the presence of the administrative capacity and ability to effectively apply the *acquis communautaire* upon which their EU membership was conditional. For the first time ever during different rounds of EU enlargement, such an evaluation of administrative systems of candidate countries was applied (Dimitrova, 2002; Meyer-Sahling, 2011). There are good reasons to argue that the transformative power of European integration is more pronounced in the national administrative systems in post-communist countries than in the Western European ones (Sedelmeier, 2012).

In general, the influence of the EU on PAs in NMS has been twofold and, to some extent, even inconsistent *vis-à-vis* major public administration models. Such inconsistency is best observed when comparing the impact of the EU on civil service and on public sector structure (agencification). On the one hand, in the area of the civil service, the explicit preference of the EU has been for a classical PA (Verheijen, 1999; Dimitrova, 2002; Meyer-Sahling, 2011); its own internal engagement with NPM ideas and reforms mostly came later (“Kinnock Reforms”; see Drechsler, 2009). The European Commission asked SIGMA, the OECD unit, to advise CEE governments on civil service reform during the EU accession period. Thus, SIGMA became the most important agency dealing with the topic in the region, and that is crucial, because importantly, SIGMA took a critical perspective toward NPM from the very beginning (Meyer-Sahling, 2011). Therefore, in spite of pressure from other organizations, from consultants and from locals engaged in reform who had learned about NPM in summer schools and training seminars in the West and thus wanted to tout it, the classical perspective was consistently repeated by the EC and SIGMA. As for the “softer” European values behind civil service reforms, the goal of developing a “European Administrative Space” operating by a set of common principles including the rule of law, openness and transparency, accountability, efficiency, and effectiveness, which is a combination of classical and NPM values but which crucially allows space also for the former, was well known in the NMS during the accession process (see Trondal and Peters, 2015).

On the other hand, the EU impact can also be observed in the design of administrative structures, particularly regarding agencies. A comparative study of agencies in the NMS demonstrates that the number of agencies increased substantially during the EU accession period (Randma-Liiv *et al.*, 2011), overtaking Anglo-American countries that had been the leaders of this part of NPM reforms in the previous decades. Agencies were created at a very high speed and with a larger scope than in most Western countries. As a result, the CEE countries have on average charged more tasks to agencies than most other countries (van Thiel, 2011). Thus, with some exceptions, the NMS are among the most “agencified” countries in the world, as a considerable amount of tasks have been delegated to various categories of agencies. The EU influence is particularly evident in the design of regulatory agencies and agencies responsible for administering structural funds. The form of a semi-autonomous regulatory agency was more or less unknown in CEE before the EU-accession process (Randma-Liiv *et al.*, 2011). As a result of this fast agencification process, the CEE countries structurally disaggregated a great deal of their executive and regulatory tasks from the core government.

All in all, a conscious EU “public service policy” was clearly setup against the NPM model and supportive of the classical Weberian system, whereas the EU influence on agencification (and some other individual PA tools) followed the pattern of NPM. The increase of administrative capacity, i.e. public administration reforms geared toward (higher) quality, was primarily EU-driven in the NMS. The European Commission was rather successful in pushing through major formal institutional instruments (such as the adoption of Public Service Laws in some candidate countries), but it was much less successful in influencing the actual content of change and the implementation of new legislation (Meyer-Sahling, 2011; Sedelmeier, 2012). It may well be that administrative capacity of the NMS *vis-à-vis* EU requirements was highly deficient throughout, right up to accession, and that “the EU has been far from consistent in the signals it has sent to the candidate states” (Verheijen, 2000, p. 41). But to the extent that NMS’ PA looked as good as it did in the end, this was to a very large extent due to the EU trajectory.

In sum, during the most crucial years of democratic institution-building as well as during the EU-accession period, the external guidelines as well as conditions set out by international organizations and bilateral foreign partners provided a certain orientation in the labyrinth of various models and solutions for the NMS. The effort to meet EU requirements offered some benchmarks for sound administrative policies. The important role of exogenous factors in the development of PA also explains similar trends and reform trajectories in CEE countries until the EU accession between 2004 and 2007.

### *2.3 Post-accession fine-tuning and the “paradigmtes”*

Since the EU accession, outside pressure to take hard decisions (including those concerning administrative reforms) has substantially declined. As exogenous factors behind public administration reforms disappeared, endogenous (domestic) factors obtained a greater role than ever before. One potential result of the growing importance of domestic factors was that increasingly, individual NMS opted for more and more divergent models and institutional solutions. Therefore, by 2017 it has already become difficult to define a common “CEE trajectory” of governance and administrative reforms. For example, when looking at the reforms in civil service, one can observe very different reform trajectories since the EU accession (see Meyer-Sahling, 2011).

All European countries have been looking for alternative approaches to PA for several decades already. One of the most discussed models for the period that followed NPM has been the so-called NWS, a fortuitous metaphor describing a model that co-opts the positive elements of NPM, but on a Weberian foundation (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011; Randma-Liiv, 2011; Drechsler, 2009; Pollitt *et al.*, 2009). The NWS was intended as an empirical-analytical,

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not as a normative model (to explain that several Western European countries were not NPM laggards, but had followed their own model). And yet, the NWS stands so far as perhaps the best explanatory model of what was and is going on in Europe, and it does precisely not, as the phrase goes, throw out good managerialist babies with the NPM bathwater (see Nemeč, 2010). The CEE countries have never systematically followed the NWS model, however, this is closest to how the PAs in most NMSs have naturally evolved: on the one hand, development of the Weberian foundation cemented by a German legal system as applied in many NMSs, and on the other hand, the experimentation with a set of more managerialist NPM tools. Such developments continued in the post-accession period, however, the pace of reform clearly slowed down compared to two earlier phases, and the specific reform tools and instruments differed considerably from one CEE country to another.

At the same time with the NWS, other new post-post-NPM paradigms, or better “paradigmettes” (because they exist in parallel to each other, with none rising to real dominance), arose, first of all those which wanted to preserve the basic NPM idea but now entailed lessons learned, such as the almost universally recognized value and coordination problems that NPM creates. These include, first of all, NPG as, basically, NPM with Weberian lessons learned, and with a public policy rather than an implementation focus (i.e. the mirror image of the NWS), but also coordination-emphasizing JUG and WoG. In addition, there were the leftover protagonists of the two main older paradigms (Weberianism and NPM), and even new converts to them. This has led to a post-NPM *Unübersichtlichkeit* that still characterizes PA today (see altogether Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011; also Powell and de Vries, 2011). In CEE, all of these were taken up to some extent, if mostly on an academic-rhetorical level, but it was the NWS (both before and after the concept was formulated and became known) which, especially before the Global Financial Crisis, reflected the reality of the CEE PA development (Pollitt *et al.*, 2009).

Counter-intuitively, the Global Financial Crisis which hit the world in the fall of 2008 did not change or even add to the different theories and practices of PA; rather, it impacted how earlier concepts were viewed and used (Randma-Liiv and Kickert, 2017). The NPM protagonists claimed during the fiscal crisis that exactly then was the time for a new wave of NPM reforms, this time, however, not under the mantle of “better service for less money” but just in order to spend less (the intensified “hollowing out” scenario of Lodge and Hood, 2012). Thus, although the NPM model was basically deemed obsolete by the time crisis hit, it resurfaced to some extent and in some countries in 2008-2012 because of the global financial crisis. (NPM as a toolbox never really went away, although the legitimacy of the tools was less questioned during theoretical NPM dominance and more so after its wane.)

From a more technical-administrative viewpoint, the trend of agencification was reversed in most CEE countries. The de-agencification process started in the mid-2000s and accelerated in the 2008-2010 period. Such a U-turn can be explained by the need for a rationalization of the structure and relations within the executive power after a rather chaotic period of “over-agencification” (Randma-Liiv *et al.*, 2011). The financial crisis and the accompanying social and political crises in several CEE countries, expressed through public dissatisfaction with government, forced political leaders to (attempt to) rationalize and reorganize the public sector. The search for savings and cost efficiency has led to the abolishment, absorption and merger of many agencies in NMS, thus signifying a shift away from NPM – but ironically with an NPM-related impetus (Randma-Liiv and Kickert, 2017).

The de-agencification process indicates a need for better coordination in CEE administrations, which is in line with various paradigmettes such as WoG and JUG, which also reflect quite mainstream criticism of NPM and its drawbacks globally, even by its erstwhile protagonists and champions. Indeed, although the NMS have been seen as rather successful in dismantling previous systems and structures of PA, they have been less

capable in integrating the new systems into each other. Very little has been done to develop new efficient mechanisms for inter- as well as inner-organizational coordination, both vertically and horizontally.

#### *2.4 e-Gov and PSI*

There is no doubt that the present time is denoted by the technological paradigm of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) age, to which in the public sector we refer to as e-Gov, often in the context, today, of Smart Cities and of the use of Big Data (and perhaps Open Data) in public affairs (see Mergel *et al.*, 2016) – no self-respecting PA community could argue against this, and rightly. And while the importance of the e-aspect in and for PA has been recognized since more than a decade now (Dunleavy *et al.*, 2006), that it has completely overtaken front and center stage in PA itself is arguably only the case since a few years. It is interesting, however, that neither is there a specific PA paradigm tied to e-Gov (the acronym e-PA practically does not exist), nor is there agreement which paradigm, or paradigmette, is most logically coupled to ICT – one would assume that one of the many larger projects studying the issue now will come up with some suggestions sometime soon.

The one PA phenomenon of the recent years that has dominated the discourse in some symbiosis with e-Gov, but not necessarily so – it would be possible to conceive it without ICT as well (e.g. through co-creation and co-production) – is PSI (see Kattel *et al.*, 2017). This is a very unclear concept; it is, among Innovation scholars, even controversial whether PSI exists or not. If one cannot properly delineate and define PSI, then the concept would denote any good idea or positive change in the public sector organizations as innovations, and “will lose credibility because it has no meaning” (Lynn, 1997, p. 98). “The sad truth is that many of today’s management seminars on innovation are filled with a promiscuous litter of buzz words and woolly concepts whilst being almost entirely bereft of any specific, empirically grounded propositions” (Pollitt, 2011). Even the most advanced concepts of PSI do not address in detail how typical PA processes (e.g. personnel selection, performance assessment) take place that would enable us to distinguish innovations from ordinary changes. What makes one reform or new service an innovation, and the other not? Often there seem to be normative connotations involved in distinguishing innovation from change: as innovation is good, a successful reform must be innovative (Kattel *et al.*, 2017).

Be that as it may, we cannot say that there is a special approach to, or distribution of, PSI in the CEE countries. Basically, the creation of iLabs and of much of PSI is an NPM-type reaction (as a carryover from the private to the public sector, often without much consideration of how appropriate this is), and it remains to be seen how this plays out in the immediate future. What is largely missing in CEE besides a few ad-hoc fashionable technical initiatives is the service delivery angle of PA reforms today (Verheijen and Rabrenovic, 2015). But this is not the case in every instance.

Rather, what is noticeable is that regarding the larger e-Gov world and even some considerable service delivery measures, while some NMS are among the laggards, some others are doing much better than Western Europe. The Estonian example, which is often seen as a model case not only for Europe but also for the Tiger States of East Asia and even the USA, is perhaps the best-known one, with such achievements as e-voting, e-medicine, e-residency, e-enabled deliberative democracy, e-taxes and so on (see Kalvet, 2012). In short, e-Gov is a world in which any CEE convergence is completely gone.

### **3. After 30 years**

Beyond the challenges of the digital world and of Big Data in and for PA, what can we say about PA in CEE in 2017? There were many common features in the politics and PAs of the CEE countries at the beginning of the 1990s because of their common communist legacy,

and also during the EU accession period stemming from the “administrative capacity” requirement by the EU. However, domestic decisions of individual CEE governments have moved them apart from each other, which makes it even more difficult than before to generalize findings and offer recommendations that apply to all CEE countries. This is likely to mark an end for a specific “Central and Eastern European administrative tradition,” as individual CEE countries gradually move toward Continental, South European, or Nordic traditions.

Moreover, the sustainability of administrative reforms essentially depends on domestic factors which may ultimately lead to reform reversal. As extreme cases, the recent reforms toward politicization and centralization in Hungary and Poland clearly threaten the fundamental features of democratic governance that 30 years ago seemed to be a non-controversial “given.” Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic all moved to dismantle legal and institutional civil service systems which were created before EU accession, and returned to a much more politicized civil service model, including a much greater managerial discretion to hire and fire staff (Meyer-Sahling, 2011). This has led Verheijen and Rabrenovic (2015) to argue that in the cycles of ups and downs in civil service development in CEE, the present is a “down.”

As we have stated before, the main problem during the transition was the shortage of well-qualified, motivated civil servants, and this does not seem to have been changed to a sufficient degree that one could be happy about it. In many cases, CEE civil services still lack the elements that bind the different parts of PA together in Western countries. There is an insufficient formal or informal framework of professionalism, which might provide an *esprit de corps* or any other kind of common identification and loyalty. If the central government contains loosely connected internal labor markets, every government unit is likely to develop its particular culture and work habits in the long run, thus developing rivalry rather than unity within the public service.

Therefore, the elements of the NWS that support the development of unity of PA as well as common public service culture, such as the preservation (or first of all, the creation) of the public service with a distinctive status, culture, and conditions (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011) as well as the recognition of the need for a capable state, are still particularly relevant for CEE. The development of a unified public service with a distinctive status could offer a backbone for the stabilization of the state apparatus and make the civil service less politicized. This would also allow for the development of continuity in the public service, an identifiable administrative culture and unified standards of conduct.

But whether any of this will be realized before the concept of CEE evaporates altogether, or whether some sub-regions will emerge as much more distinct governance and perhaps also PA, but much less oriented toward global-Western trends and principles, remains to be seen.

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