

Abstract

The importance of public administration (PA) education and training is obvious, any effective public administration system needs an influx of a new and well-educated workforce. Compared to the (relatively) better situation in other Central and Eastern European countries, the Czech Republic and Slovakia represent a very specific case – the falling number of students in PA programs threatens the existence of the only programs with international accreditation (those at Masaryk University Brno and Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica). The aim of this paper was to investigate the reasons why so few students apply and enroll in these EAPAA-accredited programs. Qualitative research is used to achieve this goal. In the opinion of the program chairs and our secondary analysis, there are multiple factors behind the very low level of demand which critically threatens the existence of the best master programs in the countries studied. A very specific issue that appears to be unique for both countries is free public university education with unregulated demand. Such an environment, combined with the performance-based funding of public universities and other higher education institutions, where the number of students is a decisive factor in the amount of the public grant to the university, generates an oversupply of places offered to secondary school graduates. The role of other potential barriers for the interest to study public administration is catalyzed by the ‘oversupply’ conditions. The questionnaire, the statements of program chairs, and our secondary analysis confirm that there is a role to be played by monitoring other potential barriers – the fact that programs are run in economics faculties, limited trust in politicians, government and public administration, the system of access to the civil service and salary levels in the public sector.

Keywords: public administration program, demand, enrolled, Czech Republic, Slovakia.

THE LOW DEMAND FOR PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION PROGRAMS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC AND SLOVAKIA: WHAT MAY BE BEHIND IT?*

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1. Introduction

In response to major global challenges and for the imperative of sustainable development, the Member States of the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015. At its core are the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which call for the implementation of strategies that fight poverty, improve health and education, reduce inequality, and promote economic growth. Goal 16 states the role of building effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels (United Nations, 2015). This applies, of course, to all levels of government, from central administration to local authorities. For example, according to the U.S. National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA), in recent decades the public sector and its constituents have often struggled to adapt to a rapidly evolving international, economic, social, technological, and cultural environment. To function effectively and move forward, governments must become action-oriented, enabling them to address new challenges and earn the public's trust. NAPA's list of 'Grand Challenges in Public Administration' — the 12 most pressing issues in public administration today (NAPA, 2018) is fully relevant to many other countries. It also well documents that the need to cultivate national public administration and increase its competence, efficiency, accountability and responsiveness is not limited to countries that have recently undergone major transformations (such as the Czech Republic or Slovakia).

Only loyal, motivated, and skilled public administration servants, administrators and other public sector employees can successfully work on solutions. The importance of public administration education and training is evident even though empirical research provides only limited evidence on the social returns to education in this area (e.g., Botev *et al.*, 2019; Psacharopoulos, 1994; Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, 2004). In terms of specific education and training programs in the broader field of public administration and management, we know much more about their institutional set-up, curricular content and development, as well as their teaching philosophy (e.g., Reichard and Schröter, 2017; Hajnal, 2003; Nemeč *et al.*, 2012) than their measurable impact on improving public administration.

However, there are still ample practical reasons to pay attention to these programs and seek to develop them. One of them is the natural age turnover of public administration employees. In the Czech Republic, for example, which is the focus of this paper, about 1/4-1/3 of the current public administration staff will retire in the next ten years. The current share of employees under 31 years of age is on average less than 10%, but the share of those over 55 years of age is about 21% (Eurostat, 2021). As the rules require a minimum university degree for most positions in public administration, this represents a demand for roughly 15-20 thousand university graduates. The situation in Slovakia, which is the second country in this paper, looks almost the same in relative terms.

However, the authors of this paper see (in both the Czech Republic and Slovakia) a visible trend of declining student interest to enroll in quality public administration programs, which should be the core source for future public administration experts. Their first idea

was to check whether this is the common trend for Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and to provide a broad comparative study covering the whole region. They contacted all programs registered in the Network of Institutes and Schools of Public Administration in Central and Eastern Europe (NISPAcee) database with a request to participate in a survey and provide data and expert insights on trends related to enrollment numbers. Unfortunately, we received only a modest response and data on only a few programs. For this reason, we directly contacted programs from the CEE region (namely the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, Estonia, Poland and Slovakia), which have been awarded accreditation/certification from the European Association for Public Administration Accreditation (EAPAA) and these programs eventually participated in our survey. Their responses indicate that in most of their countries, demand for PA programs is not a critical issue, and enrollments are mainly determined by national regulations and the internal capacities of higher education institutions.

The Czech Republic and Slovakia represent a very different case — the falling number of students in PA programs threatens the existence of both EAPAA-accredited programs at Masaryk University and the existence of the program at Matej Bel University, which received accreditation in the past. The contradiction between the undoubted potential demand for quality graduates for the Czech and Slovak public administration and the low interest of students in studying quality public administration programs in these countries appears to be a topic worthy of investigation. The aim of this paper is to find out the reasons why so few students apply and enroll in EAPAA-accredited programs at Masaryk University in Brno and Matej Bel University Banská Bystrica. The paper is based on a qualitative approach, data were collected from secondary sources through our own questionnaire and also through structured interviews with representatives of both programs under study.

The structure of this paper is as follows — in the next section we outline what is known about the demand for PA programs in the CEE region in the available literature; this is followed by a brief outline of our methodology and an introduction to the programs; in the final section we present the main findings from the interviews with representatives of the programs; this is followed by conclusions.

2. Determinants of demand for PA programs in the CEE region – what can be found in literature?

PA programs are important in supporting public sector development and in providing oxygen to organizations to introduce new ways of working, processes and service delivery (Proeller and Reichard, 2013; Broucker, 2015). They can also determine the professionalism and quality of civil and public service (Broucker, 2015).

In Central Europe, the establishment of a properly functioning civil service was one of the indirect entry conditions for the first accession wave (Nemec and de Vries, 2017). Already in 1999, Connaughton and Verheijen noted that PA programs in CEE states were developing rapidly. Available studies (see, for example, Staroňová and Gajduschek, 2016)

suggest that PA programs and education have been mainly researched in the context of developed countries, and less attention has been paid to the context of Central and Eastern European (CEE) and specificities of approaches in the individual countries. Some literature on PA programs in CEE countries has been published in international journals (and are available in English and not only in the national languages), especially after 2010 (with some exceptions — e.g., Hajnal, 2003).

Pevčín *et al.* (2019) summarized that research on PA programs in CEE countries focused on individual CEE countries (e.g., Gellén, 2013; Hajnal, 2015; Hajnal *et al.*, 2018), or presented a comparative analysis of the situation in selected CEE countries (e.g. Marčetić *et al.*, 2013), or focused on specific CEE sub-regions (for example, Koprić (2013) focused on South Eastern European countries), or compared the situation of CEE programs with those based on U.S. university programs (Staroňová and Gajdushek, 2016), or focused on a larger group of programs consisting of public administration, public policy and public management programs (e.g., Staroňová and Gajdushek, 2016; Verheijen and Nemeč, 2000), or public management programs (e.g., Nemeč *et al.*, 2012).

Pevčín *et al.* (2019) also pointed out that existing research on PA education in CEE countries is usually based on content analysis of existing study programs; the basic unit of the analysis is the individual program offered (Staroňová and Gajdushek, 2016). Starting from the assumption that PA education can reveal a lot about the identity of the field as perceived by scholars and practitioners (Staroňová and Gajdushek, 2016; Hajnal and Gajdushek, 2022), the available literature usually focuses mainly on the institutionalization of public administration or public management as a discipline and maps the content of existing PA programs. Staroňová and Gajdushek (2016), for example, conclude that there has been a growing number of public affairs programs in CEE countries over the last 27 years. Pevčín *et al.* (2019) suggest this.

According to Staroňová and Gajdushek (2016), public administration programs have traditionally focused primarily on the legal and formal institutional aspects of governance, while public policy and management programs have been completely absent and are relatively new. Their research suggests that master level PA (MPA) programs are offered by several branches of study (political science, economics, law, sociology) and can be both stand-alone programs taught in the faculties of social sciences, economics, or law, and/or in newly created and more specialized faculties of public administration, public policy or governance, as well as specializations which typically form part of general economics, social science, political science or law programs. They also point out that the late 20th and early 21st centuries saw a boom in private MPA programs, but only in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Such developments and the heterogeneity of PA programs raise questions about competition among programs; this issue may be particularly relevant for countries where there are a high number of such programs.

Staroňová and Gajdushek (2016) suggest that master PA (MPA) programs in the CEE region do not fit the so-called mainstream model. Their analysis of curricula found a low number of practice-oriented and analytical core courses and gaps in internships and suggested that MPA programs typically focus on economic theory, and typical courses are mi-

croeconomics, macroeconomics, economics of various subfields, accounting, and public finance. Where human resource management and strategic management could be found, they were usually among the electives and were relatively rare. Nemeč *et al.* (2012) also concluded that the public management component in MPA programs in CEE countries (they focused on the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland) is rare.

This raises questions about the extent to which PA programs differ from other programs offered by higher educational institutions, e.g., the extent to which PA programs differ from programs such as economics or business administration. According to Hajnal and Gajdusček (2022), the attractiveness of business management programs may determine the demand of prospective students. And, as they say, more attractive programs attract more and probably more capable students. This was also discussed by Malý (2014), who compared and discussed the willingness to enroll in the Business Administration, Finance and Public Administration program at Masaryk University between 2004 and 2012. Malý (2014) concluded that not only were there fewer applicants for the PA program, but their average ability also to study well (according to the LPT results!) was somewhat lower and seemed to decline over the time period. This was partly due to the admissions criteria (e.g., in 2011/2012, PA required 67th percentile vs. 88th in Finance, and that 88th percentile represented 1.7 times more students than PA at the 67th percentile).

The role of ownership (private vs. public) of universities offering PA programs was also discussed. According to Hajnal and Gajdusček (2022), this has only occasionally been scrutinized and mixed findings can be found in the literature. Staroňová and Gajdusček (2016), for example, report that privately run universities may have a lower quality of education because they lack adequate staff. Institutions also seek to increase their revenues rather than provide quality education (Hajnal and Gajdusček, 2022).

In many CEE countries (see, e.g., country reports published by the PAQUALITY project), the demand for PA programs is also incorporated into the data and structures (bodies) required in the internal quality assurance systems of higher education institutions. These quality assurance systems typically require programs to respond to feedback from program stakeholders. In the Czech Republic, for example, representatives of employers and graduates as well as students are to be included in the so-called 'Programme Councils', which have to meet on a regular basis to discuss the functioning and changes needed in the programs; representatives of employers, graduates and students are also members of other bodies set up within the quality assurance and management system of public universities, etc. But still, almost at the close of 2022, we have not found literature that is more concerned with the demand for PA programs by higher education institutions in the CEE region, which can also shape the content and quality of PA programs.

As Nemeč *et al.* (2017) suggest, PA education without any strict national educational standards can be effectively provided in countries with high demand, functional labor markets and well-developed professional standards, but they also highlight that the lack of national educational standards can lead to a chaotic and inefficient state in less developed countries where the production of supply-based curricula in the field of PA education is a reality. Hajnal and Gajdusček (2022) consider the demand for PA programs as an

important external factor shaping PA curricula in CEE countries. They point out that while universities may be prepared to provide more comprehensive, interdisciplinary education, practice (specifically employer organizations and potential future civil/public servants) favors established, law-based curricula (Romania being the only exception). They also highlight that the gap between PA practice and PA education is greater in the case of more prestigious universities — lecturers at such universities are expected and/or eager to publish in leading, predominantly Anglo-American journals, and they argue that this situation motivates professors to find research topics and approaches that are more internationally accepted and legitimate, despite their relative lack of relevance in the CEE environment. Pevčín *et al.* (2021) also point to gaps in the practical orientation of PA programs and suggest that by creating and introducing new contemporary teaching methods, PA programs in the CEE region can increase job opportunities for the participants, which may help boost enrollment figures.

Gajdushek and Hajnal (2022) conclude that the attractiveness of PA programs everywhere depends mostly on the relative position of civil service employment in the labor market. Similarly, according to Malý (2014), the declining demand for PA study programs was determined by two main factors: the growing public distrust in government and public administration in general (compounded by corruption cases) and the fact that a public officer has been a low-prestige job for several decades.

According to Staroňová and Gajdushek (2016), it is evident that institutional settings and the way MPA programs are designed are much more important in the design of core curricula than the country context. The institutional setting can also determine the extent to which professionals are involved in PA education (Neely *et al.*, 2018). Nevertheless, as Pevčín *et al.* (2019) suggest, the lack of uniformity of PA education in CEE countries is also determined by the country specific context, as it appears to shape the structure and content of PA programs. PA programs tend to be inward-looking, focusing on local, regional, and national administrative systems (Toonen, Verheijen and Bousekom, 1999; Randma-Liiv and Connaughton, 2005), they are also developed within a specific national quality assurance/assessment framework (Nemec and de Vries, 2017; Nemec *et al.*, 2017). Thus, when examining PA programs, it is necessary to combine a contextual approach with a focus on the institutional setting and how the program design is developed at the micro (organizational) level.

In conclusion, very little has been done on the issue of demand for PA programs in the CEE. This may be related to the fact that for most countries in the region the issue of demand is marginal. However, as our article suggests, this is not the case for the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

3. Methodology

This paper is based on data collected through a questionnaire survey that focused on the number of students in public administration (PA) programs in CEE (and potentially other) countries, not on the content of the programs. In the survey, we wanted to ask

representatives of higher education institutions in the CEE region for information and data on their main Bachelor/Master's public administration (PA) programs. We first sent the call to participate in our survey to all contacts in the NISPAcee database (we used our contacts from NISPAcee to distribute information about the survey and the call). The first call was distributed in mid-June 2022. Due to zero-response, the next call was sent in mid-August. Since we received only one response, we surveyed representatives of programs that had received EAPAA accreditation and directly contacted them in late August and early September 2022. As a result, we received input from EAPAA-accredited programs implemented in the Czech Republic, Romania, Hungary, Slovenia, Estonia, Poland, and Slovakia. Because the survey clearly showed that the Czech Republic and Slovakia appeared to be the exception in the countries, as the other programs did not struggle with the demand, we decided to focus only on programs from the Czech Republic and Slovakia and conducted additional follow-up interviews with representatives of the programs implemented by Masaryk University Brno, Czech Republic (Faculty of Economics and Administration; ESF MU) and Matej Bel University Banská Bystrica, Slovakia (Faculty of Economics; EF UMB).

4. Outlining the context – legal framework and the programs

4.1. Master's public administration program

Public Economics and Administration at ESF MU

The legal status of higher education institutions and the framework of their educational and research activities are regulated in the Czech Republic by the Act on Higher Education Institutions (Act. 111/1998 as amended). The Act distinguishes between public, private and state higher education institutions. The Act also distinguishes 'university' and 'non-university' higher education institutions (HEI). Masaryk University is a public university. Public universities have the status of a public legal corporation as a specific type of self-governing entity; universities are separate legal subjects. Public and state HEIs provide free education for citizens of all nationalities while studying in the Czech language. In private institutions, students are obliged to pay tuition fees.

As students themselves contribute only a minimum amount to the running of HEIs, most of the institutions' income comes from a one-off grant from the state budget under the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS) chapter. As additional sources of funding for HEIs, the Ministry uses two public science support agencies whose funding is linked to the state budget. These agencies provide project funding for basic and applied research of science on a competitive basis. Grant funding uses rather complex rules that follow the priority objectives for higher education by the MoEYS. Institutional funding of HEIs is derived from the scale and economic intensity of HEIs' performance (measured by the number of students enrolled and the financial intensity of accredited study programs) — the fixed part and the outputs of HEIs' activities and their quality — the performance part. The ratio of the fixed part to the performance part has been set at 82.46% and 17.54%

for 2022. Stability of funding is enforced by the principle that no HEI can experience a year-on-year decrease in its budget (sum of fixed and performance parts) of more than 2% (all information in this part is derived from the actual MoEYS guidelines — MoEYS, 2022).

The performance part of the budget quantifies the performance of HEIs, focusing on the results in educational and creative activities, dividing the HEIs into 4 segments. Segment 1 consists of art universities, segment 2 public non-university colleges, and segments 3 and 4 are the remaining universities, divided by size and volume of R&D performance (segments 3 and 4 differ little in how performance is funded). The individual segments use uniform quality and performance indicators to determine performance funding, which varies in weight across the segments. Here we present the weighting of indicators for segments 3 and 4: R&D outputs (30%), international mobility of staff and students (22%), graduation rates (15%), graduate employment rates (10%), foreigners in HEIs — academics and students (10%), external (non MoEYS) income (6.5%), other (6.5%).

The Public Economics and Administration program was introduced in Brno in the early 1990s with the establishment of the Faculty of Economics and Administration. The faculty was co-founded by professor Strecková, who had worked at the Faculty of Arts at the end of the communist regime, where she had worked on theories of economics of non-profit sectors. For simplicity's sake, it can be said that from the beginning of the faculty's operation, the management decided to offer one bachelor's and several follow-up master's programs. Even then, the Public Economics and Administration program was already facing lower demand from applicants than other programs. However, given the several-fold overhang of demand and the limits on the number of new enrollments, this was not a problem. As these limits were relaxed, the number of students in the program grew steadily. In the first decade of the 21st century, the follow-up master's program was accepting up to 120 new students per year. Most of the students came from a radius of about 100 km from Brno. At the same time, a significant proportion of students also came from more distant regions of the Czech Republic where there was not an adequate offer of university education. The second significant group of students were Slovaks, for whom Brno offers ideal conditions for study (distance and total cost of study). Over the past ten years, the program has seen a gradual decline in demand and, measured by unit costs alone, with 33 newly enrolled students for this academic year, is one of the most expensive programs offered by the faculty.

4.2. Master's public administration program

Public Economy and Management at EF UMB

The legal status of higher education institutions and the framework of their educational and research activities are regulated in the Slovak Republic by the Act on Higher Education Institutions (Act. 131/2002 as amended). The Act, like the Czech legislation, distinguishes between public, private and state higher education institutions. Matej Bel University is a public university. As in the Czech Republic, public universities have the status of a public legal corporation as a specific type of self-governing entity; the universities are separate legal subjects. The main income of public universities is a grant from

the public budget (Ministry of Education, 2022). This grant is performance-based and includes four subparts: grants for the provision of accredited study programs; grants to support scientific, development, and artistic activities; developmental grants; and grants to support socially disadvantaged students.

Most of the revenue is provided by the first sub-program and is allocated on the basis of a formula. The main elements of the formula are the number of students, the number of graduates, the educational costs of the program, placement, publications, and scientific grants received. The number of students determines approx. 60% of the total revenue provided by this sub-program, which means that a sufficient number of students is a decisive factor in the implementation of the program.

Grants to support scientific, development, and artistic activities are provided by three grant agencies linked to the Ministry of Education: Agentúra na podporu vedy a výskumu (APVV: Slovak Research and Development Agency), Vedecká grantová agentúra MŠVVaŠ SR a SAV (VEGA: Scientific Grant Agency of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic) and Kultúrna a edukačná grantová agentúra MŠVVaŠ SR (KEGA: Cultural and Educative Agency of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic) on the basis of a standard grant competition.

The program in Banská Bystrica was established in its original form 40 years ago (at the same time as the program in Brno) and has undergone many changes throughout its history. The number of students enrolled in the program has dropped from 250 ten years ago to the current number of 36 enrolled (data provided by the program). With such a small number of students, the program is unable to earn enough resources to finance its costs and the faculty leadership is looking for solutions (now cross-subsidizing it).

5. The views of the program leaders on the reasons for the limited demand and the analysis of the main arguments

The leaders of both evaluated programs provided a set of views regarding the critically declining trend in enrollment. In the answers of the EF UMB, the following factors were mainly highlighted as being responsible for the declining demand: demographics (declining number of secondary school graduates), low awareness of potential students about public administration and public economics, and the curriculum (the program is economically oriented, there are more mathematics and statistics courses, which are not popular among students). The program leader summarized these problems during the interview as follows:

‘In addition to demographic trends, I consider an important factor to be the very limited knowledge of secondary school graduates of what ‘public administration’ means. Our experience from study exhibitions and direct discussion with secondary school students confirm that these students have zero or very limited knowledge of public administration, public policy, public economics — and therefore they do not perceive the importance of related programs. A specific problem for our faculty is the fact that the program is implemented at the Faculty of Economics, and this

determines the curriculum. Courses like mathematics, statistics are not very appreciated by the young generation. In this respect, programs in Slovakia with a more legal/political sciences background may have a relative advantage.'

The Brno response highlighted a number of factors compared to EF UMB, in particular the salary level of graduates, competition within and between universities, the fact that graduates do not have direct 'preferential' access to civil/public service positions, the regional nature of demand, and limited trust in government, politicians and public administration.

The program leaders summarized the main factors during the interview as follows:

'We can identify several factors behind the decline in demand from prospective students. Let us mention the four most important ones: Firstly, demographics — the number of prospective students dropped significantly after 2010. This is related to the large drop in the birth rate after 1990 and also to the fact that a group of adults who lacked a higher education after 1990 have since obtained it. In recent years, the number of applicants has been almost constant, but their results in the admission process have been falling slightly. Second, because of lower demand, PA programs are admitting applicants with lower admissions scores. However, these students have a higher dropout rate during their studies, which discourages other prospective students. Third, there is competition among programs within the faculty for the best applicants. Applicants are then more likely to choose a program that has a simpler and catchier name (e.g., Management or Finance). In previous years, we have seen changes in the names of existing programs and the creation of new programs to appeal to potential prospective students. Perhaps the factor that most discourages studying PA programs is the aspect of low public recognition (both formal — salary, and informal). Working in the public administration is not perceived as important by society, which is confirmed by numerous statements made by politicians (e.g., about overemployment in the sector). The often-chaotic management of public administration by politicians is then often attributed to its employees.'

5.1. Analysis of the main arguments

The programs do not mention this, but the first question is to try to guess why the Czech Republic and Slovakia have such significant 'demand' problems, while similar trends are not so visible in other CEE countries (all other EAPAA accredited programs signaling either increasing demand or only very mild demand 'problems', mainly caused by national or internal regulations).

The authors see the main purpose in the institutional setting. The Czech Republic and Slovakia are unique in the region, but also in the world, due to 'free' public university education: students in public universities do not pay any flat fees to cover the cost of their studies (some fees exist, but these are not associated with standard studies). Not only is education at public universities 'free', but also the number of places offered is not centrally regulated. Especially in Slovakia, public universities have complete freedom in deciding

how many students to admit (and since they receive public grants according to the number of students and graduates, the incentive to admit and retain students is very high — see e.g., Nemeč, 2007).

SITA (2020) reported that, according to an analysis by the Technical University of Bratislava (2020), approx. 45 thousand places will be offered by Slovak universities in 2020 for less than 40 thousand secondary school graduates. Moreover, approx. 20% of these graduates will choose to study abroad — this should mean that the supply is higher than the maximum demand by more than 10 thousand places. Indeed, in such conditions, many universities are canceling entrance exams and accepting anyone who applies.

The situation in the Czech Republic is not so visibly critical, but it is not very different either. Such a high over-supply gives students the opportunity to apply for the most attractive programs such as IT, finance or law with a high chance of success. The attractiveness of PA programs is much lower and this limits the possibility to get enough applications — internal and external competition between programs (ESF MU mentioned above) is excessive in such conditions.

Both programs are offered at the faculties of economics

In both the Czech Republic and Slovakia, public administration programs are offered by different faculties/units — mainly law, political sciences, and economics faculties/units. A significant disadvantage may be the fact that the program is located at a faculty of economics (in both countries, economics also includes business). The program chair highlighted two barriers. The ‘external’ barrier is the need to study subjects such as mathematics, statistics or accounting, which do not suit many potential applicants — they can choose a program in political science or law, where mathematics is not part of the curriculum (this kind of competition even has an ‘inter-university’ character — Matej Bel University also offers a master’s program in public administration at the Faculty of Political Sciences and Masaryk University at the Faculty of Law). The ‘internal’ barrier is the fact that those who have decided to study at the Faculty of Economics have the opportunity to choose much more attractive programs at the faculty (finance, business, tourism, etc.). The fact that the demand for higher education is of a ‘regional’ nature is also evidenced by the enrollment figures reported by the ESF MU program (the same applies to the EF UMB program). There are two other universities in Brno offering programs in ‘Economics’, and two more programs in ‘Economics’ are also within 90 km of Banská Bystrica. With regional demand, competition for students between these faculties is strong.

Limited trust in politicians, government and public administration

Trust in politicians, government, and public administration, as well as the related prestige of the professions for which these study programs primarily prepare their graduates, may possibly influence the attractiveness of the respective study programs.

Data from the standard Eurobarometer survey show some differences between the two countries. While the Czech Republic showed an average tendency to trust regional and local authorities between 2017 and 2021 (the five-year average was 58.8% compared to 57% for

the EU as a whole, ranking the Czech Republic 11th), Slovakia was among the below-average EU countries at the same time (45.6% and 20th respectively). The same applies to the tendency to trust public administration. The Czech Republic reported a five-year average level of 54.4% (compared to 52% in the EU in 2021), ranking 13th. In contrast, Slovakia ranked 17th with 45.4%. Both countries are below average in trust in government (Czech Republic 17th, 30%; Slovakia 22nd, 25%, compared to the EU average of 37% in 2021); moreover, in 2022 Slovakia dropped to last 'place' in the EU with only a 21% level of trust.

These data do not seem to offer a reliable explanation on their own for the regional phenomenon of declining interest in public administration programs. Within the EU there are countries with significantly lower levels of trust (Croatia, Greece, Spain, Slovenia). However, it should be borne in mind that the Eurobarometer surveys the whole population, not the specific age group of young people from which the majority of applicants come. It is reasonable to assume that they have less trust in this type of authority and are therefore reluctant to pursue a career in this field. Moreover, the Czech Republic is a country where unemployment (including youth unemployment) has long been at the lowest level among EU countries. This largely eliminates the undeniable comparative advantage of public administration employment — greater stability and income security. The perception of public authorities by potential degree candidates may thus further affect the attractiveness of studying public administration studies.

The Czech Centre for Public Opinion Research (Tucek, 2019) has published a ranking of the prestige of professions based on a sample survey. Unfortunately, the profession of a public administration official does not appear in it. The closest profession to public administration is the 'deputy'. It ranks at the very bottom of the list, behind journalists, priests, secretaries, and cleaners. The entire ranking, which has been tracked since 2011, shows little variation, with the exception of the rise in the prestige of the security forces and the fall of professions related to politics and management.

Civil/public service access

There are no direct links between the PA program and the national requirements of the civil/public service entry systems in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. In both countries, the civil service system is relatively fragmented and decentralized, including the recruitment procedure (Staroňová and Rybár, 2021). Any university graduate can apply for a civil service position, and the civil service systems in both countries are position based. The appointment is on the basis of a competitive process, but this does not guarantee an appointment on merit (Staroňová, 2017). In such conditions, academic PA programs are not the main and predetermined area from where to source civil servants with effective initial knowledge and skills. Without a clear career perspective, the attractiveness of PA programs to their graduates is obviously limited.

Moreover, the Czech Republic was a country without a general civil service legislation and until 2015 had a rather fragmented legislation on public administration employees. This was despite the fact that the country was criticized by the European Commission and the OECD for the lack of specific legislation on the rights and obligations of civil servants,

which went hand in hand with the absence of a more coordinated civil servant education system in the pre-accession period.

The Czech Republic only formally responded to the European Commission's criticism by adopting the State Civil Servants Act (no. 218/2002), as the entry into force of this Act has been postponed almost every two years since 2003 when it was expected to come into force. In addition to the State Civil Servants Act, the Act on Civil Servants of Self-Governing Local Authorities (no. 312/2002) was also passed and came into force in early 2003. This Act is relatively short and regulates only some specific areas (in particular, requirements on recruitment, education and training, release of senior civil servants, and accreditation of institutions providing training for civil servants under the Act). In other areas, the Act refers to the general Labor Code.

Salary level of graduates

Not only is the career of graduates in the public administration 'dangerous', but in both countries, their eventual salary level is also problematic. For example, the Slovak Ministry of Finance (2020) published a comprehensive report on employment in the public sector, which also analyzed salary issues. According to this report (pp. 7-8), university graduates working in the public sector earn only approx. 80% of the salaries of their counterparts in the private sector.

In most segments of the public sector in both countries, salary levels are regulated and fixed — the basic salary level is a combination of the grade (job difficulty) and pay band (length of experience). Bonuses are possible, but the system for allocating them is completely non-transparent (Staroňová and Rybár, 2021). This form of pay for performance is not very attractive for many potential candidates.

6. Discussion and conclusions

The current turbulent times have posed a set of critical challenges to the public administration system. There are a number of studies and papers which attempt to summarize them. As an example, in 2019, the US National Academy of Public Administration (Gerton and Mitchell, 2019, p. 436) defined four areas and twelve 'grand-challenges' as follows:

1. Protecting and advancing democracy
 - a. Protect electoral integrity and enhance voter participation;
 - b. Modernize and revitalize the public service;
 - c. Develop new approaches to public governance and engagement;
 - d. Advance national interests in a changing global context.
2. Strengthening social and economic development
 - a. Foster social equity;
 - b. Connect individuals to meaningful work;
 - c. Build resilient communities;
 - d. Advance the long-term fiscal health of the nation.

3. Ensuring environmental sustainability
 - a. Steward natural resources and address climate change;
 - b. Create modern water systems for safe and sustainable use.
4. Managing technological changes
 - a. Ensure data security and privacy rights of individuals;
 - b. Make government AI ready.

To support the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals, the United Nations Committee of Experts on Public Administration formulated the ‘Principles of effective governance for sustainable development’, which were endorsed by the United Nations Economic and Social Council in July 2018 (ECOSOC, 2018). The eleven ‘Principles’ are as follows: competence, sound policymaking, collaboration, integrity, transparency, independent oversight, leaving no one behind, non-discrimination, participation, subsidiarity, and intergenerational equity. The COVID-19 crisis and the current war in Ukraine have created new additional challenges which require ‘robust governance for turbulent times’ as a response.

Is the current public administration education system prepared to respond to all the current challenges to which public administration systems should respond? This question was already evaluated at the level of Europe, and more specifically Central and Eastern Europe in 2013 when the Trans-European Dialogue attempted to answer the question ‘Is the field of PA education ready for the future of the public sector in Europe?’. The general answer was that the strong legalistic heritage of some continental European countries and their educational systems in particular was a critical barrier. The authors are concerned that not much has changed after this meeting (for more information on the contents of this meeting, see the special issue of the *Journal of Public Administration and Policy*, vol. 6, no. 2).

In the U.S., the NASPAA, as the leading public administration education association, has responded to the new challenges by adopting its accreditation standards (Gerton and Mitchel, 2019). For example, the graduate programs in the field are now required to adopt a set of competencies determined by the department’s mission and public service values in the following five areas:

- Lead and manage in the public interest;
- Participate in and contribute to the policy process;
- Analyze, synthesize, think critically, solve problems, and make evidence-informed decisions in a complex and dynamic environment;
- Articulate, apply, and advance a public service perspective;
- Communicate and interact productively and in a culturally responsive way with a diverse and changing workforce and society at large.

Gerton and Mitchell (2019, p. 440) also articulated the ‘current public administration academy roles’ as follows:

1. Inspire action
 - a. Set a ten-year agenda for the field (practitioners & academics);
 - b. Develop a baseline understanding;
 - c. Educate & inform stakeholders.

2. Enhance understanding
 - a. Conduct or support research to determine what works, identify key innovations, and disseminate effective practices and lessons learned;
 - b. Convene conferences and seminars on particular grand challenges and focus areas;
 - c. Develop case libraries and toolkits.
3. Connect stakeholders
 - a. Interagency;
 - b. Intergovernmental;
 - c. Intersectoral;
 - d. International;
 - e. Academics and practitioners.
4. Drive change
 - a. Identify and assess solutions;
 - b. Highlight successful innovations & promote effective practices;
 - c. Identify ways to scale up solutions;
 - d. Develop action plans & issue recommendations;
 - e. Assess & report on progress.

The issue of the relationship between public administration practice and public administration education, the level to which programs in Central and Eastern Europe are increasing their orientation to practical relevance (as one of the issues outlined above) was mapped by the PAQUALITY project (for more information see https://www.nispa.org/paquality.php?proj_id=16&sid=1887).

Findings based on employer and graduate perceptions suggest that all programs in the region need to make extra efforts to increase students' general skills in terms of their analytical competencies, critical thinking, and ability to independently plan and implement projects (Špaček, 2019a and 2019b), skills related to data collection and analysis and evaluation skills (Vitálišová *et al.*, 2019). Further regular screening of competencies (based on employer and graduate perceptions) was recommended in this project. Methodical guides have also been published to increase competency-based education that would enable students to advance their competencies and better prepare them to meet the day-to-day challenges of public administration (Nemec *et al.*, 2021).

In the era of the above challenges, knowing that the declining demand for public administration programs is a critical problem in the Czech Republic, the authors of this article have attempted to obtain comprehensive information on the demand situation in the whole CEE region. This was not successful, perhaps because demand data is sensitive for faculties and their programs. Data obtained from 'EAPAA-designated' programs suggest that critically low demand appears to be a problem specific to only two countries — the Czech Republic and Slovakia. This article has attempted to identify why, and such an analysis is critically important, as the combination of limited demand and performance-based public funding (based on the 'wrong/pervasive' indicators: student numbers and quality of academic papers) critically limits the ability of programs to respond to current global and public administration challenges.

In the opinion of the program chairs and our secondary analysis, there are more factors behind the very low level of demand which critically threaten the existence of the best master's programs in the countries studied — ESF MU and EF UMB programs. A very specific issue that seems to be unique to both countries is free public university education with unregulated demand. Such an environment, combined with the performance-based funding of public HEIs, where the number of students is the determining factor for the amount of public grants to the university, generates an oversupply of places in HEIs.

The role of potential barriers to interest in studying public administration is catalyzed under the conditions of 'oversupply'. The questionnaire, the statements of program chairs and our secondary analysis confirm that the following potential barriers would play a role — the fact that programs are delivered in economics faculties, limited trust in politicians, government and public administration, the system of access to the civil/public service and public sector salary levels.

The last positive news is the fact that the programs analyzed are not passively waiting for their 'end' due to too low demand and the financial infeasibility of running them. Both program chairs mentioned a number of 'standard' marketing measures, but also very specific activities, implemented to attract more students. In their opinion, the most successful tactic is the creation of joint bachelor programs with other faculties of the university. Experience shows that these kinds of programs represent an effective source of applicants for the analyzed master's in public administration programs. The second option is foreign students, but this opportunity is not yet yielding results — the number of students enrolled in the English variants of the analyzed programs is still critically low (perhaps because ESF MU and EF UMB are not located in the capital city, and in particular the journey to Banská Bystrica, which is a relatively small city, is still 'somewhat' complicated).

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