

Role and Role Perceptions of Senior Officials in Slovakia

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Introduction

The transition of Central European countries into modern democracies in the past decade brought a lot of questions and problems connected with institutional redesign. So far, the majority of academic studies focused on such topics as electoral systems, multi-party politics, coalition governments and constitutional review whereas the supranational organizations were interested in the degree of 'Europeanization' or 'Westernization', thus into the formal framework adopted that corresponds to democratic standards.

Part of the process of making new institutional arrangements relates to the role of individual senior officials, notably to their clear division into political or administrative ones. Although the importance and need of establishing Senior Civil Service is recognized by many international organizations such as European Commission, OECD etc., so far not many studies have been undertaken in this field.

This paper focuses on the analysis of the formal and actual role perceptions of the senior civil servants in Slovakia. The research method follows the methodology developed by Guy Peters and Tony Verheijen and is a part of the study on politico-administrative relations. As the definition of senior official is missing in the Slovak formal legislation, the author analyses all relevant formal documents (Law on Civil Service, Competency Law, Coalition Agreement) in order to provide a clear overview of top civil servants in the Slovak context. The second part of the paper focuses on the role perceptions of the identified top civil servants from their point of view. This part draws from the empirical research.

PART I – FORMAL ROLES

1. Context and Background

Immediately after the velvet revolution in 1989, the former Czechoslovakia engaged in a democratic transformation. The public administration reform process was initiated in 1990 and envisaged two associated and interconnected reforms: *decentralization* (handing over responsibilities from the state administration to territorial self-government) and *civil service reform* (defining the new status of civil servants).

Following 1992 elections, a new government was created by a coalition of populist parties with national and social orientations and some authoritarian inclinations led by Vladimír Mečiar's HZDS.¹ The only public administration reform during this term (1994-1998) was a new territorial division with a slow process of deconcentration (transfer of competencies from top to lower level of state administration). The ruling government had made no effort for the introduction of decentralization or introduction of such laws that would affect the behaviour of civil servants. As a result, the politicization of the civil service during 1994-98 era was strengthened and the environment in which the civil

¹ HZDS led coalition brought about the split of Czechoslovakia in 1992. After premature elections in 1994, HZDS (with nearly half of the seats in the parliament) became again the leading party in the coalition with Slovak national party and Association of Workers and ruled the country full term from September 1994 to September 1998.

service was operating was highly politicized, not transparent and lacking ethical principles which in turn resulted in high turn over among civil servants.

The 1998 elections brought into power a broad coalition ranging from the right (Slovak Democratic Coalition, Hungarian Coalition Party) to left (Slovak Democratic Left and Party for Civil Understanding), which was reflected in the internal tensions, conflicts and ultimately in the delay and compromises in the administrative reforms.² Thus, the administrative reform, including the laws on relations among civil servants became the struggle point of the coalition parties and their power interests.

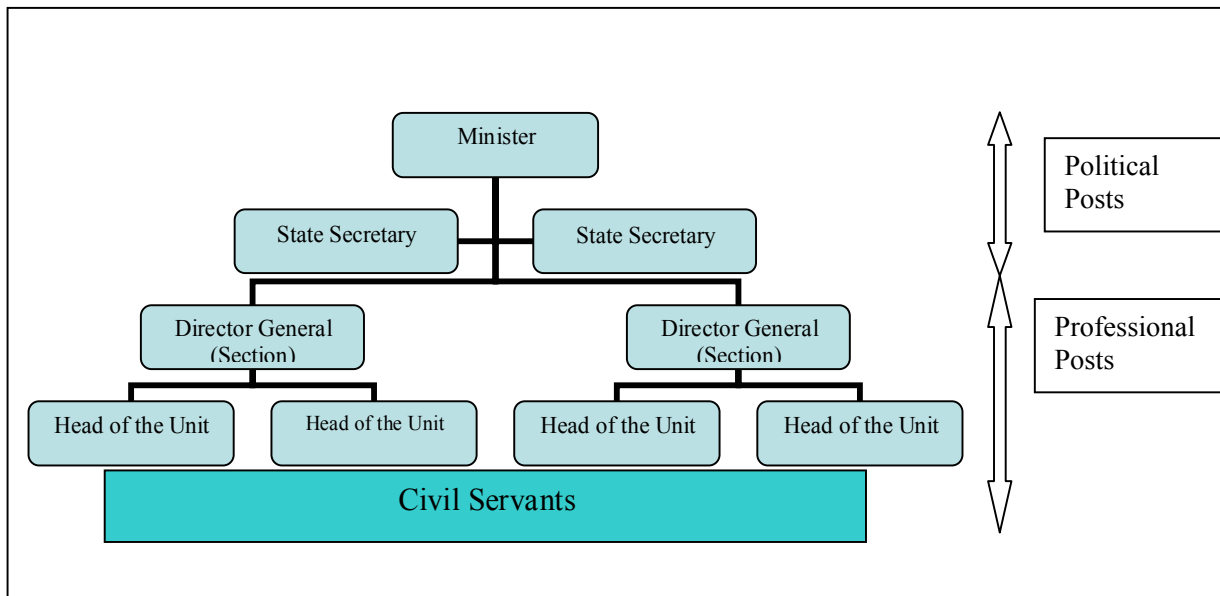
Vital piece of legislation for the public administration reform were legislative norms that arranged organisational relations among politicians and civil servants, namely the *Law on the Civil Service* and the *Law on the Public Service*; both passed by the parliament in July 2001. These long-awaited legal rules, which had been in preparation for almost two years, took force on April 1, 2002. Prior to that the practice was that each incoming government tried to place its own people into all key positions (sometimes even two or three layers down in the hierarchy). The main ambition of the Civil Service Law was to make the civil service more professional, and to reduce the vulnerability of civil servants to changes in government. Thus, the new law clearly distinguishes between a *political post* (e.g. president, cabinet including individual ministers) and a *professional career post* (head of the office, director generals of the section, heads of units and other staff at the ministry)

2. Structure of the Ministry and Definition of Senior Official in Slovakia

A formal structure of a ministry in Slovakia is depicted in the Figure 1. The ministry is headed by a *minister* who is appointed by the winning coalition and who is a member of the cabinet. Each ministry has one or two *state secretaries* who are political nominees of a party whom this post belongs. These political posts are the core of coalition negotiations and are anchored in the coalition agreement. The distribution of political posts and their arrangement within the ministry strictly respect the **principle of proportionality**, i.e. each party represented in the coalition has such a number of political posts (in this case ministers and state secretaries) that correspond to the ratio of votes gained during the parliamentary elections. A Ministry is divided into Departments that are responsible for a particular substantive part of the ministry's agenda. Usually, there are a few supportive departments (e.g. legislative, financial, EU, information technology) that are either separate or integrated into substantive departments, depending on the type of a Ministry. Each department is headed by a *director general* and further subdivided into units which are headed by *heads of units*. A Ministry has also a *Head of the Office* who is in charge of administrative and personal tasks in a day-to-day run of the office. He together with the director generals belongs to the top professional civil servants.

Figure 1: General Structure of the Ministry in Slovakia

² More information on the effects of the coalitions on the policy making process, including administrative reform can be found in Staroňová K., Malíková L. "Politico-administrative Relations under Coalition Governments in Slovakia." In Verheijen T., Vass L. (eds.) *Coalition Politics*. Bratislava: NICPAcee (to be published).



The term *senior official* does not exist as a formal status and form of appointment (neither political nor professional) and it does not appear in any piece of legislation in Slovakia. Thus, in order to be able to identify senior officials in the Ministry's hierarchy, an overview of the roles of officials according to the Civil Service Law³, Competency Law⁴, Coalition Agreements and internal ministerial regulation is provided. On the basis of the analysis of these documents, certain criteria were applied that enabled the author to identify senior officials:

- the formal status in the hierarchy (top layer);
- form of appointment (political vs. professional);
- influence on decision making and policy making process (executive team of the Ministry).

The Civil Service Law provides a definition of a *civil servant* and recognizes both political and professional career posts. Within the professional hierarchy it specifically mentions two positions: an *official* and *head of the office*. According to the law, an official is a civil servant who is authorized to instruct subordinated civil servants to fulfill civil service (§9) and a head of the office is the hierarchically highest official in the respective office, responsible for personal and organizational run of the office (§10). The former description of the post, however, does not provide any information as to the formal status in the hierarchy (level of superiority and subordination) and influence on decision making and policy making. The law defines political posts as "those to which the nominees were elected or recalled by the Parliament or those who were nominated or recalled by the a) president; b) Cabinet; c) head of the Parliament; d) head of the

³ Act No. 312/2001 on the Civil Service Law.

⁴ Act No. 575/2001 on the Organization of the activities of the Cabinet and on the Organization of the Central Institutions of the State Administration.

Constitutional court” (§5). Thus, it does not mention and does not provide any information on the number and roles of the political posts, notably of the state secretaries.

The Competency Law states the number of ministries, their basic competencies and basic structure of a Ministry: Minister is running the whole ministry, and ministry is divided into departments headed by general directors. The internal organization and division of roles within a Ministry is left for the internal regulation of each Ministry. It is the only formal legislation that talks about *state secretaries*, however, only very briefly when the role of a state secretary is stated as a deputy to Minister in the case of his/her absence. According to the law “...the minister may delegate some of his/her rights and tasks also in other events. The state secretary has an advisory vote when representing the minister at the Cabinet’s meeting.” As a result, the actual role of the state secretary is not clear, it depends from the minister what tasks and duties is he or she going to deliver and thus the state secretaries role varies from the ministry to ministry.

In practice, the executive team of each ministry consists of the minister, state secretaries, head of the office and directors general. This team meets regularly, once a week to discuss all important matters concerning policy development and makes decisions in this regard. Therefore, in this paper it will be this group of top civil servants who are going to be considered as senior civil servants and who were interviewed for the purposes of their role perception. The last group of interviewees were heads of the units at the level below the position of the directors general.

The **Minister** represents the Cabinet in the Ministry and is exclusively in charge of the agenda at the Ministry. He sets the priorities and issues to be dealt with, represents the ministry at weekly Cabinet sessions and coordinates work to be done at weekly executive team meetings of the ministry. Usually, he has his own administrative staff that ranges from the head of his office, press officer, secretary and advisors.

The position of a **state secretary** was introduced in 1992 as a part of new institutional arrangements. As it has been mentioned earlier the status of a state secretary is not clear. It is indirectly mentioned in the Law on Civil Service, where political posts are those nominated among others also by the Cabinet and its role is vaguely defined by the Competency Law as a deputy of a Minister whose scope of tasks is to be defined by the Minister. Also, the number of state secretaries is not defined. The practice is to have one or two state secretaries at each ministry, but the number is determined in the coalition agreement and it follows rather the principle of proportionality than the real need of a ministry, its scope of agenda or prioritization. As a result each government has a different number of state secretaries, with increasing tendency (see Figure 2).

In spite of the unclear position, three basic functions can be identified⁵:

- deputy to the minister internally and externally
- permanent run of the ministry or part of the agenda
- representation of coalition interests at the ministry

⁵ Beblavý (ed.) (2002), p. 40.

The first function, representation of the minister internally and externally, is the only function anchored in the Competency law, however, the scope and extend to which the state secretary functions as a deputy is left for the discretion of the minister. The second function, run of the ministry or part of its agenda, is the intention when setting up the post of a state secretary. Particularly ministries with a broad agenda should have two state secretaries so that the agenda can be divided, e.g. at the ministry of education higher education is run by one state secretary and primary and secondary education is run by the other state secretary.

The third function, representation of coalition interests, is directly related to the way of political nominations made for this position. Each government made different arrangements of post distribution, ranging from one party nominees present at each ministry (1994-98), to a complicated arrangement when a minister was from one of the coalition parties, and at least one of his state secretaries had to be from another coalition party (1998-2000).⁶ In this way, each ministry had a representative of at least two coalition parties. Current government abandoned this principle. Thus, the post of a state secretary is also a source of influence as well as a source of control and (or) cooperation among coalition partners. Whatever the arrangements were during the each government, each agreement clearly defines the ratio among coalition partners.

It must be noted, however, that there are cases when the posts of a state secretary were assigned to the field specialists with no political affiliation. During the second coalition Government (2002 – now) this practice was reinforced and more ‘expert’ appointments have been done (See Figure 2). Naturally, as the distribution of posts of state secretaries belong to the political parties, it is a specific party that nominates an expert to this position.

Figure 2: Political posts (ministers, state secretaries)

government	ministers (ministries)	state secretaries		
		total #	party members	expert appointees
1994 - 1998	15	17	17	0
1998 - 2002	15	22	20	2
2002 - present	14	22	16	6

The absence of the definition of a state secretary leaves space a) to the minister to avoid and ignore this position if he wants to, particularly on the basis of disagreements in the coalition when a state secretary becomes a purely formal figure; b) to the state secretary with discretionary activities where it is impossible for a minister to control him because state secretary is accountable to the Cabinet and not minister. In either case the result is a dysfunctional and inefficient ministry where political tensions among the coalition parties are reflected within the ministry; notably minister and state secretaries.

⁶ Staroňová, Malíková, (2003).

Head of the office is according to the new Civil Service Law the top administrative function at a ministry. Prior to the new Civil Service Law, however, the head of the office was a clear political post, usually from the same party or affiliated to the party of the minister. This was a natural consequence of the fact that state secretaries in the 1998-2002 ruling term according to the coalition agreement had to be from a different party than the minister. As a result minister often felt alienated from his political appointees (he had no word in choosing them) and thus wanted to have a trustworthy political representation. Often, the heads of the offices filled this vacancy and assumed de facto the role of a state secretary.

After the Civil Service Law came into effect on April 1, 2002 and required this post to be apolitical, those heads who were in the political party either withdrew from the office (e.g. Ministry of Justice) or officially left the party. Currently, this position is purely administrative according to the law, however, the heads are still members of the executive team and do have influence on policy making. Internal ministerial regulations reinforce head's of the office managerial role. According to these regulations the head of the office is responsible for professional, administrative and technical run of the ministry.

Directors general perform duties within his or her department's jurisdiction, coordinate its work activities and supervise policy development and implementation. They manage the human resources at their disposal , submit proposals for necessary financial resources and exercise control over substantive issues and processes in their departments. It is directors general who produce draft concepts, strategies, draft laws and any written documentation for the policy making process with or without the necessary support from their subordinates. Directors general are fully accountable to the Minister.

Besides the above mentioned senior civil servants, interviews were conducted also with **heads of units** who are the first level below the directors general. They usually work on the command of the directors general and do the actual elaboration of the material. Heads of units can be of substantive nature or supportive nature (legislation drafting, budgeting, IT). They report directly to the directors general.

Any vacancy in the professional civil service has to be filled on the basis of competition. The procedures for filling these vacancies are prescribed by the Civil Service Law (§15) that names evaluation committee for the selection of an appropriate candidate. The political nominations are part of the coalition agreements.

3. Policy elaboration and approval process in Slovakia

The formal framework for policy making is set by the Constitution and laws that regulate the initiation of the new laws and amendments, the process of law adoption and its promulgation. All processes that are formally regulated are of legislative nature, regulated by, in particular, the Legislative Rules of the Government, Guidelines for Drafting and Presenting the Materials for Sessions of the Government of Slovakia and Act of the National Council on the Rules and Procedures of the National Council.

Formally, the Constitution of the Slovak Republic and other normative legal acts recognize three stages of the policy making process: a) legal initiation of the new laws and amendments; b) the process of law adoption; c) and its promulgation.

A) Law Initiation

The Constitution of the Slovak republic stipulates that bills (draft laws) may be introduced by the Committees of the Parliament (National Council), members of the Parliament and the Government (Cabinet) of the Slovak Republic. In practice, most bills and other regulatory instruments are initiated and prepared by individual ministries (on the basis of the government program) where also the actual drafting work is carried out. In 80% of the cases, the individual ministries follow the Plan of legislative tasks that is being prepared annually on the basis of the government program.

The ministry elaborates draft legislation, concepts, action plans or any related policy documents that are discussed at the weekly meetings of the executive team of the ministry. Each document is then signed by the minister and sent for reviewing at the adoption stage.

B) Law Adoption

The process of law adoption follows a very formal sequencing of concepts and legislation as stipulated in the Legislative Rules of the Government. In this process, the respective department of the ministry prepares and drafts a policy document or a piece of legislation, which then progresses through a review process in the following steps:

- intra-ministerial review by other departments and leadership of the ministry (review by other organizational units within the ministry)
- inter-ministerial review by other ministries and subordinated institutions (so-called commenting period)
- review by the Ministry of Finance (impact on the state budget)
- review by the Office of the Government (Institute for the Approximation of Law: compliance with the EU legislation; Legislative department)
- review by a relevant advisory councils of the government (Legislative Council: legislative logic and compliance with the Constitution and other laws)
- approval by the government
- review by a relevant committee of the parliament
- approval by the parliament (3 readings)

At every stage of the law adopting process, the law drafter co-operates within his/her ministry, the Office of the Government and often with the Chancellery of the Parliament.

C) Promulgation

The Constitution stipulates that each act passed by the Parliament shall be signed by the President of the National Council, the President of the Slovak Republic and by the Prime Minister. The President has the right to return the law with comments to the Parliament or sign it within 15 days after his receipt of the act. The Parliament must reconsider the act and when it is passed, it must be promulgated. Any law enters into effect after

promulgation in the Collection of Laws and into force by the fifteenth day after promulgation in the Collection of Laws (unless specified otherwise in the law itself).

PART II – REAL ROLES AND ROLE PERCEPTIONS

The interviews were conducted in the period of August – November 2002 with the senior officials and one level below the senior officials from the selected ministries, notably the Ministry of Education (5), Ministry of Health (1), Ministry of Labour (4), Ministry of Justice (7) and Ministry of Transportation (1). Although, Slovakia had elections in September 2002 the interviews were strictly made with the officials who were at the position during the period of 1998 – 2002⁷, although some of the interviewees have not lasted the whole period, particularly in the political posts.

The list of interviewees is as follows:

- ministers: 2
- state secretaries: 4
- heads of the office: 2
- general directors: 6
- head of the units: 4

1. Professional Profile of the Senior Officials in Slovakia

All of the interviewed senior officials are highly educated (university degree), two of them have obtained their degrees in U.S.: one head of the office has a law degree (LLM) and one general director a MPA degree. Usually, the acquired education corresponds to the field of specialization: legal education at the Ministry of Justice, degree in engineering at the Ministry of Transportation, medical degree at the Ministry of Health and social sciences at the Ministry of Education and Labour, though there exist exceptions as well.

All senior officials came to the ministries only with the change of the government in 1998, except of one general director at the Ministry of Justice who is in his position since 1992. Even the administrative positions of the heads of the office were appointed in 1998, at time when this post used to be a political one. When the Civil Service Act came into effect in April 1, 2002 and required this post to become apolitical, one of the interviewed heads who was at the same time a member of the party, left his position. Majority of political senior officials (ministers and state secretaries), including 1 head of the office, are career politicians who were members of the parliament prior to their nomination after the elections in 1998. Only one state secretary at the Ministry of Health was prior to his nomination deputy to the director of the main insurance institution and a medical doctor in a hospital.

Professional senior officials before their appointment to the post of general directors have a long history of employment in their respective specialty: director generals from the Ministry of Justice are former judges; directors general from the Ministry of Education come from Universities or secondary schools where they acted as teachers/directors, general directors from the Ministry of Labour used to be researchers in the field of their

⁷ The interviews were conducted either by the author Katarina Staronova or by Ludmila Malikova, associate professor at the Political Science Department of Comenius University Bratislava.

specialization. Thus, the government tried to depoliticize this level by bringing experts in their respective fields and as one of the interviewees noted to “bring the work of the Ministry closer to the real world and practice by appointing practitioners into these positions”. After 2002, out of the six interviewed general directors only two are not among senior officials any more (1 died and 1 returned to the judge practice).

Figure 3: Professional Profile of the interviewed senior officials and heads of the units

	ministers	state secretaries	Heads of the office	general directors	heads of the units
# of interviewees	2	4	2	6	4
Educational background	1 lawyer, 1 engineer	1 lawyer, 1 social scientist, 1 engineer, 1 medical doctor	1 lawyer (LLM), 1 social scientist	2 lawyers, 1 engineer, 3 social scientists (1MPA),	2 lawyers, 2 social scientists
arrival to the ministry	1998	1998	1998	1998 (1 in 1992)	1992-1998
Previous working experience (after 1990)	MPs	3MPs, 1 subordinated inst. in PA	1 MP, 1 PA	researchers, professors, judges	subordinated institutions in PA
Party membership	2	4	1*	0	0

Note: * At the time of the interview, the interviewee has already left this position because the new Civil Service Act that came into effect on April 1, 2002 required heads of the office to be apolitical.

The level below the senior officials, heads of the units, came to the ministries much sooner than their superiors, the majority during the previous governments. Prior to their entry to the public administration they used to work either in the subordinated institutions of the Ministry or in the NGO sector. None of them is involved in the political parties or other organizations.

2. Review of the Senior Officials’ Role Perceptions

Both ministers perceive themselves as key policy makers and leaders of their respective ministries, managing internal and external aspects of the organization. Both of them spend approximately half of their time on consulting, communicating and organizing agenda of/within the ministry with the senior staff and their main effort focuses on “making things happen” (see Figure 4). Both of the ministers lead operational meetings of the executive team (minister, state secretary, head of the office and general directors) that meet at least once a week, usually on Mondays and where all important decisions take place. The other half of their time is spent on managing policy issues with external stakeholders, ranging from interest groups, union representatives to political interests of coalition partners and members of parliament. Both of them spend considerable time focusing on relations between the ministry and political leadership, particularly from the

coalition partners. In this sense, both ministers perceived extreme pressure from coalition partners on the development of certain policies and on personal representation in public agencies. One of the ministers confessed that particularly one coalition partner exercised enormous pressure on him to fill the positions of substantive senior officials at the ministry from the ranks of the party.

Two of the state secretaries perceive themselves primarily as managers of part of the agenda within the ministry and as policy advisors in that agenda to the minister. The minister delegated the responsibility for a part of the agenda to the state secretary and it was the state secretary who supervised the delivery of public policies in the given area. The two state secretaries view this role to be dominating as they spend nearly entire working time on policy issues and internal management, including budget preparation and personal management. Both state secretaries agreed that the division of the agenda and responsibilities between the minister and him (whether each is responsible for own agenda or both together) is the best and most efficient approach to deal with the broad tasks of a ministry. The division depends on the minister. Around 15% of the working time was spent on consultations in various governmental advisory bodies or with members of the parliament. Another big area of the working activities were negotiations with various interest groups.

On the other hand, two other state secretaries interviewed, perceive their roles at the ministry as a minimal ones. These two state secretaries were responsible for only a very little part of the agenda that was even not a high priority. They spent only little of their working time on management and policy issues. In their opinion, most, if not all of policy issues of the Ministry were dealt with under the supervision of the minister and in one case with a big authority given to the head of the office. They spent more time in negotiations and consultations with colleagues from the parliament and coalition.

These different perceptions of the roles of a state secretary only confirms the problems raised in the previous section. As one of the “weak” state secretaries stated *“the role and functions of the state secretary are badly defined in the Slovak legislation. He/she is a deputy of the minister, however, without any authority. He/she is politically nominated but the responsibilities are not adequate to such a position”*. This statement reflects the true nature of the role of a state secretary who, without any formal definition of the post, is entirely dependent on a minister and his division of authority, responsibilities and tasks. As a result, some state secretaries are strong and do act as deputy ministers in the full meaning of the word, whereas other state secretaries are weak and de facto ignored at the ministry and all decisions take place without them. This pattern is particularly visible at ministries where the coalition tensions are reflected in the minister – state secretary relations. Here, the impact of a coalition government is the most visible one.

All of the state secretaries, regardless whether strong or weak, felt tremendously the tensions among the coalition partners and complained how they are reflected in the work of a ministry. One of them stated that *“the instability within the coalition and inability to reach a common decision was always present in a daily work of the ministry which made the daily routine more difficult”*. All of them also complained about the amount of time

they have to dedicate to various public events, ranging from opening a conference to leading a press conference.

General directors perceive themselves as leaders and managers of their respective area within the ministry and at the same time policy advisors to the superiors in their field of their expertise. Four of the interviewed directors generals were appointed in a newly established departments which they had to develop both in terms of staffing, priorities setting and activities development. As one of them stated the most attractive part of his job was that he did not have a predecessor in the newly created department and he could form it according to his vision and he is particularly proud of the achievements he managed to gain. He praised the fact that he was relatively free to prepare policies under his supervision (except for budgeting) and he had to only report weekly on latest and planned activities. The majority disliked the administrative / bureaucratic aspects of their post, particularly related to the exercise of authority such as signing of enormous amount of written documentation. All of them confirmed that their relationship to the political leadership is based on their knowledge and expertise and purely professional. All of them perceive themselves as professionals in the policy making process in the specialized area and agree that most of their working time is devoted to that purpose.

Figure 4: Role Perceptions of the Interviewed Senior Officials and heads of units (1998-2002)

	external roles		internal roles				other
	broker	interest groups	leader	manager	policy advisor	administrator	
Political							
minister	50%		50%				media
state secretary	15%	5%	20%	60%			public events
	30%	40%	0%	10%	20%		
Professional							
head of office			0%	20%		80%	
	20%		20%	60%			
directors general	5-20%	25%	50%		50-100%	15%	lecturing
unit head	1%	10-20%	0%	10%	20-30%	50%	

Note: Broker – focusing on relations between ministry and political leadership, inter-ministerial coordination, building coalitions across ministries

Interest groups – dealing with outside interest groups

Leader – ‘a person that can create followers’ rather than an attribute of position

Manager – pro-active orientation on personnel, budget and internal organization

Administrator – passive administrative role

Policy advisor – professional policy orientation

Heads of the office perceived their role very differently, although it was recognized that this has changed with the introduction of the new Civil Service Law. One head of the office perceived his role to be administrative, managing the internal run of the office. On the other hand, in the case where the minister and state secretary did not come along due to the previously mentioned system when the state secretary comes from a different coalition party than the minister, the head of the office assumed de facto the role of a

state secretary and it was even recognized that way. He noted that “*my minister needs a person to be trusted so that he can divide the work load and fully concentrate on his part of the portfolio*”. The head had full support to exercise independent leadership and managed his part of the ministry, including personal and policy making process. This leadership role was exercised primarily internally with him focusing on the relations with his political leadership and not intervening into cross ministries relations. After the introduction of the Civil Service Law in April 2002, the head of the office withdrew from the office and publicly announced that he plans a political career and respects the principles of politico-administrative division. He urged all the other heads to do the same and claimed that withdrawal from the party membership rather than from the office is not transparent act and it would not help depoliticize the office. Currently with the new government he is the minister of the ministry and the state secretary was also nominated by his party, though on expertise principles and she is not a member of that party.

Both political and professional senior civil servant perceive themselves and also their counterparts (political or professional) to play important role in the policy making process within the ministry (see Figure 5). The state secretaries have their freedom in priority setting and decision making if this is provided by the minister. Then they perceive this to be the dominant part of their agenda. On the other hand, if this is not provided then they can be successfully ignored and not take part in the policy making process. One of the state secretaries noted that she felt her input in this area to be as small as only 20% of her time. The directors general felt to have enough freedom in priority setting and decision making, particularly in the substantive issues. At the same time they have only little influence on issues beyond their expertise. Many of the directors general came from the practice and started their job only in 1998 they perceived this to be to their advantage because they understand “real” problems and have a network of contacts developed. They recognized the role of the minister as a decision maker on political issues. All of them, however, claim that they are not sufficiently prepared for this role.

Figure 5: Perceptions of Freedom in Priority Setting and Decision Making within Ministry

	Priority setting and Decision making within Ministry	
	Freedom	Note
Political		
minister	100%	pressure within coalition
state secretary	20 - 100%	Pressure from minister
Professional		
Head of office	20 - 100%	Depends from minister
directors general	70%	freedom in substantive issues, priorities
unit head	30%	preparation of background material

Heads of the units proved in the interviews to be left out of the policy making and decision making process. They perceive their roles to be mainly administrative, preparing the necessary documentation for their superiors in the respective field. They recognize

this role as legitimate, though, some of the interviewed heads would prefer to have more freedom in their endeavors. They were complaining about the artificial speeding up of the process for material preparation which does not allow them to produce a high quality outputs. Also, they perceived that the political decision making influences the priority setting when the most pressing issues are not dealt with adequately and sometimes even left aside. In this sense all of them agreed with the statement that “in policy making it is essential for the good of the country that technical considerations be given more weight than political factors”. The perceptions of the heads of units towards the politicians varied among the ministries, some perceived them as good leaders with good management skills who are comparable to the best talents in the private sector, whereas others perceived them in the contrary. These differences can be explained by the personality of the minister and state secretaries and their interaction or non-cooperation which was observed and noted at all levels of the hierarchy.

Most of the senior officials assessed the policy making process as relatively effective. The professional civil servants complained about the time pressure under which they have to work and bureaucratic procedures to be followed. They were dissatisfied with the amount of information at disposal, particularly with the access to it when they are forced to spend a lot of time in searching for relevant data. Also, the biggest problem is the lack of capacity to process and analyze data adequately. Also, they were complaining about the quality and objectivity of existing analyses at the ministries. Their suggestions for improvement is systematic training that would raise the level of professionalisation of civil service, possibilities for promotion on a merit based system and introduction of incentives. Another area of improvement was seen in the legislative process and its ‘humanization’, i.e. preparation of the draft laws on the basis of the public needs.

As far as the relationships among political and professional senior officials are concerned, they are recognized to be fair on both sides and better than they used to be. However, both parties list **low trust** as a key obstacle in the working relationships. The political senior officials blame professionals for low capacity, and professional senior officials perceive their counterparts as not bringing expertise into their work and lacking relevant knowledge. There might be several factors that contribute to this situation. First, despite all of the senior officials and also heads of the units agree that there is a general decrease of political influence on the execution of tasks (particularly after the adoption of the Civil Service Law), the politicization of the senior official posts is still apparent. The majority of the interviewees blame the current Civil Service law to be weak and not sufficient to govern these politico-administrative relations. Second, the broad coalition with parties from left to right brought instability and tensions which were also reflected within the ministry and noticeable also in the third and fourth level of the hierarchy. One of the interviewees, head of a unit, commented this situation with the following words: “*the way how parties cooperate is mirrored by the cooperation of civil servants*”. Third, the position of the state secretary is not defined adequately and causes a shift in the ministry’s hierarchy and anomalies occur ranging from a ministry where the state secretary is ignored and his function moved to a different post to ministry with clear division of agenda between the minister and a state secretary. As a result, none of the senior official feel that the government (and thus also the ministry) works as a team, and

interests of political parties prevail. The majority of suggestions for the improvement of relationships between politicians and professional senior officials asked for greater respect for each other's work.

Conclusion

The introduction of the Civil Service Law in April 2002 brought clearness into the relations among political and professional civil servants and helped to depoliticize the civil service to some extent. The respondents agreed that there is a general trend towards building up professionalism in the civil service. However, weak formulations in the Civil Service law and missing definitions of responsibilities and roles in other laws bring different interpretations of some posts, most notably of a state secretary. As a result, the role of a state secretary is dependent on the minister and his definition which can range from acceptance of a state secretary as his deputy to the ignorance of this post.

All senior officials and also the level below them recognized that a type of coalition government influences the relationships between politicians and senior officials. All of them agreed that the instability and conflicts among coalition partners were visible also in the relations at and among the ministries and influenced the quality of work.

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