



Governing Illiberal Democracies: Democratic Backsliding and the Political Appointment of Top Officials in Hungary

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of democratic backsliding on the management of top officials in Hungary. Based on a unique data set of more than 1,600 top officials the article shows that the number of appointments to top positions increased in 2010 and subsequent years, during which Hungary experienced democratic backsliding. Moreover, the data shows that turnover in top official positions was higher in 2010 and in subsequent years than in the period between 1990 and 2010. The paper concludes that the politicisation and high degree of instability in top official positions may be characteristic of governance in illiberal democracies.

Keywords:

Democratic backsliding, political appointments, politicisation, top officials, Hungary

1. Introduction

Democratic backsliding in parts of Central and Eastern Europe is a key feature of the turbulent times and their impact on the management of top officials in public administration addressed in this Special Issue. Much of the debate so far has focused on the concept (Bermeo 2016, Waldner and Lust 2018), measurement and scope (Mechkova et al. 2017, Lührmann and Lindberg 2019), the drivers (Herman 2016, Mickey et al. 2017) and safeguards (Ginsburg and Huq 2018, Keleman and Blauburger 2016) against democratic backsliding. By contrast, we still know much less about the consequences of democratic backsliding for executive governance, public policy and wider social and economic outcomes (for a recent exception, see

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Bauer and Becker 2020). By implication, the impact of democratic backsliding on the management of top officials in public administration remains unexplored.

Top officials whose positions are located below prime ministers and cabinet ministers either as part of the permanent civil service or in a grey area between politics and administration play a key role for the wider understanding of the consequences of democratic backsliding. On the one hand, they are instrumental for strategies and efforts of democratically disloyal political leaders to roll back democratic governance (Mickey et al. 2017). On the other hand, they are a potential obstacle for the same politicians to entrench themselves in the state (Ginsburg and Huq 2018). In fact, in political discourse the bureaucracy is often associated with the “Deep State” and the “Establishment” that illiberal, populist leaders seek to challenge and overcome (Peters in this Special Issue, Bauer and Becker 2020).

This article looks at the political appointment of top officials in Hungary before and after the onset of democratic backsliding. Hungary has been described as a paradigm case of democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond (Cianetti et al. 2018, Hajnal 2020). Since the election of Victor Orbán and his Alliance of Young Democrats – Hungarian Civic Union (Fidesz – MPS) in 2010, the quality of democracy has continuously declined according to most available indicators of democracy. Hungary therefore represents a “crucial case” for the study of the relationship between democratic backsliding and the political appointment of top officials.

Based on a unique data set of more than 1,600 top officials appointed to central government ministries between 1990 and the end of 2019, the article shows that the number of appointments to top official positions was higher in 2010 than in any previous year since 1990. Moreover, it remained high after 2010 and peaked in 2014 and 2018 after the re-election of the Orbán government, suggesting that political appointments to top official positions are a feature of governance in countries that undergo democratic backsliding. The increasing number of appointments is evident for all top official positions regardless of their formal status as civil “democratic erosion” (Coppedge 2017), “de-democratisation” (Tilly 2003), “democratic recession” (Diamond 2015), “democratic retrogression” (Huq and Ginsburg 2018) and “autocratisation” (Luehrmann and Lindberg 2019).

Democratic backsliding is characterised by a series of incremental actions rather than a one-time coup that suddenly brings down a democratic regime (Waldner and Lust 2018). It involves steps to make elections less competitive without eliminating the opposition, to restrict opportunities for citizens and civil society groups to participate in the political process, and to weaken accountability by reducing the role of the legislature, judiciary and other oversight mechanisms that hold the executive to account. In Nancy Bermeo’s (2016, 5) terms, democratic backsliding involves the systematic harassment of the opposition and the hollowing out of checks and balances to debilitate or eliminate democratic institutions.

Much of the debate so far has focused on the definition, measurement and explanation of democratic backsliding in individual countries, regionally and at the global level. The consequences of democratic backsliding for governance and public policy have so far received little attention (for recent exceptions, see Bauer and Becker 2020, Hajnal 2020). This is especially true for the relationship between democratic backsliding and the management of top officials in public administration. However, a closer reading of the literature on democratic backsliding suggests several implications for the management of top officials. Two perspectives stand out. Both perspectives arise from discussions of the risk of democratic backsliding in the United States and the strategies that democratically disloyal presidents might take.

Firstly, Mickey et al. (2017) examine the strategies that illiberal presidents could take in order to weaken democratic governance in the United States. One of the key strategies they identify is the politicisation of the executive, that is, the penetration of the executive with political appointees (Lewis 2008). In particular, they can appoint loyalists to institutions such as electoral commissions, media regulators, anti-corruption agencies, tax authorities, intelligence agencies and prosecutors to harass political opponents and reshape the political playing field to their own advantage. Huq and Ginsburg (2018) make a very similar point when identifying the politicisation of the executive as one of five pathways to constitutional retrogression.

The strategy of politicisation follows the basic logic of principal-agent theory, whereby political principals seek to control their bureaucratic agents by making political appointments to the civil service. In the context of democratic backsliding, it is therefore most plausible to expect a growing politicisation of top official appointments in public administration. These top official positions may be formally located in the civil service or they may be in a grey area between politics and administration at the top of the executive, bearing in mind that the scope of civil service laws can be changed.

H1: Democratic backsliding is associated with the growing politicisation of top official appointments.

We can identify at least one alternative interpretation of the relationship between democratic backsliding and the politicisation of top official appointments. In their study of “near misses” Ginsburg and Huq (2018) argue that non-majoritarian institutions can act as potential constraints on democratic backsliding. They examine countries that underwent episodes of democratic backsliding without subsequent democratic breakdown. Instead, they eventually bounced back to democracy. The countries they study include Columbia, Sri Lanka and Finland in the 1920s and early 1930s. Among the institutions that helped prevent democratic breakdown in these cases, they list an autonomous bureaucracy, an autonomous judiciary or an autonomous police force that withstood efforts of political manipulation by democratically disloyal leaders.

The argument implies that democratic backsliding does not necessarily lead to the politicisation of top official positions. Rather, it depends on the institutional arrangements and practices prior to the onset of democratic backsliding. If appointments to top official positions including top positions in the civil service have commonly been made on the basis of political loyalty, democratic backsliding should reinforce an established practice. By contrast, if appointments to top official positions used to be primarily merit-based, Ginsburg and Huq's (2018) argument suggests that it will be difficult for democratically disloyal leaders to make political appointments as a means to weaken democratic accountability and harass political opponents.

The argument has a lot in common with Shefter's (1977) explanation of party patronage in Western Europe. He argued that party patronage depends on the timing of state-building and democratisation. In a nutshell, if state-building preceded democratisation, political parties were not able to rely on patronage to build their organisations in the context of expanding democratic suffrage. By contrast, if democratisation preceded state-building, political leaders took advantage of the opportunity to exploit the weakness of the state for the sake of building political organisations as democratic suffrage is expanded.

Shefter's understanding of state-building concentrates on the role of an autonomous bureaucracy. He assumed that the bureaucracy would develop a "constituency for bureaucratic autonomy" vis-à-vis political leaders. If a professional civil service including a separate statute for the regulation of administrative staff had been established, the autonomy would allow the bureaucracy to exercise an informal "veto" against the exploitation of the state for the sake of making patronage appointments.

In the context of democratic backsliding, Shefter's argument can be turned on its head. If de-democratisation occurs under conditions of weak states, that is, bureaucracies that have been subject to politicisation and excessive political control, political appointments to top official positions will reflect a common practice that is likely to be reinforced. By contrast, if de-democratisation occurs under conditions of strong states with autonomous, de-politicised civil services, democratically disloyal leaders will be constrained in the efforts to politicise top official positions. A by-product of the latter is that democratic backsliding may be slowed down or limited in scope.

The main insight from the work by Ginsburg and Huq (2018) and Shefter (1977) is, therefore, that the impact of democratic backsliding on the political appointment of top officials in public administration is likely to follow a logic of path dependence. Two related hypotheses follow from this.

H2a: If appointments to top official positions were politicised prior to the onset of democratic backsliding, the politicisation of top official appointments will be reinforced thereafter.

H2b: If appointments to top official positions were de-politicised prior to the onset of democratic backsliding, the de-politicisation of top official appointments will persist thereafter.

We still know far too little about how bureaucracies respond to democratic backsliding and how long they might withstand the efforts of illiberal leaders to politicise appointments. One option, explored by O’Leary (2013), suggests the potential for opposition and, conceivably, sabotage by bureaucrats in order to safeguard the democratic political order. It is conceivable, however, that bureaucracies will not be able to withstand pressures to rollback democratic governance for a long period of time (Zemandl 2017).

Officials in top civil service positions may prefer to leave public administration rather than serve political leaders whose support for democratic values is questionable (Correa et al. 2020). As a result, these kinds of political leaders may gain control by gradually inserting more political supporters in top official positions. In the first instance, the three hypotheses provide potential strategies for the management of top officials in the initial period after the onset of democratic backsliding.

2. Democratic backsliding in Hungary

In order to examine these hypotheses, this article examines political appointments to top official positions in central government ministries in Hungary. Hungary is widely characterised as the paradigm case of democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond (Cianetti et al. 2018, Bakke and Sitter 2020). Following the “watershed election” of 2010, the newly elected Orbán government quickly embarked on measures to gain control of the state and to weaken the wider accountability infrastructure.

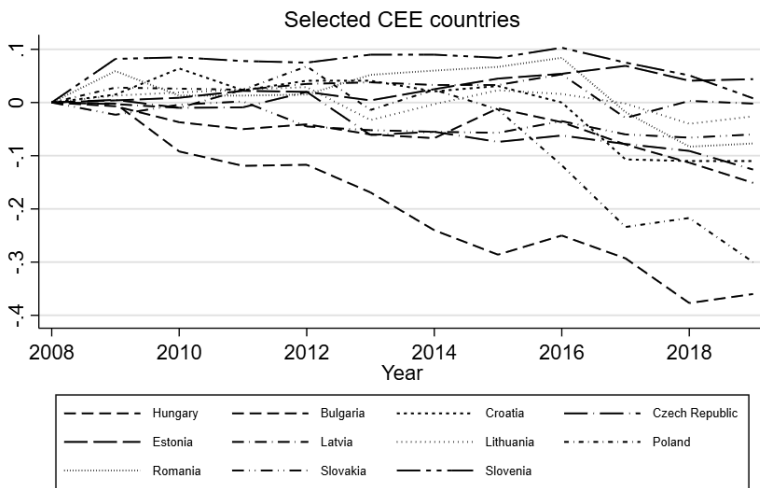
Taking advantage of a two-thirds majority in parliament, the Orbán government reformed the media landscape by establishing a government-controlled Media Council and gradually undermining the independence of the media. It curtailed the powers of the Constitutional Court, which had been the only effective constraint on executive power in the Hungarian political system characterised by unicameralism and a unitary state (Korosenyi 1999). The changes led to the adoption of a new constitution in 2011 (in effect since 2012), which has helped entrench the power of the Fidesz ever since.

Hungary is not the only country in Central and Eastern Europe that has experienced a trend of democratic backsliding. In particular, Poland showed early signs of democratic regression when the first Kaczynski government took office back in 2005. However, it took until 2015 for the Law and Justice Party to win an absolute majority and to emulate Hungary’s experience of rolling back democratic gover-

nance. In Hungary, democratic backsliding has therefore progressed for longer and to a larger degree.

Figure 1 shows the Liberal Democracy Index from the Varieties of Democracy Project (<https://www.v-dem.net>) for the new EU member states of Central and Eastern Europe for the period from 2008 until 2019. Taking 2008 as a zero point of departure, it presents the change in rating on the index, showing the greatest democratic decline in Hungary. The decline of democracy set off later in Poland. Backsliding is also evident in other countries in the region, such as Romania and Czechia, albeit to a lower degree. Yet Figure 1 also shows that democratic developments are diverse in Central and Eastern Europe. Especially the Baltic states have not followed the same trend of democratic backsliding according to the V-Dem data.

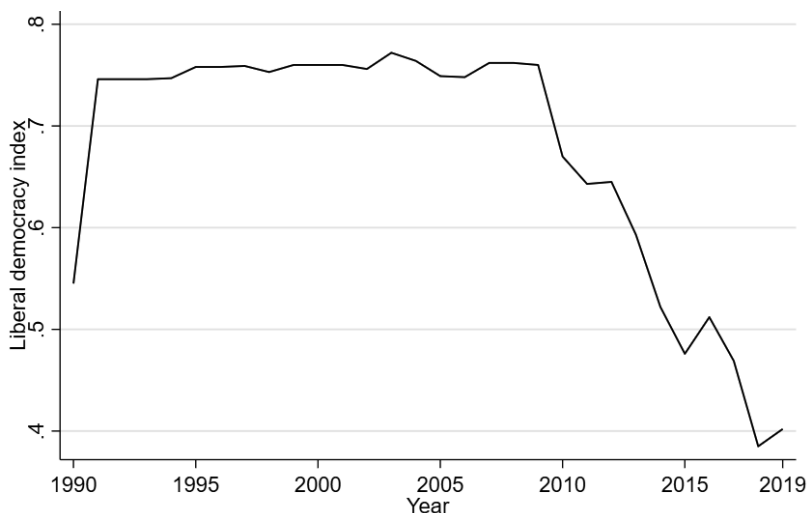
Figure 1
Change in liberal democracy index 2018 – 2019



Source: Varieties of Democracy, V-Dem Dataset, Version 10 (Mar 2020), <https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemds20/>

Zooming in on Hungary over a longer period of time, the Liberal Democracy Index increases rapidly in the early 1990s and stays near the highest level until 2009. Early signs of a decline of democracy were already visible before 2010 but are well below the threshold for the identification of episodes of autocratisation according to Lührmann and Lindberg (2019). Considering our hypotheses, we therefore expect change in appointment patterns to top official positions from 2010 until 2019, compared to the period before 2010. Note, the hypotheses do not imply any expectations for the politicisation of top official appointments before 2010.

Figure 2
Hungary liberal democracy index score 1990–2019



Source: Varieties of Democracy, V-Dem Dataset, Version 10 (Mar 2020), <https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemds20/>

Looking more closely at the governments and their composition during the period under analysis between 1990 and 2020, there were 12 governments in Hungary. Table 1 lists all governments, their prime ministers and the parties forming the government coalition. The first government in 1990 was formed by a centre-right coalition led by Prime Minister Antall. After Antall's death in 1993, Prime Minister Boross led the government for half a year. In 1994, a Socialist-Liberal coalition took office. In 1998, the Fidesz, the Hungarian Democratic Forum and the Independent Smallholder Party formed a coalition with Orbán as Prime Minister for the first time.

In 2002, the Socialist-Liberal coalition returned. Prime Minister Medgyessy was replaced by Gyurcsány in 2004. His government was confirmed in office at the 2006 election. In 2008, the Liberal Party left the coalition resulting in a minority government headed by Gyurcsány. In 2009, Bajnai took over as Prime Minister of the Socialist government until the 2010 election. In 2010, finally, the Fidesz – in an electoral alliance with the Christian Democrats – returned to office to form the Orbán II government. It won re-elections in 2014 and 2018.

It should be added here that the Fidesz is typically not classified as a right-wing populist party but as a conservative party according to political science classifications such as ParlGov.³ This is one of the reasons why in this article we tend

³ Parliaments and Governments Database (ParlGov), see <http://www.parl.gov.org/explore/HUN/party/921/>.

to speak about political leaders that are not loyal to democracy rather than use the term “populist leaders” that is also often used in the literature (for instance Bauer and Becker 2020). We occasionally use the term “illiberal leader” in order to indicate the opposition to or limited support for the principles of liberal democracy.

Table 1
Governments in Hungary, 1990–2019

Prime Minister	Coalition Parties
1. Antall József 23/05/1990–20/12/1993	MDF, FKGP, KDNP
2. Boross Péter 21/12/1993–14/07/1994	MDF, FKGP, KDNP
3. Horn Gyula 15/07/1994–05/07/1998	MSZP, SZDSZ
4. Orbán Viktor I 06/07/1998–26/05/2002	Fidesz, FKGP, MDF
5. Medgyessy Péter 27/05/2002–28/09/2004	MSZP, SZDSZ
6. Gyurcsány Ferenc I 29/09/2004–08/06/2006	MSZP, SZDSZ
7. Gyurcsány Ferenc II 09/06/2006–27/04/2008	MSZP, SZDSZ
8. Gyurcsány Ferenc III 28/04/2008–13/04/2009	MSZP
9. Bajnai Gordon 14/04/2009–28/05/2010	MSZP
10. Orbán Viktor II 29/05/2010–09/05/2014	Fidesz-MPP, KDNP
11. Orbán Viktor III 10/05/2014–09/05/2018	Fidesz-MPP, KDNP
12. Orbán Viktor IV 10/05/2018–	Fidesz-MPP, KDNP

3. Structure of top official positions in Hungary

In order to study the appointment of top officials in the Hungarian executive, this paper concentrates on central government ministries. It includes four groups of state secretarial appointments. They are

- political and parliamentary state secretaries
- administrative state secretaries and state secretaries
- deputy state secretaries and specialist state secretaries
- titular state secretaries

Political state secretaries were established in 1990. Their role was to deputise for ministers, but they would not be members of the cabinet. Political state secretaries were explicitly political appointments. Ministries would have one political state secretary, though the Prime Minister’s Office had a larger number of political state secretaries. The position was abolished in 2006 by the Gyurcsány II government, which initiated a major structural reform of top official positions. In 2010, the Orbán II government introduced the position of parliamentary state secretary. It was effectively the re-introduction of the political state secretary under a new name.

Again, ministries have no more than one parliamentary state secretary, while the Prime Minister's Office at the centre of government may have more than one parliamentary state secretary appointed at any point in time.

Administrative state secretaries were also established in 1990. While political state secretaries were formerly meant to be part of the political leadership of central government ministries, the administrative state secretary was conceived as the highest civil service position. The separation between the minister, on the one hand, and the administrative state secretary, on the other hand, therefore represented the formal separation between politics and administration (Staroňová and Gajdushek 2013). As a rule, there was one single administrative state secretary per ministry.

In 2006, the position of administrative state secretary was also abolished by the Gyurcsány II government. Instead, the government introduced the position of state secretary (without adjectives). State secretaries were and remain in a grey area between politics and administration. Since their introduction in 2006, they have formally been outside the scope of the civil service law. However, they have authority over the management of civil servants in ministerial departments. Moreover, ministries may appoint several state secretaries at the same time. There is no rule limiting the number of appointments.

In 2010, the Orbán II government reintroduced the position of administrative state secretary. The position is located within the scope of the civil service law. However, compared to the period before 2006, the role of the administrative state secretary focuses on the management of general and administrative affairs within the jurisdiction of a given ministry. Again, each ministry appoints only one administrative state secretary at any point in time.

The third group of top official positions includes deputy and specialist state secretaries. In 1990, the position of deputy state secretary was introduced. They ranked below the administrative state secretary and were responsible for groups of ministerial departments. Usually, deputy state secretaries have policy responsibilities, while general affairs departments report directly to administrative state secretaries. Deputy state secretaries were classified as civil servants.

In 2006, the new government reconfigured the deputy state secretary position as a specialist state secretary position. The functions between the two types of state secretary positions did not differ. However, specialist state secretaries were kept outside the civil service law and, as a result, became formally political appointments with responsibilities over the management of civil servants.

In 2010, the Orbán II government renamed the position deputy state secretary and re-classified them as civil servants, thereby re-storing the status quo ante. For deputy and specialist state secretaries there have never been specific limitations on the number of appointments that can be made.

The last group of state secretaries includes titular state secretaries. This position only existed between 1990 and 1998. These were top officials who were delegated particular tasks, for instance, there were titular state secretaries responsible for privatisation in the early 1990s. Titular state secretaries were classified like deputy state secretaries, so far as their salaries were concerned. Their overall number was low. However, for the sake of completeness they are included in this study.

These four groups of state secretaries are formally and explicitly identified as top officials in the Hungarian executive below the Prime Minister, ministers of executive branch ministries and ministers without portfolio. If we wanted to widen the perspective, we could include heads of ministerial cabinets which existed since the mid-1990s, and of course the heads of non-ministerial bodies, such as subordinated organisations and independent agencies. However, in the current context we limit ourselves to the study and inclusion of all top official appointments to central government ministries between 1990 and the end of 2019.

Looking at the formal institutional structure alone, the discussion so far indicates some minor institutional changes during the 30 years under study. In fact, the revision of the institutional structure in 2006 can itself be considered an attempt to restore a structure known from the past: the structure that existed before 1990. Notwithstanding the lack of any civil service law before 1990 and hence no provision for merit-based recruitment, at that time, ministers were assisted by so-called state secretaries and deputy ministers. The latter played the same role as deputy and specialist state secretaries, and it is notable that there was no clear separation between politics and administration below the position of minister either.

In addition, notwithstanding the number of ministries in place at any one point in time, a comparison of the structure of top officials in 1990 and 2019 quickly indicates an increase in the number of top official positions. The 2019 setup that has been in place since 2010 has added the position of state secretary to the list of positions that already existed in 1990. Bearing in mind that the number of state secretaries per ministry is not formally limited, it is hence evident that even from a very basic formal point of view the opportunities for political appointments to central government ministries have increased over time, in particular since 2010.

4. Appointments to top official positions, 1990–2019

For the empirical assessment of the relationship between democratic backsliding and the political appointment of top officials we focus on two indicators. They are:

- The annual number of appointments to top official positions.
- The turnover in top official positions after government changes.

Both indicators are commonly used to assess the politicisation of top official positions. Lewis (2008), for instance, refers to politicisation as the penetration of

agencies with political appointees. In other words, the more political appointments are made per member of staff, the higher the degree of politicisation. In our context, we would expect, in accordance with hypothesis 1, that the number of political appointments is higher in 2010 than in previous years and is likely to stay high in subsequent years, given the continuous decline of democracy in Hungary.

Turnover after government changes is also a commonly used indicator of politicisation. Studies on senior civil service politicisation in Germany, for instance, examine the proportion of state secretaries that is replaced after a new government takes office (Derlien 1988). For Central and Eastern Europe, turnover is also included as an indicator in comparative studies of senior civil service politicisation (Meyer-Sahling and Veen 2012, Staroňová and Rybar 2020).⁴ In the present context, we would expect high turnover after the onset of democratic backsliding in 2010 and to remain high as the decline of democracy continued. However, Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz won re-election in 2014 and 2018, suggesting that turnover would be lower in the absence of a wholesale alternation of government.

The empirical analysis is based on a new dataset of top officials in Hungary. The dataset includes the four groups of state secretaries for the period from 1990 until the end of 2019. In total the dataset includes 1,633 state secretaries. It consists of 170 political and parliamentary state secretaries, 350 administrative state secretaries and state secretaries, 876 deputy and specialist state secretaries, and 30 titular state secretaries.

Each appointment is counted as one observation. This means, an individual may appear more than once in our data set. A given state secretary may have initially been appointed as a deputy state secretary. After some time, he or she may have been appointed as an administrative state secretary, which is formally a new appointment but practically a promotion. 306 state secretaries appear more than once in our dataset.

A given state secretary may have also returned to a top official position after a period of absence. For instance, several state secretaries who were appointed during the first post-communist government formed in 1990 returned in 1998 with the Orbán I government (Meyer-Sahling 2008). In a few instances we also found state secretaries who moved to an agency or an international organisation but came back shortly after to take up another appointment as a state secretary in a central government ministry. One of the state secretaries, Szilvásy György, appears nine times in the data set, given appointments to different ministries, at different ranks and under different governments.

Finally, we code the end date of an appointment as the date when a given state secretary leaves his or her position. This means, a given state secretary could serve under several governments. For instance, one of the deputy state secretaries in the

4 See Bach et al. (2018) for an alternative, survey-based measurement of politicisation.

prime minister's office, Müller György, was appointed in 1990 and left his position in 2006. During this period, he served under six prime ministers.

Data was collected using both print and online sources. Biographies of state secretaries from 1990 to 2006 were primarily compiled from the almanacs of government officials for the first four governments following the regime change (Kajdi et al. 1994, Kiss et al. 1998, Kovács 2006, Ughy 2006). Data for those who held office from 2010 onwards was collected mainly from curricula vitae published on the government's official website (www.kormany.hu) and its archived version for 2010–2014. Additionally, information about appointments was collated from the Hungarian Gazette (magyarkozlony.hu), which contains authentic copies of the official journal of Hungary that publishes legislative and non-legislative legal documents, including announcements of government appointments and dismissals. These sources were further supplemented through publicly available biographies and news reports published on the Internet.

Figure 3 shows the number of appointments for each year between 1990 and 2019 in accordance with our first indicator of politicisation. On average, governments made 54 appointments to top official positions every year. However, the number of appointments varies greatly from one year to another. With 150 appointments, it shows the largest number of appointments in 2018. This is followed by 133 appointments in 2014 and 126 appointments in 2010, 118 appointments in 2002 and 109 appointments in 1990.

Figure 3
State secretary appointments by year

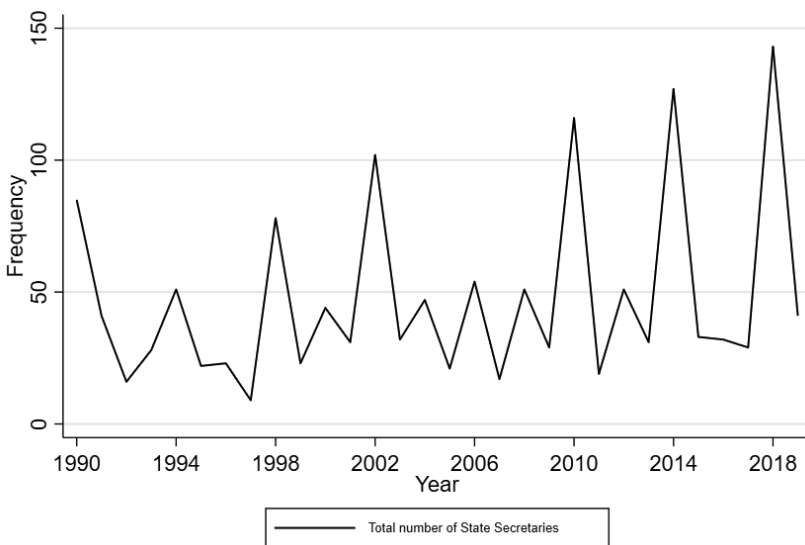


Figure 3 provides strong support for our first hypothesis. It shows that compared to previous years the number of appointments was higher in 2010 when democratic backsliding set off. In subsequent years, when democratic backsliding gained momentum, appointments were even higher after the elections of 2014 and 2018, even though the Orbán government gained re-election on both occasions. Comparing the period between 2010 and 2019 to the period before 2010, the data suggests that on average the Orbán government made 66 appointments per year, while previous governments made only 49 appointments to top official positions every year.

The much larger number of appointments from 2010 onwards also provides evidence of the increase in the number of top official positions that can be filled at any point in time. In 1990, a minister could typically appoint, in collaboration with the Prime Minister, one political state secretary, one administrative state secretary and three or four deputy state secretaries. Since 2010, a minister may be surrounded, or may directly appoint, one parliamentary state secretary, one administrative state secretary, several state secretaries and several deputy state secretaries. As a consequence, between 2010 and 2019, several ministries have had five or six state secretaries and seven or eight deputy state secretaries appointed at any given point in time.

In the Ministry of Agriculture, to give an example, there were six state secretaries in 1990 while there were 19 in post in the autumn of 2019. Ignoring the Prime Minister's Office and its successor institutions for a moment, the average number of state secretarial appointments increased from seven in 1990 to 13 in 2018. This takes into account both a larger number of available positions as well as a lower number of ministries; namely 14 in 1990 and 10 in 2019.

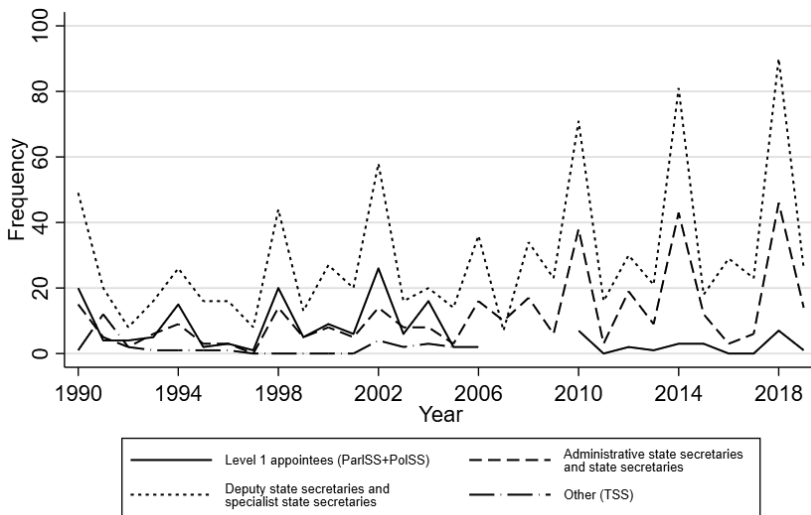
The growth in the number of appointments is particularly noteworthy when comparing the Prime Minister's Office in 1990 and its successor institutions. In 1990, there were 5 political state secretaries, one administrative state secretary, 2 deputy state secretaries and 1 titular state secretary. By 2018, the Orbán IV government had established, in addition to the Prime Minister's Office, the Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister and the so-called Government Office of the Prime Minister. Together these three institutions had appointed 2 parliamentary state secretaries, 3 administrative state secretaries, 10 state secretaries, and 26 deputy state secretaries. In other words, by 2018 the number of top officials at the centre of government was four times higher than in 1990.

Despite the increase in the overall number of top official appointments, the proportion of appointments made at the centre of government has also increased. Democratic backsliding therefore appears to be associated with a growing number of appointments to top official positions, which are made on a continuous basis, and a growing centralisation of appointments. Indeed, the latter resonates closely with

Coppedge’s (2017) conceptualisation of democratic regression as the centralisation of executive power.

Figure 4 provides further evidence that democratic backsliding is associated with an increasing number of political appointments to top official positions. It differentiates groups of state secretarial positions. The solid line shows the appointment of political state secretaries. These are explicitly political appointments. They naturally peak when governments changed in 1990, 1994, 1998 and 2002. Their number appears to be relatively low afterwards, which reflects the abolition of the position in 2006. Interestingly, the number of parliamentary state secretaries since 2010 does not stand out as particularly high compared to other states’ secretarial positions.

Figure 4
State secretary appointments by year and types of position



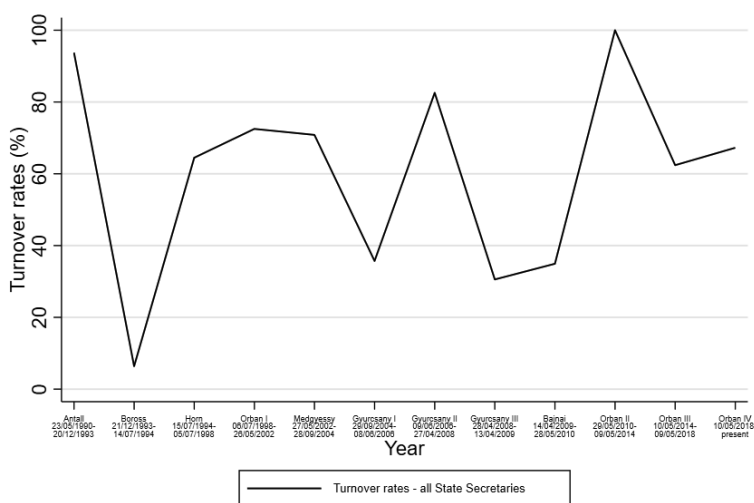
The dashed line shows the number of appointments of administrative state secretaries and, since 2006, state secretaries. The number of appointments also clearly peaks in the election years. Between 1990 and 2002 this implied wholesale changes of government between left and right. In 2006, the Socialist-Liberal coalition were re-elected. However, in the context of the re-organisation of top official positions, the number of appointments to the newly created state secretary position was as high as after previous changes of parties in government. The highest number of administrative state secretaries and state secretaries was appointed in 2010, 2014 and 2018 by successive Orbán governments in accordance with the general pattern of appointments.

The large number of appointments is most evident at the level of deputy and specialist state secretaries. Formally, these positions were within the scope of the civil service law until 2006 and again from 2010. The growing number of appointments at this level and the peaks during years of elections and government changes therefore most unambiguously indicate the politicisation of top official appointments. The sheer number of appointments at the deputy state secretary level almost doubled from 49 in 1990 to 90 in 2018.

Figure 5 shows the turnover in top official positions after alternations in government during the first six months after the investiture of a new government. While the discussions so far focused on appointments, the examination of turnover shifts attention to the dismissal of top officials after new governments take office. Turnover here does not necessarily mean that a state secretary left public administration altogether. It is conceivable that the same person was reappointed to another state secretarial position or he or she was appointed to another position in public administration.

Keeping this basic caveat in mind, turnover after government changes is a useful measure of the politicisation of appointments to top official positions. If turnover, measured as replacements, peaks after changes of government, it is assumed that it indicates efforts of governing parties to politically control appointments to top positions or to make high-level appointments for the sake of rewarding political supporters. By contrast, if there is no political interference with appointments, we would expect a flat line and basically no differences in turnover from one year to another.

Figure 5
State secretary turnover rates



According to Figure 5, turnover after the formation of a new government stood at 100% in 2010. By contrast, in 1990 turnover reached “only” 92%, as the Antall government did not replace all top officials, if we assume that the former state secretaries are equivalent to the administrative state secretaries introduced in 1990 and the former deputy ministers are equivalent to deputy state secretaries. Even though the Antall government was the first democratically elected government after the exit from communism, it did actually not opt for a complete turnover in top official positions.

However, for the context of this paper the high turnover in 2010 is more relevant, in that it confirms the hypothesis that democratic backsliding is associated with an increase in the politicisation of top official positions. Hence the formation of the Orbán II government in 2010 has features of a regime change, insofar as political appointments in the executive are concerned.

Figure 5 also shows that turnover ratios remained high after the 2014 and 2018 elections. This may be surprising, as the Orbán government was confirmed after the elections. However, the high turnover supports the argument that instability in top official positions will remain high while democracy is rolled back by illiberal governments.

To be sure, Figure 5 also indicates that turnover was high after previous changes of government, providing support for hypothesis 2a. In 1994, 1998 and 2002 turnover was around 70 to 80%. Interestingly, turnover was also very high in 2006, even though the Socialist-Liberal coalition stayed in office, but this reflects the institutional change as much as the approach to the control of top official positions by the Gyurcsány government. Figure 5 as well as the previous figures that showed change over time also indicates that we cannot test hypothesis 2b in the context of this paper, as the Hungarian case does not allow the examination of the impact of a legacy of de-politicised appointment practices prior to the onset of democratic backsliding.

Figure 5 does not distinguish between groups of state secretaries. The different turnover ratios do, however, not surprise. It is highest for political and parliamentary state secretaries. For administrative state secretaries and state secretaries it is slightly lower. For deputy state secretaries it is relatively lower. However, even in the 1990s and 2000s, 50 to 60% of the deputy state secretaries were replaced after government alternations. Since 2010, this figure has gone up to more than 70% of turnover after the elections of 2010, 2014 and 2018.

The discussion of appointments and turnover does not indicate from where new appointees have been recruited (Bach and Veit 2018). In fact, when looking at the state secretaries that were appointed back in 1990 by the Antall government, it is evident that several appointees had been in top official positions during the last communist government led by Prime Minister Németh (Meyer-Sahling 2008).

Moreover, approximately one third of the various types of state secretaries were recruited from within the ministerial civil service.

Preliminary evidence for 2010 suggests that the proportion of state secretaries recruited from within the ministerial civil service was lower than in 1990. At the same time, there was a larger proportion of appointees in 2010 whose background indicates some sort of political affiliation, for instance, as a former member of parliament, as a former head of a political cabinet, as a party official or a party activist. Further research is needed in order to disentangle the career pathways of state secretaries between 1990 and 2019. However, insofar as appointment and turnover patterns are concerned, the evidence from Hungary suggests that democratic backsliding is associated with greater politicisation of appointments to top official positions, thereby confirming hypothesis H1 and, given the already high turnover before 2010, hypothesis H2a.

Conclusion

This article has examined the impact of democratic backsliding on the management of top officials in public administration in Hungary. Based on a dataset of over 1,600 top officials appointed to the positions of political and parliamentary state secretary, administrative state secretary, state secretary, deputy and specialist state secretary and titular state secretary, the analysis has shown that the number of political appointments increased during the period of democratic backsliding since 2010 compared to the period between 1990 and 2010. Political appointments remained high in subsequent years and even increased after the 2014 and 2018 elections.

Moreover, it has been shown that turnover in top official positions increased after the onset of democratic backsliding and in subsequent years. In particular, the 2010 change of government saw 100% turnover in top positions, suggesting a regime change in public administration comparable to 1990 when the first democratically elected government took office. The analysis therefore confirmed the hypothesis that democratic backsliding is associated with the increasing politicisation of top official appointments.

The analysis also revealed that politicisation was high before 2010. In particular, the government changes in 1994, 1998 and 2002 involved high levels of turnover and large numbers of political appointments to top official positions, regardless of the formal status of top officials as civil servants or political appointees. The politicisation of top official positions has therefore been a long-standing practice in Hungary. 2010 marked a new peak that corresponds to our hypothesis that democratically disloyal political leaders would reinforce the politicisation of the executive in order to entrench themselves in the state.

The high number of appointments in subsequent years and the increasing number of positions that has become available for political appointments since

2010 is nonetheless noteworthy. It indicates that the Orbán government appears to systematically use patronage powers in order to reward and co-opt supporters, to manage careers and to co-ordinate policy. The initial evidence therefore suggests that political appointments, even in the absence of government changes, to top positions may amount to a regime-specific mode of governance in illiberal democracies.

It remains to be seen to what extent other countries in Central and Eastern Europe and elsewhere have undergone similar trajectories. Poland might be one of the first places to look at. Already in 2005 it was evident that the formation of the first Law and Justice-led government involved a large degree of turnover and the appointment of large numbers of officials to senior positions in public administration (Heywood and Meyer-Sahling 2013). Anecdotal evidence suggests that the appointment patterns in Poland have been very similar to Hungary's experience after Law and Justice returned to government in 2015.

At the same time, we would expect much more continuity in other countries, such as the Baltic states (Pesti and Randma-Liiv 2018). The case of Hungary did not allow for the examination of the third hypothesis that was developed in this paper. It suggested that democratic backsliding would not necessarily lead to the politicisation of top official positions if the appointment practices prior to the onset of the decline of democracy were characterised by de-politicisation. In post-communist Europe, if countries such as Estonia and Latvia were to experience episodes of democratic backsliding, it would be possible to test this hypothesis.

Further research will also have to explore in more detail potential obstacles to politicisation in the context of democratic backsliding. For example, the Western Balkans provide an interesting test case for the influence of the European Union. On the one hand, it is evident that there has been considerable democratic backsliding from a low level in countries such as Serbia, suggesting a further politicisation of top official positions. On the other hand, Western Balkan countries are subject to EU conditionality, which implies the commitment to professionalise the civil service and hence efforts to limit the politicisation of appointments to top positions (Meyer-Sahling et al. 2019).

It will also be intriguing to examine the management of top official positions in established democracies of Western Europe. For the time being there are no signs of democratic backsliding similar to Central and Eastern Europe. However, democracy has been under pressure in several Western European countries. It will be particularly intriguing to observe what will happen when political leaders who are not fully loyal to the traditional model of liberal democracy challenge an established, autonomous and de-politicised civil service. The wider question of how the crisis of democracy affects the governance of the state, in particular the management of its top officials, is likely to remain relevant for some time to come.

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