Politico-administrative relations in top civil service in the EU member countries

EGPA/IIAS – Study group on personnel policies project

STUDY COMMISSIONED BY THE BELGIAN EU-PRESIDENCY

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1 Introduction

1.1 Framing the topic

Politico-administrative relations are of growing importance nowadays. Many changes in public administration were undertaken during the last decades and they have had an influence on the landscape of politico-administrative relations. The way policies are formulated, are put into practice and are evaluated has changed from a strictly Weberian bureaucratic dichotomy (Weber, 1972) to more hybrid types of working practices (Aberbach, Putnam & Rockham, 1981; ‘t Hart & Wille, 2002). The Weberian dichotomy implied that policies were developed by politicians and implemented by bureaucrats. There was a strict division of tasks and no overlap in the functions of politicians and bureaucrats. This politico-administrative relation has however undergone several changes. More hybrid forms of relations have risen and this implied that the roles of bureaucrats and political executives became to a greater extent interlinked in the policy process. Moreover, all sorts of advisors, experts or assistants entered the field and this changed the politico-administrative roles as well.

The aim of this project is to interlink the existing, but fragmented knowledge on politico-administrative relations. This is relevant for increasing the general knowledge on public organization and to gain insight in the way policy processes are structured. As the shifts in politico-administrative relations were different in the EU member States, this led to distinct outcomes. The first research question investigates whether politico-administrative relations can be positioned in an all-embracing typology which presents the situation in the 27 EU-member states as realistic as possible.

The second research question concerns the mechanisms which are in operation and which can make the politico-administrative relationships more effective and efficient. We argue that every sort of politico-administrative relations, no matter where positioned in the typology, can be optimal or effective. However, the most optimal mechanisms or theories that can be applied in analyzing the operation of politico-administrative relations differ according to the field in which one is positioned.

To increase the use and understanding of these mechanisms, a last research question is concerned with the operationalisation of these mechanisms into indicators. These indicators will help to make the relationship more effective and/or efficient. We argue that tone and nature of interaction and the frequency of the contact are relevant here.
1.2 Definitions and descriptions

This report requires well-defined definitions. First, at the side of civil service, the scope of this project are the top officials or senior civil servants. These are the highest rank in the hierarchy of the senior civil service. Senior civil service¹ is a term which distinguishes the senior from general civil service. As the term ‘senior civil service’ may differ in the EU-member states, we stress that senior civil service and top civil service are analogous terms and that the top official is the highest rank of the civil service. A formal definition of the senior civil service can be derived from the OECD study (2008, p. 17).

“A Senior Civil Service (SCS) is a structured and recognised system of personnel for the higher non-political positions in government. It is a career civil service providing people to be competitively appointed to functions that cover policy advice, operational delivery or corporate service delivery. The service is centrally managed through appropriate institutions and procedures, in order to provide stability and professionalism of the core group of senior civil servants, but also the necessary flexibility to match changes in the composition of Government by using appropriate due processes.”

This definition was amended by the EIPA study (EIPA, 2008, p. 4) into the following definition:

“SCS is a system of personnel for high and top level management positions in the national civil service, formally or informally recognised by an authority, or through a common understanding of the organisation of such a group. It is a framework of career-related development providing people to be competitively appointed to functions that cover policy advice, operational delivery or corporate service delivery”.

This definition differs from the previous OECD definition as it in first instance doesn’t emphasize the necessity of a structured personnel system. Second, it takes in account that recognition by an authority can be formal or informal. Third, the latter definition adds that among ‘higher non-political positions’, the focus goes out on management positions within the hierarchy. Last, it excluded that the service is centrally managed because in many countries, there is no centralised management of the SCS.

¹ Further abbreviated as SCS
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Second, at the side of politics: ‘political executive’ refers to the leading politicians of the executive branch. This term is broader than purely Ministers as it also contains some other players (e.g. ‘junior Ministers’ in the UK) but it is more restricted than all political representatives of a parliament. Politico-administrative relations refer to the relationship between top officials and political executives.

Lastly, the term ‘third party’ is a summarizing name that refers to all sorts of structurally employed advisors or assistants beside the civil service who have a share in designing public policy and thus may influence the relationship between top officials and political executives. There is no connection to the magnitude of this party. This ‘third party’ differs from country to country and it is beyond the scope of our project to describe them in detail. However, a categorization of three types will be made up, based on his/her principal tasks and the extent to which this party has a share in policy making.

1.3 Outlining the field of politico-administrative relations

Figure 1 outlines a diagram of politico-administrative relations. All relationships are indicated by double arrows. This scheme shows that apart from the focus of our report, which is the interaction between senior civil servants and political executives, there are other mutual relationships as well. However, it is beyond the scope of our project to investigate the relationship between senior civil service and third parties or political executives and third parties.

Figure 1: Model of politico-administrative relations
Our point of departure for typifying these politico-administrative relations is based on the policy cycle. That cycle consists of several steps: agenda setting, policy formulation, policy decision-making, policy implementation, policy evaluation (Howlett & Ramesh, 2003). In search for clarity and comparability, in this study we split up the policy cycle into two parts: developing policy and implementing policy. These two dimensions are the base for the typology-matrix. We outline whether political executives or senior civil servants have the greatest leverage in developing and executing policy. These dimensions are not strictly two categories, rather they are a continuum. At the extreme of each continuum we find sole bureaucrats or sole politicians. None of the countries is positioned in the strict extremes, as those positions are merely theoretical ideal types.

We are aware of the simplification this method of inquiry brings along. First, it is a rather rough method to split up the policy cycle into two parts. Second, this matrix leaves out all other actors that come in the field or have a share in policy making. In answer to the first criticism, we argue that a more detailed method is impossible within the scope of this project. Moreover, policy development and implementation are not seen as an indivisible whole, but as consisting out of several steps, which will be taken into account and explained in the next chapter. Concerning the second criticism, indeed some players are left out of the matrix. Most importantly a ‘third party’, as we refer to it, is left out while in some cases they might have huge leverage. In our diagram, the double arrow between the politico-administrative interaction and third party indicates the possibility of a mediating influence of this party.

As it is necessary to include this third party, we will imbed the politico-administrative relations in three types of third parties. The first type (type A) is a third party consisting out of a few advisors for each political executive and that has a great leverage in policymaking. The second type (type B) consists of a third party that has limited leverage in policy making as the emphasis rather goes out to assisting or coordination functions. In the last type (type C), the third party is a member of a large cabinet and has a specific expertise. As a consequence, the leverage in policy making is greater. As a result, theoretically, there are 12 options of politico-administrative relations. This method of inquiry enables us to keep an eye on the leverage of this third party in the policy process. When thus e.g. a system with third party type A moves on one of the continua towards the side of the political executives, we know that the political executive do not stand by itself as that third party also has a share in policy making.
2 Interaction between top civil servants and political executives

2.1 A scope for politico-administrative relation

As discussed earlier, the policy cycle is the base of our typology. We have made up our typology based on a ‘general stage’ of developing policy on the one hand, and executing policy on the other hand. Hereby developing policies consists out of the following tasks:
- agenda setting (deciding what the issues are)
- problem defining (defining what causes the problem)
- formulation of policy (defining what the solution to the problem is)
- policy preparation (budgeting, providing evidence-based data…)
- making concrete decisions (deciding what policy options to take)

Executing policies consists out of the following tasks:
- policy implementation (realizing the policy options, including managing the process and the people)
- policy change (interfering in/adapting the implementation process)
- policy evaluation (assessing whether the policy has been successful)

Figure 2: politico-administrative relations based on the policy cycle

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Developing policy</th>
<th>POL</th>
<th>SCS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who is the dominant actor in the of policy development (based on the amount of leverage that party has in policymaking)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POL</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Executing policy</th>
<th>POL</th>
<th>SCS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who is the dominant actor in the stage of executing policy (based on the autonomy that top officials have in executing policy)?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POL</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In each stage, the ascendancy goes rather to the political executive or the senior civil service. The aim is to be as general as possible and outline which party is the most dominant on average at both dimensions: either political executives or senior civil servants. However, we emphasize once more that these axes are not a dichotomy but rather a continuum. There
Politico-administrative relations in top civil service in the EU member countries can thus be a dominance of one party, but not to that extent that the other party is necessarily overwhelmed. Rather, there is a dominance towards one party. Now, how do we have to interpret ‘dominant actor’ on the axis?

On the developing policy axis, the dominant actor in this stage is based on the leverage that party has in policy making. We outlined above that developing policy consists out of different steps. As the leverage in each step can differ, we outline what the influence is of senior civil servants and political executives in these steps and summarize this. This offers an option for nuance on the general developing policy axis. The more there is a movement towards the extremes, the more the leverage of that party is emphasized. However, it is also possible to evolve towards the centre of the typology.

Because executing policy is a task for the civil service in sé, this axis doesn’t allocate the dominant actor based on ‘how much’ political executives or top officials do. It is a continuum based on the amount of autonomy that top officials have in their role of implementers of policy. The more there is a movement towards the bottom of the typology, where the senior civil servants are positioned, the more autonomy top officials have in executing policy and the less political executives interfere. As a consequence, the dominant actor is the senior civil servant. On the other hand, the more we move towards the top of this continuum, the more autonomy top officials lose during the implementing policy phase and the more political executives interfere in policy implementation. As a consequence, there is a movement towards a politicized system and the dominance goes to political executives.

The outcome of this typology are 4 different quadrants of politico-administrative relations. However while two countries may be placed in the same quadrant, between these two countries differences can exist as well. This typology enables the option to position them at different places within the same quadrant. Quadrant 1 shows a highly politicized system, the opposite is quadrant 4 which is a technocratic system. Quadrant 3 is what we call the “classical” system. This doesn’t mean that the system is conservative without any modern features; it only points out that this system is the most related to the first and oldest ideas of politico-administrative relations. Quadrant 2 is a rather unrealistic quadrant, because development of a policy comes before the implementation it is unusual that in the developing policy stage the senior civil servant is the dominant actor, whereas in the executing policy stage the political executives are dominant. We expect thus that at the extreme of quadrant 2 (top right), no countries will be positioned and even if they are positioned in there, they will lean closely to quadrant 1, quadrant 4 or towards the centre of the typology. In case the tendency is to converge towards the centre, much is done together and the less there is a
real dominance of one party. In that case there is a simultaneously tendency of ‘bureaucratization of politics’ and ‘politicalization of bureaucracy’ (Aberbach, Putnam, Rockham, 1981, p. 19).

2.2 Theories of politico-administrative relations applied to our diagram

As the topic of politico-administrative relations has been of great interest for the last century, many researchers have offered theories to typify politico-administrative relations. Even if their typologies differ because of the different focus, there are interfaces between them. We will briefly discuss some of these existing theories. Note that these theories in general describe ideal, extreme and mostly unrealistic situations. A country will seldom be positioned into strictly one of these extremes.

Figure 3: theories of politico-administrative relations

In the theory of Aberbach, Putnam & Rockham (1981) the point of departure is the allocation of tasks. The authors outline four images, based on who does what in designing public policy. In all four images, they argue that administration is solely authorized to implement policy. For that reason, the four images are placed at the bottom of the executing policy axis. The difference between the images is based on the influence of both political executives and officials in developing policy. In the first image, I policy-administration image, the authors argue that all is done by the political executive and that civil servants do not participate in policy development. For that reason, this image is placed at the extremes and it overlaps with the Wilsonian or Weberian classical distinction (Wilson, 1887; Weber 1972).
According to Aberbach, Putnam & Rockham, this is however an unrealistic image. In the second image, II facts/interest, the influence of the administration grows because of the facts and knowledge that they offer in developing policy. The third image, III energy/equilibrium, apart from offering facts and knowledge, also a promotion of citizens' interests becomes a task in which administrators are involved. Lastly, in the IV hybride image all the roles of politicians and civil servants are overlapping and there exist a tendency towards 'bureaucratization of politics' and ' politicization of administration'. In general domination in the developing policy stage according to Aberbach, Putnam & Rockham ranges from 'sole politicians' – which is at the extreme left - towards 'doing all together', which is the middle of the typology.

Next, Svara (1985) is positioned in the figure. He developed in 1985 the dichotomy-duality model, which is outlined in the field with an X. This model was based on the policy cycle, in which he distinguished four spheres: mission, policy, administration and management. To position this in our field, the first two (mission and policy) are linked with developing policy while the latter (administration and management) are rather synonymous with executing policy. In the mission and policy phase, the roles are predominantly given to politicians, in the latter rather to administrators. Moreover, Svara (1985, p.224) outlines that responsibility for the extreme functions is largely dichotomized - meaning that mission is a predominant responsibility for the political executives and on the contrary the leverage of the administration is greatest in the management functions - but in the policy and administration spheres, the activities are more shared between political executives and civil servants. As developing policy is thus mainly, but not totally, a task for the political executives and executing policy is chiefly a task for civil servants, this model is not positioned in the extremes, but more or less in the quadrant at the bottom left.

Next, the theory of Peters (1987) is positioned in the field. He outlines five different ideal models based on modalities of relationship. One of those features is the ‘dominant partner in the relationship’, which we can use to position Peters' ideal types in the field. Firstly, the formal/legal model is equivalent with the Weberian or Wilsonian view on politico-administrative relations. It is also equivalent with the policy/administration image of Aberbach, Putnam & Rockham (1981). The village life and the functional village life are positioned in the centre. Here Peters argues that there is no dominant actor since the actors are equal. The interaction is based on mutual interest for good cooperation and best policy outcomes. Therefore these are positioned in the centre of the model. Note that the difference between the village life and the functional village life is based on other features of the Peters
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typology 2. The administrative state is positioned in the extreme at the bottom right because of the absolute dominance Peters allocates to the civil servants. They overrule the politicians because of the expertise they have in policy affairs. It is not possible to position the adversarial model because the dominance of a party is variable. As a consequence, this model can be positioned varying in all of the quadrants.

Svara (1999, 2001) offers a new typology in which complementarity between politics and administration is the central point. The base for this typology is on the one hand administrative independency and on the other hand political control. Both can be either low or high. As a consequence there are four possible outcomes of politico-administrative interactions. Although the two dimensions of Svara are not neatly consistent with the dimensions of our typology, we argue there are similarities on which the positioning of the Svara dimension in our matrix is justified. High political control leans more toward a dominance of political executives, while high administrative independence leans toward a dominance of civil servants.

A situation of political dominance is present if simultaneously administrative independency is low, because of the close watch of the political executive on the administration and the strict instruction they offer, while obviously political control is high. This is positioned at the top left. The opposite is a situation of bureaucratic autonomy in which low political control and high administrative independence is present. The civil servants back out of the eye of politics and hold on to the helm. The dominant actor is thus the senior civil servant, and this is clearly positioned at the bottom right. Next, a situation of low political control and low bureaucratic independency is called the ‘laissez-faire’ or ‘political impasse’. As there is not really a dominant actor, it is impossible to position this in our field. Lastly the situation of politico-administrative complementarity is present when both political control and administrative independence are high. It is a situation in which both political executives and civil servants are dominant because they have mutual respect: political executives have respect for the expertise and knowledge of the officials and officials in return have respect for political priorities and they are loyal. Therefore, this option is placed in the middle of our typology. According to Svara, this is the most desirable situation. Note that this is equivalent with the functional village life or village life of Peters.

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2 The difference between village life and functional village life is based on the feature ‘style of interaction’. All other features are equal. In the village life, the style of interaction is based on mutuality. The functional village life is a subset of the village life and can be seen as several distinct village life models, which are based on different expertises (Peters, 1987).
2.3 The influence of a ‘third party’

The interaction and the existing theories we outlined earlier do not grasp the total picture of politico-administrative relations. ‘Third parties’ also have a share in policy processes, even if their names and leverage differ between countries. Therefore, we will regard the politico-administrative relationships in regard to that third party. The provisional OECD report (2010, p. 11) outlines three tasks or roles for this third party: generalist stratégic advisors, media advisors, and technical advisors. All these tasks are executed by the third party, however not all of them to the same extend. Therefore, we note that based on the OECD typification there are three options.

In the first type (type A), the third party consists out of a couple (not too many, most cases just one, some cases a few more, e.g. for the Prime Minister) advisors of the political executive. This party is closely related to the political executive, which is for example expressed in the essential “appointment of trust”, which is personal to the Minister (James, 2007). His/her main task is offer advice and therefore being a strategic partner (generalist). As a consequence the role of technical or media advisor is subordinate and the third party has a great leverage in the policy process and shaping the political-administrative relationships. The political hue of the advisor is in most cases important and there is a risk that civil services consider this party as a threat to their work.
Possible names: Special advisors, political advisors, ministerial advisor, junior advisor…
Examples: UK, DK, PT, IE, FI,

In the second option (type B), the third party consists out of an assistant (not too many most cases just one, some cases a few more, e.g. for the prime minister) of the political executive. S/he has less leverage in the policy process or the shaping of the politico-administrative relations. The main task is coordination and assisting, and thus being a media advisor, rather than delimit the political course or being a strategic partner. The political hue of the advisor is in most cases of less importance and there is not really a risk that civil services consider this party as a threat to their work.
Possible names: political assistant, ministerial assistant…
Examples: NL, RO

In the last type (type C), the third party is specifically linked to the political executive via a ministerial cabinet. There are numbers of experts who provide policy advice because of the expertise they have in a certain field. Their main task is thus being a technical advisor, however their role of helping to develop the strategy of policy and upholding relations with media, interest groups… is also important. Their leverage in policy making is greater.
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official might consider them as a help, but also (mostly because they are so numerous) as a threat because they might overwhelm the expertise of the top official.
Possible names: policy analyst, policy advisor in a ministerial cabinet.
Examples: BE, FR, PL, ES (evolving towards this), IT

Combining the two-dimensional model in figure 2 with the typology of third parties leaves us with 12 possible options of politico-administrative relations. In practice, however, some of the windows will be irrelevant.

**Figure 4: Total model of politico-administrative relations, including third parties**

2.4 Preliminary mapping of illustrative countries

Next, we start positioning some countries in this field. Please note that this is a preliminary mapping which is subject to change as more literature review and external check-up needs to be carried out. Moreover, it is not yet possible to ascribe differences between countries or position them exactly.
BELGIUM (BE) has a culture of ministerial cabinets (Vancoppenolle et al, 2010, p.4). Therefore, Belgium is in first instance positioned in type C. These ministerial cabinets consist out of a lot advisers and they have a strong position in policy making. Belgian government ministers and their advisers have greater leverage in policy development than civil servants. This indicates a positioning towards the left side of the typology (thus field C1 or C3). Brans, Pelgrims & Hoet (2005, 2006) position Belgium according to Peters (1987) in the formal/legal model - which corresponds with quadrant C3. However, in our scheme, Belgium is an example of quadrant C1 as those authors (Brans, Pelgrims & Hoet, 2005, 2006) also argue that the cabinets have developed greater share in executive tasks as well. Consequently: Belgian civil service is traditionally marginalized in the policy process in general. Therefore, the total process of policy making is politicized in Belgium and this supports the positioning in quadrant C1. However, they are not positioned in the top left corner, which indicates a confined involvement of the senior civil servants in the process.

THE NETHERLANDS (NL) have a culture of political assistants, by which the Netherlands are positioned in type B. However, the influence of that party in policy making is more limited than their counterparts in type A or C, such as e.g. the Belgian cabinet. Furthermore, because of the absence of political appointees, such as political advisors that exist in type A or C, Dutch civil service is a more autonomous and powerful bureaucracy that plays a rather direct and prominent role in policy formation such as drawing up policy options and negotiating with societal actors (OECD, 2008, p.92-93; Vancoppenolle et al, 2010; De Vries, 2001). As a consequence, the Netherlands fit into field B4. A slightly nuance can be outlined: Brans, Pelgrims & Hoet (2006, p. 61) argue that the Netherlands overlap with Peters functional village life. Thus, within the field B4, they are not positioned in the extreme corner, but more towards the centre.

FRANCE (FR). France has a system of ministerial cabinets, just as there exists in Belgium. So France is positioned in type C. Elgie (2001, p. 40) points out that France is a technocracy, in which policy making is dominated by people who solve problems based on their technical knowledge. This indicates the impact that the cabinet have in policy making. Further, according to the OECD-report (2008, p.65-67) the top officials have gained considerable leverage in policy-making during the last decades. This is because SCS occupy positions in ministerial cabinets as well which are prominent. Thus, France is positioned in quadrant C4. Peters (1997) argues however that France can be positioned in the village life as top officials and political executives are not in conflict. As the village life is positioned in the centre of our typology, we indicate a positioning towards the centre.
UNITED KINGDOM (UK). The UK has a culture of special advisors whereby every Minister is allowed one or two special advisor (except the Prime Minister who is allowed to have more). According to that feature, the UK fits into type A (OECD, 2008, p.112). Furthermore, the UK is positioned in field A3. We base ourselves here on a recent OECD-report (2007, p.27). There is argued that Westminster systems (and of course the UK is the principal example of a Westminster systems) are closest related to the Weberian idea of bureaucracy – which indicates a positioning in quadrant 3. The report also indicates that in the UK Ministers seldom interfere in management issues. Therefore, the actual implementation of that policy is a primary task for civil servants. The same report outlines as well that the political advisors have great leverage in policy development. However, the civil servants’ leverage in providing evidence-based data can not be underestimated. The report outlines that leverage of them for providing evidence-based data is greater (OECD, 2008, p.112). This thus indicates a movement in quadrant A3 towards the centre line (between A3 and A4) as the influence of SCS in policy development is indicated as well.

In the following scheme, the four illustrative countries are positioned. The starting point is to position them in the centre of each quadrant. Consequently, the arrow indicates a general movement of the countries within these quadrants. These are the slightly nuances that we make, based on the literature.
Figure 5: Total model of politico-administrative relations, including preliminary mapping
3 Bibliography