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Ministerial Advisers in Slovakia: Profiles and Career Paths, 2010–2020

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Abstract

This study examines the transparency of the regulatory framework under which ministerial advisors exist within the politicized context of a Central and Eastern European perspective. We compare profiles and career paths of ministerial advisers under five different types of coalition governments and examine if variance across government types can be explained by type of party – established vs. new parties. Empirically, the article draws on a cohort of 162 ministerial advisers in Slovakia across five governments from 2010 to 2020. We arrive at multiple findings. Firstly, we suggest the limitation in the availability and reporting of data is an important finding as it highlights accountability gaps and lack of government transparency irrespective of the party in power. Secondly, within the low regulatory environment, ministers appoint multiple *types* of staff including both formal "visible" ministerial advisers and "invisible" ministerial agents that, if one could accurately measure, would likely demonstrate that the ministerial advisory system is more inflated than we currently present. The *ad-hoc* nature of the advisory system also creates fluctuations in the size of the ministerial adviser cohort across governments and across different ministries. This would also help to explain the next finding, which is that, contrary to the experience in many countries, the overall size of the advisor population does not grow, probably because executive politicians have other avenues of appointing advisory agents. Fourthly, the advisers have a fairly equal distribution of prior employment from both the public sector and the private sector, but we do see some evidence of more established political parties preferring to recruit from the public sector and newer parties preferring to recruit from the private sector. Lastly, the appointment process appears to be highly controlled by individual ministers, suggesting personal ties are essential (link between ministerial and advisor

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education) and party-political criteria are a low consideration. The research is conducted using a biographical approach in which freedom of information requests and open source data is scrapped and then triangulated via a dozen interviews with current and former advisers. It argues that regulation is weak, lacking public scrutiny, which provides loopholes for employing ministerial agents in informal ways that could create, at worst, the opportunity for corrupt behavior, or at least, lead to poor practices in good governance. Therefore, future research should focus on both the formal "visible" and informal "invisible" ways that ministers recruit their advisory agents, how their agents function, and whether existing regulatory measures create a transparent and accountable governance framework.

Keywords:
Ministerial adviser, special adviser, politico-administrative relations, politicization, Central and Eastern Europe, political elites

1. Introduction

Literature examining ministerial advisers from a public administration and public policy perspective has rapidly grown in Western and Southern Europe, Scandinavia, and the Anglo-Commonwealth countries since the turn of the century (Eymeri-Douzans et al. 2015; Shaw and Eichbaum 2018). However, there is a paucity of research from Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries (Cobârzan 2008; Keris 2008; Majcherkiewicz 2008; Pshizova 2015), and no study has directly examined ministerial advisers as the core unit of analysis in a Slovak context.

Within the broader literature, a niche field of biographical research examines the career paths of political elites – with ministerial advisers as the "third element" in an executive triangle comprising executive politicians, ministerial advisers, and senior civil servants (Eichbaum and Shaw 2010). Biographical research is a research style that seeks to identify common characteristics of a group of actors based on systematic observation of their lives and journey (Delpu 2015). The individual information collected is often personal (e.g. age, gender, education) and professional (e.g. employment history). Again, the majority of literature over the past two decades examining the profiles and career paths of ministerial advisers is from Western and Southern Europe, Scandinavia, and the Anglo-Commonwealth countries (Askim et al. 2017; Blach-Ørsten et al. 2020; Cobârzan 2008; Connaughton 2010; Eymeri-Douzans et al. 2015, LSE GV314 Group 2012; Maley and Van den Berg 2018; Wilson 2015; Yong and Hazell 2014).

To address these gaps in the literature, we pursue three questions. Firstly, to help understand how the advisory system operates, we investigate what transparency and what accountability measures exist. Thus, we ask: *what is the regulatory environment and overall framework governing ministerial advisers?* Second, we also ask *what differences exist across various types of coalition governments and parties, in*

terms of the overall numbers and types of advisers? Only a handful of existing studies investigate multi-party coalition governments (see Gouglas 2015; Askim et al. 2017; Yong and Hazell 2014), and these relations appear to be underresearched. For example, the number of appointees could indicate potential growing party demands for patronage positions that need to be accommodated. Thirdly, our main focus aims to identify who ministerial advisers are and whether Slovakia's politicized administrative tradition reflects a specific type of adviser. Thus, we ask: *What is the profile and career path of a Slovak ministerial adviser?* We ask these questions in an attempt to drag these actors out of the dark and into the limelight (Hustedt et al. 2017).

To answer these questions, we present a single country study, describing the profiles and career paths of 162 Slovak ministerial advisers compared across five governments from 2010 to 2020. As successive governments in Slovakia have not and do not publicly report official data on ministerial advisers, we conduct biographical research using freedom of information requests, scrapping open-source data (including LinkedIn), and triangulate this data via a dozen interviews with current and former advisers.

The paper is presented as follows. First, we briefly discuss the ministerial adviser literature and relevance to the Slovak case. Secondly, we present the cases and method. Thirdly, we present the findings. Finally, a concluding section pulls the threads together and considers the implications for our understanding of ministerial advisers in Slovakia and the wider CEE context.

2. Conceptualizing ministerial advisers

Examining the presence and effects of ministerial advisers in ministers' offices has been instrumental in advancing a more cogent understanding of politico-administrative relations. The literature has, at times, *colorfully* suggested that ministerial advisers exist within a virtual "purple zone" where politics (the red zone) and administration (the blue zone) merge to form a hybrid-like political-administration purple blend (Matheson 1998). Elsewhere, some scholars label these actors as "people who live in the dark" (Blick 2004), people in the "shadowland" of politics and bureaucracy (Hustedt et al. 2017), and a "third element" in a trilateral relationship at the apex of government – between ministers, minister advisers, and senior civil servants (Eichbaum and Shaw 2010).

The colors of a ministerial adviser can be directly affected by the extent of the regulatory environment which further affects the recruitment and functions of advisers. Ministerial advisers are, unlike civil servants, generally exempt from political neutrality, which means the regulatory environment governing advisers is, at times, different to regulations that govern civil servants (OECD 2011). An OECD survey on ministerial advisers found that a majority of the 27 respondent countries had not developed a governance framework promoting transparency, integrity and

accountability for ministerial advisers (OECD 2011, 3). In some countries, however, such frameworks exist. Yong and Hazell (2014) found that special advisers in the United Kingdom are governed by at least five governing frameworks, and the Cabinet Office has published an annual list of special advisers since 2010 for added transparency. But even when a broad regulatory system exists, such as in Australia, Ng (2016; 2018) found accountability gaps where ministers strategically prevented their advisers from appearing before a parliamentary committee, often following scandals and controversies, in order to evade accountability.

The recruitment and appointment of ministerial advisers is associated with literature on the politicization of the executive branch (Peters and Pierre 2004). A variety of definitions exist, as does a variety of types of politicization (e.g. administrative politicization; Eichbaum and Shaw 2008), formal, functional, and bureaucratic politicization (Hustedt and Salomonsen 2014), with Craft and Halligan (2020, 57) broadly framing politicization as "the political executive's increasing influence and control within the executive branch". They further suggest that a minister's influence is based on how they exercise authority, how they deploy their personal staff, and through any preference for non-public service advice, as well as how policy advice is communicated to them by senior officials. Thus, politicization often falls within observations about executive governments centralizing personnel and decision-making processes (Dahlström et al. 2011; Peters and Pierre 2004; Savoie 1999). Most scholars would agree that the executive has a strong normative claim to recruit personal staff to help facilitate their electoral mandate, seek alternative policy advice, and be supported by a responsive civil service. However, concerns are often raised in relation to the recruitment of the advisers and the regulatory environment governing these advisers.

For example, the presence of ministerial advisers invites questions about their *policy capacity*, defined as the "set of skills and resources – or competences and capabilities – necessary to perform policy functions" (Wu et al. 2017, 3). Evidently, examining advisers' functions would be the best method to help explain their policy capacity. However, the source of their recruitment can also offer insights. For instance, in Portugal and France, the majority of ministerial advisers are recruited from the civil service, suggesting they have technical expertise and contacts within the administration (Silva 2017; Eymeri-Douzans et al. 2015). In contrast, in Australia and Canada the majority of advisers are recruited from outside the administration, suggesting their recruitment could be more associated with personal-political criteria or through private sector or industry body expertise (Maley 2017; Craft 2016). It is unclear where Slovakia fits within these two models, or another third option.

Tenure is also important. In the Executive Office of the President in the United States, the turnover of advisers is considered a proxy measurement on the relative health of the office, with high turnover linked to instability and poor governance

(Tenpas 2018). In addition, some studies have shown that experience as an adviser can be a stepping-stone to a career as an elected official (Goplerud 2015; see also Askim et al. 2020). Combining tenure and gender also offers insights, with one Australian study showing that most junior political staff positions were filled by women, which hindered their ability to be appointed to higher-level advisory positions (Taflaga and Kerby 2019).

The politicization of policy advice via internal-to-government ministerial advisers coupled with the externalization of policy advice via external-to-government consultants is a common trend in most countries (Vesely 2013), particularly in Westminster countries (Craft and Halligan 2020). In addition to these two trends, Sedlačko and Staronova (2018) also found examples of the administration attempting to re-internalize policy advice; that is, ministries would create evidence-based policy units to help build capacity, but also as a measure to increase transparency in the policy advice provided to a minister.

In sum, studying the profiles and career paths of advisers offers insights into these issues and more. However, no study has examined ministerial advisers in a Slovak context. Further, as we detail below, the lack of accountability measures is evident in the Slovak context, with multiple types of what we call both "visible" and "invisible" ministerial advisers used by Slovak ministers.

3. Ministerial advisers in a politicized model: a case study on Slovakia

Political advisers have existed in some form or another as part of the executive advisory and support system as far back as the Austro-Hungarian Empire or the First Czechoslovak Republic. During Communist rule there was no specific regulation to govern politico-administrative divisions, including those of ministerial advisers. The system was a classical *nomenclatura* system, as all positions – whether in the administration or to personal offices of executive leaders – depended on the decisions of the Communist Party (Staronova and Gajduschek 2013). After the fall of Communism in 1989 it took another 13 years for the main Civil Service Law (CSL) in 2002 to enter into force; most countries in the region had already enacted comprehensive civil service legislation. Even then the CSL did not regulate ministerial advisers, although it introduced their formal label, "*constitutional expert agents*", which we would also label as "visible" advisers.

Slovak ministerial advisers started to be regulated when reforms to the CSL were enacted in 2003 that introduced several innovative elements (Staronova 2017), including the institution of a *temporary civil service* which was specifically designed for ministerial advisers. Thus, today both regular civil servants and ministerial advisers fall under the Civil Service Law. However, ministerial advisers (constitutional expert agents) are uniquely different to regular civil servants as they are the per-

sonal agents of ministers in an equivalent way that ministerial advisers or special advisers are found in Europe and the Commonwealth countries (OECD 2007; Shaw and Eichbaum 2018). In Slovakia, ministerial advisers are *temporary civil servants* whose tenure is tied to their political employer (e.g. president, prime minister, ministers), are directly appointed by a minister without any formal selection procedure (recruited on a non-merit principle), can offer political advice, and do not have their performance formally appraised. Thus, they fit the definition proposed by Hustedt, Kolltveit and Salmonsen, that a ministerial adviser is a "person appointed to serve an individual minister, recruited on political criteria, in a position that is temporary" (2017, 300). An additional difference to regular civil servants, but common to ministerial advisers found in other countries, is that ministerial advisers do not have any legal executive authority and cannot formally manage civil servants in the administration. In practice, however, this does not necessarily mean that advisers do not functionally intervene against the principles and conventions of impartial civil servants, in what Eichbaum and Shaw (2008) call "administrative politicisation". Within a single ministerial office, however, the most senior adviser (e.g. Chief of Staff) can manage junior staff.

When asked in an OECD study, *who is considered to be a ministerial adviser*, Slovak officials provided the following definition: "[ministerial] advisers are *constitutional expert agents* who fulfil tasks for the member of government or the President" (OECD 2011, 26). It is a legal definition directly taken from the law and purposely left vague as Slovakia does not have any other forms of regulations and accountability measures governing or overseeing advisers (e.g. presidential decrees, ministerial handbooks/guides, codes of conduct). Thus, unlike in France, Belgium, Australia, and Canada where regulatory measures governing advisers are broad (Eymeri-Douzans et al. 2015; Ng 2018; Brans et al. 2006), the Slovak framework on ministerial advisers is minimal. In addition, ministers can also make appointments to other permanent positions in the civil service. Hence, instead of having ministerial advisers in their formal role, ministers may install them into top civil service positions, which would explain high levels of civil service turnover following a change of government/minister (Staronova and Rybar 2020).

Despite the inclusion of ministerial advisers in the CSL, the regulation remains vague, non-transparent and allows loopholes to engage ministerial agents via different ways. There are no regulations limiting the size of the advisory corps within a ministry (in contrast to the UK, Ireland, and Denmark, which have caps). A minister has full discretion to employ advisers under various regimes and to determine what roles the advisers will perform (e.g. media, policy, legislative). Similar discretion is given to the minister in setting remuneration, whether ministerial advisers follow the formal grade system as regular civil servants or are granted a "special salary" which can be market-based or determined by a minister (Staronova 2017). There is no central registry that tracks who in the civil service is granted a special salary, suggesting a lack of accountability and transparency.

The lack of regulatory controls in Slovakia also allows ministers to bypass formal rules and avoid public scrutiny when employing their personal external "agents". That is, ministers can hire external-to-government advisers under the Labor Code by offering *temporary contracts* and can offer these contracts either directly or through public procurement processes to an individual consultant or a firm by *mandate agreement* (e.g. services for specific projects). Other types of advisers can also be hired on temporary contracts but through another internal regulation within a ministry. For example the Minister for Health can recruit advisers, or more accurately, "*main experts*" under an internal statute of the Ministry of Health. In fact, advisers on temporary contracts and mandate agreements are extremely difficult to track or scrutinize. As such, we label these actors "invisible" advisers. Their invisible nature also raises questions of potential corrupt activities. Anecdotal evidence from the media suggests both formal internal "visible" and external "invisible" ministerial advisers become the focal points for either securing or helping to facilitate government contracts awarded to private firms, potentially leading to corrupt behavior. A recent audit of the Ministry of Finance (2020) suggested that contractual advisers and consultants are significantly more expensive (by one to two thirds more) than investing in internal civil service capacities, and the quality of their advice is of questionable value.

In sum, Slovak ministerial advisers share common traits to functionally equivalent advisers in other European and Commonwealth countries. However, they seem to lack regulatory measures to govern their accountability, and little is known about their personal profiles. In addition, there might be other non-formal ways for people connected to the minister to enter the arena. Our interest in this paper is to isolate formal ministerial advisers (those known as *constitutional expert agents*) at the executive level as a distinct policy advisory actor and unit of analysis that would mirror the context of politicization within which they operate. So far, this has not been examined in the literature.

4. Cases and method

This single-country case study compares qualitative biographical data on individuals who served as ministerial advisers in Slovakia across five governments between 2010 and 2020 (Table 1). Biographical research is a method of study that seeks to identify common characteristics of a group of actors based on systematic observation of their lives and journey (Delpu 2015). The individual information collected is often personal (e.g. age and gender), educational, partisan and professional. We should also clarify that, as the focus is on biographical insights, we examine *who* advisers are and not the *functions* of advisers. Other scholars such as Connaughton (2010), Craft (2016) and Maley (2000) offer literature on adviser functions.

Table 1
Cases and political composition

Government	Political-party ideology and composition	Formation of new government
Radičová	Center-right coalition government (SDKÚ-DS, SaS, KDH, Most)	8 July 2010 Due to regular election
Fico II	Left leaning majority government (SMER)	4 April 2012 Premature election: government collapse after internal disputes over EU bailouts during the European debt crisis
Fico III	Left-right coalition with remaining previous major party (SMER, SNS, Sieť, Most)	23 March 2016 Due to regular election
Pellegrini	Left-right coalition with remaining previous major party (SMER, SNS, Most)	22 March 2018 Cabinet reshuffle following scandal involving the murder of a journalist
Matovič	Coalition government of socially rooted center-right parties (OĽANO, SaS, Sme Rodina, Za ľudí)	21 March 2020 Due to regular election

Source: Authors

Sourcing primary data on ministerial advisers in Slovakia is challenging (see Section on Results for more details). Biographical data is not publicly available information. To resolve this, we filed *freedom of information* requests under the free access to information law. The data received from the ministries included 235 positions of current and former official advisors (without any further biographical information). From these, we have excluded the PM advisors[4], which left us with 162 positions, equaling 135 individual names as several advisors held the position of advisor multiple times, or at several ministries.

4 We deliberately excluded the Council of Advisers to the prime minister for two reasons. Firstly, the common characteristics of these types of advisers do not fit common scholarly definitions of a ministerial adviser. Secondly, the formal regulatory environment governing the Council of Advisers it different to ministerial advisers. That is, the Council of Advisers are employed part-time and governed under the Labour Code. However, they are a unique group of actors that deserve further investigation. It is the only group of formal advisers which are publicly identified, and their names are published on an official government website. However, it is unclear what functions they perform. Their advisory function is of a part-time (Labour rather than CS law) nature as they also continue to work in their respective main roles (e.g. in universities, other public agencies). At this point we can only speculate that they are used by the prime minister as an externally facing body to "showcase" to the general public that the prime minister is surrounded by experts. It is also the biggest group of advisers, with 18–20 advisers working in each government of the monitored period, except for the last Matovič government. The Matovič government was formed in March 2020 during the COVID-19 Pandemic, and the main effort has been focused on a new Crises Advisory Council (at the time of writing the prime minister's "regular" cohort of advisers was not yet fully in operation).

Second, we created a new biographical database on listing the ministerial adviser's age, gender, education qualifications, the education subject area, political affiliation, all previous jobs an adviser held before becoming a ministerial adviser (if applicable). To that end, a 10-question survey was sent to 123 of the 135 advisers. We could not locate the contact details of 12 advisers. We modelled our survey on Maley and Van den Berg's (2018) study, but tweaked and translated the questions for local considerations. We received a response rate of 30 percent (n=40). This data was further supplemented by information collected from online sources, such as LinkedIn, google searches and media articles. This increased the amount of complete data to n=108 individuals, representing 80 percent of the monitored population. Thirdly, to supplement, triangulate, and guarantee a more in-depth analysis, we conducted 12 interviews with both current and former ministerial advisers between May 2019 and September 2020, each lasting 40 to 60 minutes, which were recorded and anonymized (See Appendix A). Lastly, the database on ministerial advisers was then analyzed, and the findings are presented below.

5. Results

Before we delve into the specific results on the profile of advisers and their career paths, we should highlight the challenges we faced in obtaining data. This, we argue, is an insightful finding in its own right as individual ministries provided varying degrees of information pertaining to ministerial advisers (see Table 2).

To begin, we found there is no central registry or a comprehensive list of the ministerial advisers regardless of their status (formal full time under the CSL or external via contracts and mandate agreements). Nor is information on them publicly available on official ministry websites. Instead, any information has to be requested by utilizing the Free Access to Information Law (FOIA). As part of the formal FOIA process, we asked each ministry for a current list and historical lists of their ministerial advisers and the CVs of each adviser (all types starting with formal full-time posts according to the CSL – constitutional expert agents, those on temporary contracts and mandate agreements). All of the ministries refused to provide CVs. Nevertheless, six of the 12 ministries provided lists of all ministerial advisers with some specifications, such as academic degree abbreviation (see Table 2). Three ministries provided partial information following FOIA requests, and we needed to repeatedly follow up on these requests for a variety of reasons. For example, it was often necessary to clarify some details in the request and to justify why they should share the data (although the FOIA process does not require any justification for requesting data). Finally, a third group of ministries provided incomplete information (e.g. a list of employment dates without names) and refused to amend the list (mostly citing concerns related to the General Data Protection Regulation, known as GDPR), which displayed some contradictory information. Only the Ministry of Defence refused to provide any data on former advisers, citing national security reasons. Thus,

the next analysis started with complete lists for the observed period from the first two groups (Table 2) and incomplete lists from the third group.

Table 2
Performance of the ministries in providing information on ministerial advisers

Ministries that provided a list of formal ministerial advisers	Ministries that provided a list of formal ministerial advisers with incomplete information, several FOIA requests necessary	Ministries that provided incomplete, contradictory, or no information at all
Ministry of Education Ministry of Finance Ministry of Interior Ministry of Justice Ministry of Transport Prime Minister's Office (PMO)	Ministry of Culture Ministry of Economy Ministry of Environment	Ministry of Agriculture Ministry of Defence Ministry of Foreign Affairs Ministry of Health Ministry of Labour

Source: authors

Note: We exclude the cohort of PM's Council of Advisers since they are under a different regulatory regime (part-time, Labor Law), but we include the PMO because some ministerial advisers directly serve the PM on a full-time basis under the same regulation as other ministries.

Furthermore, none of the ministries provided any information on external ministerial advisers who were/are on temporary contracts or mandatory agreements, although several ministries indicated that they do employ external advisers. Nevertheless, they argued in their FOIA requests that they are not required to report names or any other personal data, as these external advisers were employed under the Labor Code. Under the FOIA, the ministries are required to provide the names of the formal internal ministerial advisers (*constitutional expert agents)*, their academic titles and the length of their employment. Thus, it is impossible to know the complete size of the ministerial adviser corpus and their names, particularly if different ways of employment are utilized.

Government differences in adviser recruitment

Last employment prior to becoming adviser: Table 3 presents data illustrating the sector(s) from which advisers are recruited. The public sector accounts for almost 32 percent of the overall population, ranging from 12.6 percent under the Matovič government to 55 percent under Pellegrini, indicating on the one hand that ministers value the experience of administration and contacts within the administration that civil servants can offer as advisers. On the other hand, the higher levels of politicization of the public sector (Staronova and Rybar 2020) may suggest an entirely different story. Established parties with experience as a government (e.g. Fico II, Fico III and reshuffled in the Pellegrini governments) may prefer to draw a high number of advisers from the public sector as these parties may view these

actors as their personal "pool" of loyal political public servants.[5] In other words, the short tenure of ministerial advisers in combination with a culture of politicization and government experience could mean that a ministerial adviser position is both a springboard for employment in the public sector and a readily available resource for "older-established" political parties who already had experience of being in government needing to recruit loyal and experienced civil servants.

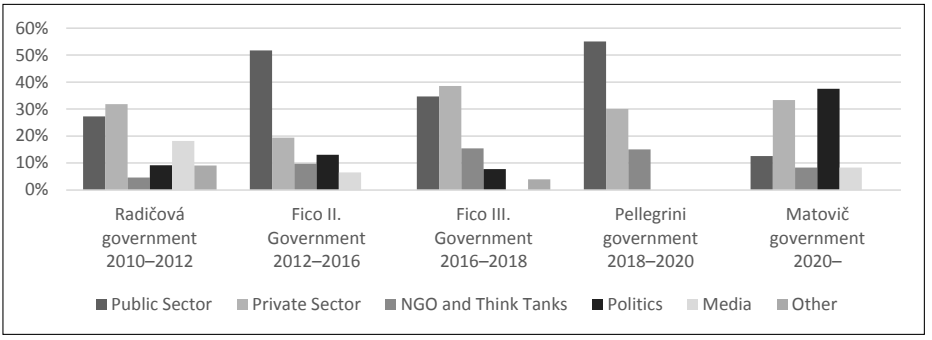
The private sector also accounted for around 30 percent when looking at the entire adviser population, but it is higher when either "new parties" enter government (Radičová, Matovič) or when an "old party" is making a new coalition with new parties (Fico III). This may suggest that ministers welcome external government expertise from corporate and industry professionals when there is a window of opportunity to do so by welcoming a new party into the government (coalition). Thus, the recruitment of private sector advisers also raises issues of potential corrupt behavior in situations when advisers use their position of influence to advance government contracts to their private networks of former firms, which is particularly risky in the CEE context (Innes 2014).

Interestingly, we also found some cases of individuals who were either previously elected politicians or others who worked as a personal adviser to an elected politician immediately prior to starting an advisory position. The third biggest category overall is therefore the *Politics* sector (averaging 14 percent, but with big variations between different governments: e.g. reaching 37.5 percent under the Matovič government). Since we do not have direct data on party membership, Rybář and Spáč (2020) argue that being a politician (prior to the advisory post) can be a proxy indicator for party membership, since Slovakia is dominated by a new type of "political entrepreneur" parties with little real party membership.[6] In respect to former politicians-turned-advisers, this includes former members of parliament from the Slovak parliament, former ministers, or local councilors. This could mean that ministers' value their knowledge of government, contacts and experience, or, simply, that an adviser role was a purely party patronage appointment. The fourth most populous category overall was the Non-Government Organization and think tanks sector with 10.6 percent.

5 The category "public sector" was subdivided into three parts: central, local levels and "other". The local level did not play a role at all. Interestingly, the first Fico II government recruited some of their advisers from the "other" category, which encompassed state employees from the police, public hospitals, public schools, judges and people sitting on controlling boards of state-owned enterprises. In contrast, the Pellegrini government (reshuffled Fico II) recruited some advisers from the central level.

6 For many years the political party of PM Matovič (OĽANO) only had four official members. An amendment to the law regulating political parties was made in 2019 that now requires a minimum of 45 members to qualify as a registered political party.

Table 3
Last employment before becoming an adviser (cross-governmental differences)



We also compared an adviser's previous employment immediately prior to becoming an adviser with their more distant professional experience. We found that 80 percent of advisers already had public sector experience before being appointed as an adviser, even though only 32 percent of advisers were hired directly from the public sector. Similarly, 62 percent of advisers already had some private sector experience, even though 30 percent of advisers were hired directly from private sector.

Employment as an adviser (recruitment and code of conduct): The appointment of ministerial advisers is entirely at the discretion of their minister. This was confirmed also during interviews. In all cases the minister reached out to prospective advisers and asked them directly if they were interested in becoming an adviser. Commonly, ministers would appoint advisers with individuals that they had a previous personal relationship with. None of the interviewees were concerned with acknowledging these personal connections. This was due to the fact that they identified *personal trust* as a key factor for their appointment. As Interviewee F told us: "Personal trust, this is inevitably necessary, but having similar views on the issues at hand as well as similar values is important too." Thus, ministers may be recruiting along the "political" lines suggested by Hustedt et al. (2017), which includes both party-political criteria and personal trust. This might also distinguish the Slovak system from Britain, where Yong and Hazell (2014) argued that the personal nature of appointment was exaggerated, at least in the UK context, as many special advisers were not well known to the minister, and further fueled by growing reliance on a semi-open competitive recruitment process. While personal trust is important in the Slovak context, the interviewees also emphasized that they believed they would not have been offered the job without sufficient knowledge and skills in their respective fields. Interviewee E, who served as a spokesperson/adviser said that *"no minister needs a spokesperson just to be pretty, everybody needs him or her to do their job well"*. Similarly, Interviewee F explained that he was hired to manage issues that civil servants could not or should not resolve:

> *Everything that could not be solved by the standard ministry bureaucracy that nobody could take care of, all that was my job to deal with. The problem is that when you are changing the Ministry of Finance on the go, the number of standard problems is relatively small. I was sweeping sand from the cogs of the ministry machine to make it work.*

As there is no specific code of conduct for ministerial advisers, the interviewees were also asked about what rules applied to them, if any, during their time as advisers to better understand the nature of their relationship with the civil service and their minister. Their responses provided insights into the degree of discretion at their disposal, as well as their minister's expectations on what an adviser can and cannot do. Despite no official code of conduct, advisers said they felt obligated to follow their ministry's general internal rules. Furthermore, ministers offered their advisers a substantial level of independence and autonomy, but still advisers self-regulated for political and self-interested reasons. As one adviser said:

> *When it comes to people like the minister's spokesperson, his chief of staff or adviser, our motto was: Not only everything has to be in line with the law, but everything has to be acceptable for the evening news as well. We just imposed a much more demanding standard on ourselves. Call it self-regulation, self-censorship and self-control if you want (Interviewee F).*

Number and tenure of ministerial advisers

The size of the ministerial adviser cohort varies across ministries and governments, mostly because of the various employment possibilities, but not necessarily across government types. The number of advisers in individual ministries is highly variable, with, for example, our data finding that the Fico III (2016–2018) government employed 10 advisers in the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport, five advisers in the Ministry of Justice, and one adviser in the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. Table 3 presents the size of the adviser population in individual ministries for each government. Over the 10-year period and five governments, we found the adviser population fluctuated across governments but has not particularly risen in any definitive way across time. This observation sits in contrast to some other countries where the adviser cohort has often incrementally grown and consolidated in size across time and across changes of government (Shaw and Eichbaum 2018; Hustedt et al. 2017; Askim et al. 2020), viewed as a sign of increased politicization and an effort to regain political control over the bureaucratic apparatus.

The stability of the Slovak adviser cohort could relate to two factors. Firstly, as our data captures a portion of the adviser cohort, a complete dataset might illu-

minate a more robust change in the population size across governments. Secondly, ministers have a flexible appointment system at their disposal, in which they can recruit a variety of types of staff – including formal ministerial servants, seconded civil servants, and external ministerial agents. As our study only captures formal ministerial advisers, the fluctuations across governments and stability of the adviser population over time could be explained by ministers appointing different *types* of advisers as part of their personal entourage.

Oddly, we could not find any advisers in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Environment, or the Ministry of Health. There is no way to be certain as to why some ministries have no advisers, but this could be linked to a minister's personal approach to seeking policy advice. For example, local media reported there were 27 people who worked as external advisers to the Minister of Health from 2012 to 2019 (which was confirmed by our correspondence with the ministry) and 17 external advisers during the Matovič government in the Ministry of Agriculture; while formal government records indicate the ministries had zero internal advisers (Table 4). Thus, the ministries seem to not consider external advisers to be *formal ministerial advisers* under the Civil Service Act as they fall within the remit of the Labor Code, which makes it legally impossible to obtain their names from the ministry.

The average tenure of a ministerial adviser (excluding advisers who just started working under the current government) is 1.25 years or around 474 days. This short duration, which is oddly often shorter than the tenure of their ministers, implies that advisers were most likely hired for a specific project/task and that they do not, in most cases, serve as personal "general" advisers to the ministers. This tendency to hire advisers for a specific project/task was confirmed by a current adviser and was partly linked to a lack of either trust or capacity within the administration. Interviewee B said that:

> *I was hired as he [the minister] encountered an issue that civil servants in the ministry could not solve – because it was an atypical problem. I had worked with the minister previously, and he had remembered having a good professional experience with me.*

In addition, in some cases media reports of conflict of interest or corruption have pressured ministerial advisers to resign, and in at least one case an adviser went to jail (Dennik N 2015). Plus, there were quite a few outliers recorded in the data, with some three advisers holding the position of an adviser for just 5–7 days and others being advisers for more than seven years. The long periods can be explained by incumbent ministers of the dominant party that have been in power (either alone or as a coalition member) for the eight years in the monitored period. However, after personally communicating with an official from the Ministry of Education, it emerged that another explanation might be due to financial restrictions hindering

the recruitment process. That is, the Official told us that the adviser was recorded "on paper" for about a month to bridge an employment restriction requirement:

> *That was probably a pure formality. Since they [the ministry's administration] did not have a specific position available, they probably temporarily placed me in a different position. However, I have only been working in the communications department the whole time and nowhere else. The content of my work did not change (e-mail, 2019).*

Table 4
Number of advisers across governments and ministries

	Office of the Prime Minister	Ministry of Finance	Ministry of Economy	Ministry of Interior	Ministry of Justice	Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Ministry of the Environment; Ministry of Health	Ministry of Transport, Construction and Regional Development	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development	Ministry of Defence	Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family	Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport	Ministry of Culture	**TOTAL**
2010–2012 RADIČOVA	3	6	1	1	1	n/a	7	1	n/a	1	5	1	**27**
2012–2016 FICO II.	0	8	5	9	7	n/a	5	1	n/a	0	7	1	**43**
2016–2018 FICO III.	0	5	0	7	5	n/a	8	1	n/a	0	10	1	**37**
2018–2020 PELLEGRINI	0	1	0	1	4	n/a	7	1	n/a	0	10	4	**28**
2020 – MATOVIČ	0	0	7	3	1	n/a	5	0	3	2	1	5	**27**

Source: authors

Note: Information in the table is as of May 2020. The Matovič government is likely to change with time. It also does not capture the new Ministry of Investment and Regional Development that was established only in July 2020 by the Matovič government.

n/a – no information on ministerial advisers was provided by the Ministry

PMO includes only direct full time advisers and not the Council of Advisers to PM, which is excluded (see footnote 1).

Profile of ministerial advisers (age, gender, education)

Age: The median age of a Slovak adviser when first recruited was 41. The median age ranged from 36.5 under the Fico II government to 43 under the Pellegrini and Matovic governments. This is higher than the median age of advisers in the UK, which was around 31 (under the Coalition 2010–2013) and 33 (under Labour 1997–2010) (Yong and Hazell 2014), and also early 30s in Australia and the Netherlands (Maley and Van den Berg 2018, 14). The Slovak data indicates that being an adviser is not a starting position in one's career and that the people advising ministers presumably have 20 years of professional experience before joining ministers' offices. In some cases when no reply to the survey was recorded or no exact data could be found, the age of advisers was calculated on the basis of the year when they started their higher education. This determination process carries some risk of inaccuracies (+/- 1–3 years), but the technique was tested on 15 advisers that provided their exact age in the questionnaire, compared to the estimations, and proved to be within the mentioned error margin. Despite this testing, the data on age should be regarded as indicative only.

Gender: In the Slovak civil service, women account for 64 percent of all civil servants (Sedlačko and Staronova 2018, 9), but almost half that number represented the share of female ministerial advisers. On average, women represent 36 percent of the advisory positions, with the highest proportion of male advisers recorded under the Fico II government at 72 percent (Table 5). This finding is not surprising for two reasons. Firstly, the over-representation of men as ministerial advisers is common in other countries, including the special adviser cohort in Britain (Yong and Hazell 2014) and "legislative" political staff in Canada (Snagovsky and Kerby 2019). Secondly, the gender divide has also been found in other "political elite" domains within the Slovak civil service, such as in the in-house advisory bodies which are primarily staffed by young men (Sedlačko and Staronova 2018). The proportion of female MPs in the Slovak parliament has hovered at around 20 percent since the beginning of the 2000s, with the Pellegrini government appointing a record five female ministers (33 percent of the cabinet) compared to early 2016, when all cabinet ministers were men in the Fico II government (Torrabala 2018). Plus, according to the Gender Equality Index[7], Slovakia currently ranks fourth lowest in terms of gender equality among EU member states (European Institute of Gender Equality 2020).

7 The Gender Equality Index is a composite indicator that measures the complex concept of gender equality and, based on the EU policy framework, assists in monitoring progress of gender equality across the EU over time. For more information see https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index.

Table 5
Gender balance and age of ministerial advisers in Slovakia

	Radičová government 2010–2012	Fico II government 2012–2016	Fico III government 2016–2018	Pellegrini government 2018–2020	Matovič government 2020–	Overall
Number of advisers	27	43	37	28	27	162
Gender (male)	59 %	72 %	62 %	61 %	63 %	64 %
Gender (female)	41 %	28 %	38 %	39 %	37 %	36 %
Age (median)	40 years	36.5 years	40.5 years	43 years	43 years	40.5 years

Education: Slovak ministerial advisers have a high level of education, with more than 93 percent of the advisers between 2010 to 2020 holding a master's degree or higher qualification when they were hired to be an adviser.[8] Unusually, a high proportion of advisers (17 percent) have a doctorate degree, or an even higher qualification (docents or professors). Only one person from the whole population had no university education and 10 advisers had only a bachelor's degree. The high proportion of highly educated advisers can be partly explained by Slovak administrative culture, which has historically linked one's academic qualifications to one's paygrade. Ministries are required by law to provide information about academic titles on *formal ministerial advisers* (if advisers have titles). However, this does not necessarily explain why ministers would want to recruit such highly educated staff.

The vast majority of advisers obtained their diplomas in Slovakia, indicating that education from abroad was not an important factor in their selection. This is in direct contrast to in-house advisory bodies (analytical centers) which place great emphasis on an "elite" foreign education when recruiting officials (Sedlačko and Staronova 2018). This would suggest that a foreign education might play a minor role when ministers are selecting ministerial advisers.

The results also show that Slovak ministerial advisers have much higher qualifications than advisers in other countries, such as Britain and Greece (Gouglas 2015; Yong and Hazell 2014). Their higher education level, together with the higher average age when first appointed as an adviser, shows that Slovak ministerial advisers likely contribute lots of field-specific knowledge.

Educational Field: In Table 6 we also looked into a potential link between the education of the minister and their advisers, something which has not been examined in the international literature, but which might indicate personal rather than partisan linkages. We found that 31 percent of advisers were educated in the same

8 These findings relate to data from 155 of the 162 advisers.

field as their minister. Here we see differences across governments with more than half the advisers educated in the same field as their minister in the Fico II government but only 15 percent in the Matovič government. This could perhaps show a stronger personal link and networks between the minister and advisers, particularly with a one-party government, as has been suggested by Staronova and Rybar (2020) in relation to patronage practices with permanent top civil servants.

Table 6
Link between education field of the minister and ministerial adviser

	Radičová government 2010–2012	Fico II government 2012–2016	Fico III government 2016–2018	Pellegrini government 2018–2020	Matovič government 2020–	Overall
Number of advisers	27	43	37	28	27	162
Same education field (minister and their adviser)	38.8%	51.7%	32.1%	17.3%	15.3%	31.4%
Different education field between minister and adviser	61.2%	48.3%	67.9%	82.7%	84.7%	68.6%
No information (N)	9	14	9	5	1	38

Note: The percentages refer to the available information

The top three most common fields of education are law, economics and communication/journalism, representing 56.7 percent of the adviser cohort (Table 7). Thus, we can confirm that Slovak ministerial advisers are generalists, as commonly found in the Germanic administrative tradition (a legal education), rather than the Westminster tradition with a main educational focus on politics and history (Yong and Hazell 2014). Interestingly, advisers in Slovakia rarely completed politics, international relations and public administration degrees, unlike their Westminster counterparts. Economics is on the rise as a generalist education since the New Public Management became influential in CEE countries.

Individuals with a media or journalism education were usually a minister's spokesperson, but their presence is not consistent across ministries and governments. For example, it was common for the minister's spokesperson to be a communication or journalism graduate in both the Radičová and Matovič governments, but less common in the Fico III and Pellegrini governments. This shows different

governments recruited their spokespeople in different ways. Some spokespeople were permanent civil servants (but sometimes this changed with the change of government), and some were ministerial advisers, or other types of contracts. Overall, we can confirm a global trend identified in other countries where the mediatization of politics has led to a desire for enhancing control of the media agenda and for hiring more professional communicators (Blach-Ørsten et al. 2020).

Table 7
Main educational field of the ministerial advisers

	Radičová government 2010–2012	Fico II government 2012–2016	Fico III government 2016–2018	Pellegrini government 2018–2020	Matovič government 2020–	Overall
Number of advisers	**27**	**43**	**37**	**28**	**27**	**162**
Education field						
Economics	23.8%	25.8%	17.9%	17.4%	11.5%	19.4%
Humanities and Art	23.8%	3.2%	7.1%	17.4%	23.1%	11.6%
Communication/ Journalism	19.1%	6.5%	10.7%	13.0%	23.1%	14.0%
Management	4.8%	6.5%	10.7%	4.4%	3.9%	6.2%
Political Science, International Relations and Public Administration	9.5%	16.1%	7.1%	4.4%	3.9%	8.5%
Law	0.0%	32.3%	28.6%	26.1%	23.1%	23.3%
Natural Sciences	4.8%	3.2%	3.6%	4.4%	0.0%	3.1%
Technical Sciences	14.3%	6.5%	14.3%	13.0%	11.5%	11.6%
No information (N)	6	12	9	5	1	33

6. Concluding remarks

This paper contributes to widening knowledge on politico-administrative relations not only in Slovakia, but also in the broader context of a politicized country with coalition governments. In particular, we identified a group of actors that advise ministers, consisting of the formal "visible" ministerial advisers group, and the "invisible" group of external agents. We presented a new biographical dataset on the profile and career paths of 162 "visible" ministerial advisers in five governments from 2010 to 2020. These actors are the functional equivalent of ministerial advisers or special advisers found in Western Europe and the Commonwealth countries and are locally

called *constitutional expert agents* under the Civil Service Act. Both the visible and invisible groups link to discourse on politicization of executive offices and a "steering from the centre" (Dahlström et al. 2011; Peters and Pierre 2004) and constitute the "third element" in the executive triangle between ministers, minister advisers, and senior civil servants (Eichbaum and Shaw 2010). However, unlike ministerial advisers in Western Europe and the Commonwealth, who have come out of the dark and into the limelight (Hustedt et al. 2017), Slovak constitutional expert agents are only *partially* out of the dark, while the other types of ministerial agents appear to remain firmly in the dark.

However, we should also say that our study could only examine an unknown portion of the visible group per government as the availability and access to a full dataset on ministerial advisers is not freely available in Slovakia, and perhaps more broadly in a CEE context, when compared with countries of the Westminster, West European, and Scandinavian traditions that transparently publish various data points on advisers. This is a key limitation of the study, but also an insightful finding in and of itself. The lack of government reporting illustrates both transparency gaps and a lack of regulatory oversight on ministerial advisers. Thus, Slovak advisers primarily exist within an accountability vacuum.

We found the size of the adviser cohort fluctuated across governments but did not rise significantly across time. However, this only relates to the formal ministerial adviser cohort. We suggest ministers also appoint other *types* of staff beyond formal ministerial advisers – such as seconded civil servants and external ministerial agents – that, if one could accurately measure, would likely demonstrate that the ministerial advisory system is more inflated than we currently present. Building on this argument, some ministries did not even formally employ a single formal ministerial adviser (e.g. the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or Ministry of Health until the latest government). This suggests that the ministerial advisory system, in a similar vein to the regulatory system governing these advisers, has been created in an *ad-hoc* fashion. Thus, improving the regulatory system would also help to systematize the appointment system across the entire government.

Also surprisingly, the tenure of a majority of ministerial advisers is shorter than the minister who hired them. This high turnover could illustrate instability in ministers' offices (an indicator of poor governance), as has been observed in other executive offices (see Tenpas 2018). In addition, it could also indicate yet another form of patronage, where elected politicians bring their agents into a position of influence, which then enables them to later transfer into either a high civil service position or a senior private sector role. This would go hand in hand with Rybar and Spac's (2020) argument about "political entrepreneur" parties that operate without standard party membership.

We sketched a profile of a contemporary ministerial adviser. The median age is 41, predominately male (around 64 percent), and highly educated (93 percent held

a master's degree qualification or higher). The top three most common fields that advisers are educated in are law, economics and communication/journalism, which represent 56.7 percent of the adviser cohort. In addition to their education, around 32 percent of advisers were directly recruited from the public sector, and around 30 percent were directly recruited from the private sector. This does vary across governments with new parties forming government generally recruiting more advisers from the private sector and older or re-elected parties generally recruiting more advisers from the public sector. On this latter point, we suggest the short tenure of ministerial advisers in combination with a culture of politicization and government experience could mean that a ministerial adviser position is both a springboard for employment in the public sector and a readily available resource for "older-established" political parties needing to recruit loyal and experienced civil servants.

In addition to their education and prior professional experience, it is common for ministers to appoint advisers through some form of prior personal ties, rather than through an open competitive recruitment process. This, coupled with their mature age, suggests they offer both substantial technical expertise and a high level of trust; though the data is unclear as to the extent, the appointments are linked to party patronage, or through previous ties to a minister. As an adviser is often first appointed around their early 40s, the adviser role is not necessarily a springboard that *rapidly* advances one's career, which has been observed in the younger cohort of advisers found in the UK (Goplerud 2015) and Norway (Askim et al. 2020).

These conclusions should also be viewed as tentative. Further research on the topic is needed to provide a comprehensive overview of these actors. Beyond our biographical research, future studies examining the functions of their roles, their powers and the relations both horizontally across other ministerial offices, externally with business and industry bodies, and vertically with civil servants (particularly in-house advisory bodies in the form of analytical units) would be useful to conceptualize the phenomenon of a ministerial adviser in the Slovak context. The vertical relations between advisers and the civil service would be particularly interesting to show whether they compete for power and minister's attention in a zero-sum game or whether their relationship is of a more collaborative and positive nature, such as in the case of New Zealand (Eichbaum and Shaw 2006). Above all, the collection and analysis of the data presented in this paper provides insights into ministerial advisers working in close proximity to executive politicians and can improve our understanding of public administration through personnel profiles, structures and regulatory systems (or lack thereof).

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Appendix A

Interview list

Interviewee	Type of adviser and ministry	Date
A	Former external adviser to the Prime Minister	May 2019
B	Current internal adviser to the Culture Minister	May 2019
C	Former internal adviser to the Economy Minister	May 2019
D	Former external adviser to the Prime Minister	May 2019
E	Former internal adviser to the Education, Science, Research and Sport Minister	May 2019
F	Former internal adviser to the Finance Minister	May 2019
G	Former internal adviser to the Transport, Construction and Regional Development Minister	May 2019
H	Current internal adviser to the Justice Minister	July 2020
I	Current internal adviser to the Health Minister	September 2020
J	Current internal adviser to the Employment, Social Affairs and Family Minister	September 2020
K	Current internal adviser to the Investment, Regional Development and Information Minister	September 2020