

ADMINISTRATIVE CAPACITY

MINISTERIAL ADVISERS IN BULGARIA: DOES PROFESSIONALISATION EXCLUDE POLITISATION¹

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Abstract

The study examines the Bulgarian model of ministerial advising through three interpretive case studies of advisers with extensive academic and administrative experience. It argues that politicization and professionalization coexist rather than contradict each other, shaping both the appointment and functioning of advisers in practice. The Bulgarian system is marked by minimal formal regulation, strong dependence on personal and party networks, and the absence of a stable corps of advisers. Advisers perform diverse functions - from expert policy work to political communication and acting as intermediaries between ministers, administration, and external actors - resulting in significant variation across ministries. Although formally subordinate, their real influence is situational and largely shaped by personal trust and informal relationships within the executive triangle. The respondents highlight the need for clearer qualification requirements and greater transparency to limit party-driven appointments and enhance public trust in the institution of ministerial advisers.

Keywords: ministerial advisers; politicisation; professionalisation; executive triangle.

INTRODUCTION

Advisers in the executive branch exist to provide the necessary personal support for ministers or senior civil servants. Ministerial advisers have become a stable feature of administrative systems around the world. Their presence and influence have become so significant that they

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are often portrayed as a third element in the Government structure, alongside executive politicians and senior civil servants (Staronova, Rybář, 2024, 201).

They (in the words of one of the respondents in this survey) are like the Minister's "Magnificent Seven". The existence of an institution of "Ministerial Adviser" in the bureaucratic state is a deviation from the classic Weberian model and professional administration. This administration, according to Weber, represents the "headquarters" of officials in the executive branch. In this institutional tradition, "professionalisation" and the associated political neutrality towards ideologies, interests, and parties are the main characteristics of administration in the executive branch. The minister is a political figure with clear values and party identification. A gap appears between the legitimate holder of executive power and his headquarters, in which political and professional approaches can not only clash, but even crash. This gap is filled by the political advisers in the executive branch – they must be both loyal to the minister and therefore with a clear political identification, and at the same time with sufficient professional skills to be able to help him adequately. Thus, in theory, they are something like "neither cancer nor fish", which makes them difficult to study, even more so to regulate. Defining them as except staff (Craft, 2015, 135) emphasises this variability of the advisory institution. These are people appointed to serve a particular minister, hired on political criteria, in a temporary position (Hustedt et al. 2017, 1).

In recent years, there has been a growing international research on the phenomenon of the increasing number of ministerial advisors moving in and out of ministerial positions (Eymeri-Douzans et al. 2015, 101-105). The emergence of a "third actor" in the traditional dyadic relationship between ministers and senior civil servants is widely understood as a response to ministers' increased demand for political support capacity (Maley, 2000, 48). The emergence of ministerial advisors has also been seen as a backdoor politicization of the government apparatus. Research on ministerial advisors has focused on the roles and functions of advisors (Craft, 2016, 3-4) and their relationships with ministers.

A political advisor is presumed to have strong political ties to the minister for whom he/she works (OECD, 2011, 16). The advisers should be personally loyal and professionally sound. To whom they actually serve depends on a set of personal, organizational and cultural factors. The positive image of the Ministerial advisor is related to his/her professionalism - so the advisor as an institution is close to the administration. However, to become an advisor he/she should be close to the political party of the Minister at least by his/her values and ideas. This dual nature of advisers makes difficult the building of sound normative theory of their role and career.

In fact, empowered politicians have always had advisers – secret and overt. The institutionalisation of advisers (the creation of formal rules for their status and role) practically brings them to light. Transparency and accountability are the main characteristics that distinguish advisers in democratic executive triangle from grey cardinals in traditional political regimes. In this sense, transparency and accountability are a key feature of the ministerial advisory model in the context of democratic government, where vertical connections, networks, the temporary arrangement of multiple stakeholders (Rhodes, 2007, 1249) become more important than hierarchical subordination in the power structure. As a

consequence, activity becomes more important than structure, and repetitive practices become more important than formal rules.

Ministerial advisers as an institution turn the hierarchical relationship "politicians – civil servants" into a network. The bilateral relations become a triangle. In this executive triangle the relative influence of each of the participants is situational rather than permanent, outlined by formal rules.

Despite the need for transparency, advisers are rarely bright public figures. Their activities consist of formal, informal and casual practices. This is a challenge to the study of the advisory model. Due to its often-hidden nature, such a study necessarily presupposes the use of qualitative methods, and especially interpretive techniques (Rhodes, 2019, 14-17).

The challenges to the study of the advisory model are also a consequence of the fact that it is context-dependent (Wilson, 2016, 192). It is dependent on a series of random factors, mostly related to the personality of the minister, but also to the behavior of the political force in power. These factors complement the formal rules and make it almost impossible to talk about an outlined or established model of counselling. It is rather a variable structure that is different in political time and space. It depends on the context, on the cabinet, on the minister. Only a longitudinal study can derive repetitive characteristics that give us grounds to talk about a model.

CASE STUDY

The methodology of this study is built on the basis of the above considerations. Its aim is to derive recurring characteristics of the model of advisory in the executive branch in Bulgaria after the adoption of the main formal institutions in the field of civil service (1998). It includes three cases of Ministerial Advisers in Bulgaria and their own interpretation of their career path and activities. The cases were developed through in-depth, open-ended interviews. The studied cases were selected on the basis of the following criteria:

1. The respondents have observations and experience as advisors in at least two cabinets in the period studied;
2. They have academic degrees and experience in public administration and governance. This criterion was introduced for two reasons: on the one hand, academic degrees are proof of professional competence, on the other hand, theoretical knowledge allows respondents to draw reasonable conclusions and suggestions. This not only increases the credibility of the research, but also makes possible the normative research approach and the simultaneous search for an answer to the questions "what is and what should be the model of advisory?"

The three respondents have the following experience in the field of the executive triangle:

One is a professor of administration and management and has experience as an advisor in three political offices. The second is a professor of administrative law and has been an adviser in three governments and a minister in one cabinet. The third is a professor of political science and was a minister, and then an adviser in a cabinet. The choice of respondents is not random - according to a study by Staronova and Rybář, some respected academics have accepted advisory positions because the advisors' academic experience symbolically signals to the public the "non-corruption and expertise of the ministers who appointed them." (Staronova,

Rybář, 2024, 210). All three respondents exhibit the psychological trait found in multiple studies (Enste, Potthoff, 2021, 28-29) - high criticality towards the various participants in the system. Based on these three stories, the following characteristics of the Bulgarian consulting model are made. Based on some key issues in the existing literature, important in the analysis of policy advisors are issues such as the career paths of ministerial advisors (Askim et al. 2021;), participation in the policy development process (Gouglas 2015), their functions (Christiansen et al. 2016) and roles (Gouglas et al. 2017).

APPOINTMENT OF POLITICAL ADVISORS

Empirical research in different countries shows that some advisors are “primarily appointed due to party political affiliation” while others have strong personal ties to the ministers themselves (Staronova, Rybář, 2024, 204). Officially, the Ministerial Advisors (including those of the Prime Minister) in Bulgaria are elected and appointed by the respective official. In practices, there are two ways to choose an advisor. One is related to the personal contacts of the Minister and his own assessment of the competences of the potential adviser. Ministers may need close aides to provide unconditional support and backing based on personal rather than party connections (Panizza et al 2022, 223).

The other way is related to party appointments, in which the political force behind the minister offers him to appoint as an adviser an expert close to the party. The second way of choosing is more problematic – such are the assessments not only of the participants in the executive triangle, but this is also the widespread opinion, due to the party logic of the appointment and the associated expectation of lack of expertise or of narrow party interests.

The two types of appointment seem to correspond to the widespread in researches distinction between non-partisan and partisan advisors. In fact, things are much more complicated, because regardless of the method of appointment, the advisers have approximately the same profile – they have expertise (usually people with academic degrees are appointed) and have a party or at least ideological identification (usually close to that of the minister or the political force that nominated him). At the same time, partisan, unlike non-partisan advisors, are not necessarily personally loyal to the minister – if there is a contradiction or tension between the party-appointed advisor and the minister, it is a consequence of this. The Bulgarian model is dominated by party-appointed advisors and in the majority of cases their activities as advisor are ineffective. Official appointments are politically hired actors who come and go with governments. Such appointments are legal and legitimate (Staronova, Rybář, 2024, 206).

In this respect, the Bulgarian model is no exception. Numerous studies of other models have argued that non-partisan advisers are ghosts on the side-lines of the executive branch (Cole, Rose, Rose, 2023). The question is "can it be otherwise?" given that politically neutral policies rather do not exist.

The functional explanation for the rise of ministerial advisors suggests neutrality and expertise in civil service recruitment (Staronova, Rybář, 2024, 203). In the case of party appointments of advisor, a specific relationship is transferred to the model of advisory - that between the party and the minister nominated by it. It emerges under the influence of many factors: organizational culture and leadership model within the party; the personal attitudes of

the minister; the relationship between the Minister and the party leader(s); the established socio-psychological attitudes on the scale of individualism-collectivism, etc.

The party's nomination of advisers is a prerequisite for party control over the minister and for the restriction of his relative freedom. According to public attitudes, as well as according to expert assessments, personal commitment to the Minister is much more acceptable, especially since it is accepted as a prerequisite for higher efficiency of advisory activities.

There is another way of choosing a Ministerial Adviser, in which the choice of a specific person proves the commitment to certain ideas or interests. According to the respondents in this study, this is a common practice to prove mostly external orientation and commitment. According to the respondents in this study, this is a widespread, and acceptable practice.

FORMAL MODEL REGULATIONS

The Bulgarian public administration follows the traditional model of professional administration. The normative model was introduced in the late 1990s with the adoption of the Administration Act (1998), which regulates the structure and powers of the executive power. With the adoption of this law, the Strategy for Modernization of Public Administration (1998) and the Civil Servant Act (1999) were adopted.

In comparative terms, three models of interaction between political advisors and civil servants in European countries can be distinguished: political advisors working together with politically neutral civil servants; political advisors working together with civil servants, the highest level of which is also politicized; and political cabinets, which usually consist of a mixed group of political advisors and temporary civil servants who advise the minister (Viorescu, Pedreira, 2008, 232). Formally, the Bulgarian model resembles the latter, typical examples of which are Belgium and France, where the system of political advisors is “colonized” by political cabinets that act as “shadow administrations”.

In Bulgarian practice, the formal provisions of the consultative institution are extremely scarce (mainly in Art. 27 and Art. 28 of the Administration Act). The Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Ministers, Ministers, Chairmen of State Agencies and Regional Governors establish a political cabinet, which reports directly to them. The political cabinet is an organisational structure entrusted with consultative, control and information-analytical functions, which assists the relevant executive body in formulating and implementing government policy within its sphere of authority, as well as in presenting it to the public. The work of the political cabinet is organised by a Head of Cabinet. The political cabinet of the Prime Minister consists of the Head of Cabinet, the Spokesperson, the Parliamentary Secretary and the Head of the Public Relations unit. The political cabinet of a government minister consists of the Deputy Ministers, the Head of Cabinet, the Parliamentary Secretary, and the Head of the Public Relations unit, and the political cabinet of the Minister of Foreign Affairs also includes a Spokesperson. The political office of the Chairman of a State Agency consists of the Deputy Chairmen and the expert responsible for public relations.

The activities of the political offices of the Prime Minister and the ministers of the Government are supported by advisers on specific issues who cannot perform managerial functions, by experts and by technical assistants. The Head of the Office, the Parliamentary

Secretary, the Spokesperson, the advisers, experts and technical assistants perform their duties based on an employment contract.

Their legal relationships terminate at the discretion of the relevant executive authority or with the termination of its powers. Neither the number of ministerial advisers nor their functions is regulated. These parameters depend entirely on the minister. Accordingly, the specific practices are very different – there are offices with a large number of advisors and those with an extremely limited number.

The Head of the Political Cabinet of the minister, who is part of the "except staff", although not seen as an adviser, is the figure who can acquire and often acquires a very large importance for the work of the minister. On the one hand, he/she manages the advisers (according to the respondents, "he/she is the "manager of the other advisers"), on the other hand, he/she filters the information to the minister. The Chief of Staff ("always" – in the words of one of the respondents) is a party appointment.

Ministerial advisers in Bulgaria are no exception to the advisory model common in democratic political systems – they are "except staff" in the full sense of the word. The appointment of an adviser to the Minister follows the procedure in the Labor Code, including an employment contract in a certain full-time position. Advisors do not benefit from the protections afforded by the Civil Servants Act. He can be dismissed at any time and usually ceases to be an adviser with the dismissal of the Minister. In the words of one of the respondents, "there is a 100% turnover in the political cabinets", which means that the cases in which the adviser continues to be an adviser in the new cabinet are practically negligible. After their advisory mandate, they return to the social place that they had been before it.

The appointment of the adviser depends entirely on the discretion of a minister, observing the general requirements for completed higher education in the relevant professional field (according to the job description). However, the regime is flexible enough to be modified according to the needs of the ministry's leadership.

Certainly, there are practices for appointments justified not only by the expertise required by the authority, but also by political motives or personal ties of trust. It is a common practice to involve experts with an academic profile on a half-staff contract or as external advisers/consultants on a civil contract. In order to create a more flexible model of interaction with experts who advise the institution, civil contracts with advisers are often concluded, and the financial resources that are distributed in this way can be widespread.

All three advisers whose stories are the subject of the study say that they were appointed because of their professional competence. At the same time, two of them admit that they were close to the political force that nominated the respective cabinet and this contributed to their appointment. The analysis of the stories told shows that the combination of expertise, professional acquaintance with the minister and identification with the political party that nominated the minister is the combination that makes a person both electable and effective as a Ministerial Adviser. In each specific case, one of these characteristics predominates, but this does not mean that the others are missing.

The advisers who are publicly approved are more experts. At the same time, their commitment to a specific cabinet and political force is used as a reason for criticism of them.

Expertise is an acceptable argument for the nomination of an adviser, at the same time his connection with a certain political force is used to criticize his activities and creates prerequisites for challenging the credibility not only in him, but in the political system as a whole.

In the course of the interviews, it was shared that one of the significant problems of the Bulgarian model of counselling is "the lack of an established corps of advisers". Expertise is a complex concept that can be defined in different ways. The bigger problem is how it can be proven. In fact, expertise is not only a matter of knowledge and skills for the application. To be recognized as an expert implies that you are trusted. The disputed expertise, the lack of recognized authorities in the field of knowledge is a major prerequisite for the problems in the model of advisory, at least in Bulgaria.

Asked what criteria they used when choosing advisers (two of the respondents were ministers), the participants in the survey listed a multitude of often contradictory qualities: the expertise of the advisers, proven professional experience, their integrity, political commitment and the established good working relations. Everyone tries to hierarchize these qualities and always puts professionalization (expertise) as the main one. However, we have reason to assert that the politicization and professionalization of advisers can only be separated by simplifying the facts.

FUNCTIONS OF ADVISORS

Probably the most important question related to the advisory model is "what do advisors do?". According to the successful definition of one of the respondents, they are the minister's "liaison" with the environment – political institutions, citizens and their organizations, the administration of the relevant ministry, political parties. The adviser is an intermediary between the minister and the external environment.

The advisor is appointed to resolve a specific problem or to act in a specific sector that the Minister considers important. Usually, the advisor's expertise corresponds to a specific assigned task. Councils are often described as aiming to support decision-making by politicians, by analysing policy problems and proposing solutions (Veselý, 2017, 141).

As Peters et al. note, institutions and administrative traditions strongly influence the specific tasks and arrangements of political advisors, and are embedded in the combination of constitutional, cultural, political and administrative environments of each country (Peters, Rhodes, Wright, 2000, 21). There is no standard approach in the Bulgarian advisory model. The assessment is entirely up to the specific minister. It is a common practice for at least some of the advisers to be as flexible as possible, without requiring daily presence at the workplace. More specific tasks may also be assigned in terms of political consultation with parliamentary groups, with supporting MPs, interaction with representatives of civil society and within the framework of tripartite cooperation. Some advisors may function as a permanent 'liaison officer' with the party concerned or with the parliamentary majority group. According to comparative studies, which also cover Bulgaria, substantial political councils in the country are seen as anomalous, since "substantial policy development is usually managed by a (politicised) bureaucracy" (Staronova, Rybář, 2024, 213-214). At the same time, the

political roles of councillors are most pronounced where they do not clash with other politicized appointments.

When the expert quality of the adviser is leading, he/she must ensure the connection with the administration of the respective ministry, closer interaction with the units in the administration and with the work processes within (participation in working groups, consultations, preparation of opinions, reports, bills, impact assessments, etc.), which implies that the permanent workplace is in the institution.

In practice, according to one of the respondents, there are different types of advisors. For example, there is an advisor - a "liaison officer". He/she is a party loyalist, serving primarily the promotion of the party's line and its electoral interests. The type of advisor "expert" is primarily engaged in the development and formulation of policies.

The type of adviser "public communicator" is important for ensuring wider public support for various political initiatives in front of civil society, the media, and various public and professional groups. The type of adviser "political strategist" is especially valuable in discussing/developing management decisions, proposing various alternatives and scenarios.

REAL INFLUENCE OF POLITICAL ADVISORS

Does the Ministerial Advisor have influence? The Minister bears the political responsibility, he/she is the governing body. From a formal point of view, the hierarchy is clearly defined. The internal logic of the position of "adviser in the cabinet of a minister" implies that the minister discusses key decisions with his political team, accepts feedback and trusts the expertise of his advisers. Eichbaum and Shaw argue that the emphasis on regulation and accountability should be complemented by efforts to better understand who political advisors are, what they do, with whom, and with what effectiveness (Eichbaum, Shaw, 2010, 223).

If these are real people with extensive experience and proven expertise, beyond formal hierarchies, it would be useful for the management of the institution and the processes to have a cooperative process of full discussion and argumentation before deciding.

However, the minister is surrounded by a network of influences: appointed advisers, close informal advisers, stakeholders, party representatives, etc. These networks are mobile and difficult to percept with existing social science methods. What we can say, however, is that in these ministerial networks appointed advisers are rarely in the center.

Telling their own stories, respondents say that they have had an impact on the policy-making process. In addition, they felt free to propose initiatives. They believe that the responsibilities of the adviser should be accompanied by criteria for evaluating what has been achieved. According to them, we can say that a Ministerial Adviser is effective if certain policies in relation to the functions assigned to him have been implemented or a process has been completed.

The Bulgarian model of advice is characterized by limited publicity (the public does not know who the appointed ministerial advisers are and what they do) and by a lack of responsibility and accountability. Only the Minister can remove an adviser, and this can be done as a result of a personal, unprovable assessment.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE

What should be changed in the advisory in Bulgaria according to those who were part of this institution? According to the respondents, the requirements for educational and professional qualifications should be regulated in order to increase the expert nature of the institution "Ministerial Adviser" itself. At the same time, they recognize that real practices depend to a large extent on values and attitudes, on the level of institutional and political culture. Its characteristics in Bulgaria often lead to the transformation of the position of "Ministerial Adviser" primarily into an incentive or reward for party loyalists (such as "deserving party comrades") to be provided with some temporary employment.

The other necessary change relates to publicity. The latter practically does not exist. This study confirms that in all Central and Eastern European countries, "invisible advisors" are identified, remaining hidden from public scrutiny. They do not appear in publicly available records, even in response to requests under access to information legislation (Staronova, Rybář, 2024, 219). If the publicity of the biographies and functions of the ministerial advisers is increased, the relative weight of the purely political motives for their appointment will decrease. Public suspicions about their hidden role will also decrease.

Asked how they imagine the "ideal executive triangle", respondents outline the following picture: Politicians – providing political and public support and legitimacy for governance programs, key participation in the formation of priorities, reform strategies; the ability to generate and maintain public trust is a leading value; Advisors – analytically supporting the process of policy formation, participating in their development and coordinating with the administration and stakeholders; the leading value should be the expertise combined with the trust between the minister and the adviser; Administration – involved in the process of policy formation and their specific development and implementation; Expertise is a leading value.

By recounting specific cases, however, they explain the functioning of the executive triangle more through the relations within it, rather than through the formal distribution of functions. The relations between the three sides of the triangle in many cases modify its ideal shape.

Often, the administration underestimates and even bypasses the advisers, perceiving them as an extension of the minister and the party that nominated him. The advisers, in turn, underestimate the administration mostly with the argument of the lack of relevant competencies and, above all, expertise. The executive triangle is more a matter of culture than formal structures. Mutual neglect and suspicion lead to inefficiency and create problems.

CONCLUSION

The Bulgarian advisory model does not differ significantly from the models described in the scientific literature. It is more similar to models in which formal regulation is limited, and the Minister has freedom to establish a so-called ministerial political cabinet. In these models, participants' personality characteristics are much more important. There are no established practices, and there is a possibility of party influence and politicization, depending on the type of ministerial leadership.

Since each advisory model is context-dependent due to the strong individualism of attitudes and the leadership nature of political parties in Bulgaria, Ministerial Advisers rarely gain significant influence in the executive triangle. The public perception of them is more often as party members, provided with jobs and income, or those who ensure the presence of private interests in the executive branch. This makes them an easy target of criticism and a reason to challenge trust in the minister, the cabinet, and their actions.

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