

# ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM

## INTERNAL V/S EXTERNAL POLICY EXPERTISE: WHAT WE LOSE WHEN WE WIN<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*The article examines the structure, evolution, and challenges of policy advisory systems (PAS), with a particular focus on the Bulgarian case. The authors argue that Bulgaria's PAS developed spontaneously after the 1990s, resulting in fragmentation, weak institutionalization, and limited coordination between internal and external expertise. They highlight how politicization and insufficient capacity undermine evidence-based policymaking. Ultimately, the study shows that balancing internal administrative expertise with external knowledge sources is essential for an effective modern PAS.*

**Keywords:** policy advisory systems; expertise; public administration; Bulgaria.

### INTRODUCTION

The balance of internal and external expertise in the public policy process is a poorly researched topic in Bulgaria, while policy advisory is attracting increasing attention in the administrative and management literature (Pattyn et al. 2022, 26). The complex system of advisories within the Government and adapts to the context it governs, has long been a subject of scientific interest (Dror, 1984). In Bulgaria, the development of a policy advisory system (PAS), in the sense of Craft and Halligan, is limited. According to them, PAS is an "interlocking set of actors" (Craft, Halligan, 2017, 48) that operate in distinct sectors or

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jurisdictions and provide policy recommendations to policy-makers. This concept extends beyond the specific case of giving and receiving advice. It is crucial for understanding the complex and ever-changing nature of policy consultation in contemporary governance. The concept considers the diverse set of actors and organisations that contribute to policy development, as well as the interactions and relationships between them. By viewing policy development as a system rather than a structure, PAS recognises the complexity and interdependence of its components, thereby facilitating a more holistic analysis of policy outcomes (Hussain et al. 2024, 713-714).

Like most analyses of administrative reforms in Bulgaria since the early 1990s, this article may simply prove the thesis that reforms have been delayed due to the totalitarian past or historical tradition. In fact, the state of PAS in Bulgaria reflects the peculiarities of the overall reform itself in the 90s of the last century and, above all, the impossibility of the practices perceived at that time as effective and just to fit adequately into Bulgarian society. A study from a PAS perspective is useful because it helps to understand the country-specific organisation and institutionalization of policy consultations, as well as the interactive effects of different actors and sources of consultations on policy outcomes, integrating the analysis of power and knowledge dimensions into the policy development process, rather than separating them into different analytical perspectives (Craft, Halligan, 2020, 1-4). To meet the increasing governance demands, a variety of formal and informal consultation procedures involving a range of actors have been established. Various researchers and research organisations have different channels of access to governance structures. However, it is possible to characterise them in several generalised roles based on the type of relationship with governance practice: advisory bodies (committees or councils); permanent or ad hoc scientific and technical structures with advisory functions; contract research; internal research structures; independent research by researchers from market and civil society structures; individual scientific advisors and experts appointed by political figures; neutral academic research, etc. (OECD, 2015, 14-18).

### **OPEN ADVISORY SYSTEM**

In political communities, regardless of the form of government, policy advice is probably always given and accepted. Both the ruler and the democratic leader seek and take advice. Historically, power-expertise relations are opaque and most often come from a place close to power. The change in which the expertise for governance becomes visible and legitimate takes place in Weber's theory and through the introduction of the traditional model of administration. In Weber's terminology, the "organisation" of any dominion is determined by the type of relationship between the "ruler" and his "commanding staff" as well as between this apparatus and the governed. In this case, what is decisive for the type of a dominion is not so much the type of the ruler as the structure of the headquarters and the distribution of command powers between the ruler and the apparatus (Daskalov, 1992, 62-72). Max Weber created the principles and rules for the professionalization of expertise, although he did not use the term. According to him, and in the legacy practices of the modern state, the administration is the bearer of expertise.

The concept of a policy advisory system (PAS) was introduced by Seymour-Ure (1987) as a way of describing the different sources and channels of policy advice available to governments. A distinction is made between internal and external sources of advice and between formal and informal communication channels. In addition, four main types of policy advisors are identified: professional civil servants, policy advisors, consultants and interest groups. The concept was later described as a way of characterising and analysing the multiple sources of policy advice used by governments in their policy-making processes. A PAS is defined by Halligan as an organisational configuration of advisory actors within a jurisdiction or policy sector, an interconnected set of actors and organisations that provide recommendations for action to policymakers (Halligan, 1995, 3). The question of open PAS (systems of administrative administration) arises when the development of ideas focused on the negative consequences of bureaucracy, over-regulation, and the coalescence of power and expertise. At the same time, in Western Europe, especially in the Anglo-Saxon countries, there already exist strong research centers independent of the political power, which compete for public influence on the basis of the quality of the expertise offered and the resource mobilized. Although Max Weber is at the center of the mainstream in administrative science, practices are being radically changed by the 'opening' of the policy process to private organisations and individuals. The PAS shaping, the regulation of internal relations, and the creation of procedures actually make public the hitherto hidden relations between power and knowledge producers. The main idea that accompanies the creation of PAS in Western European countries is the idea of overcoming the processes of bureaucracy and the creation of a competitive knowledge market. The thesis becomes valid that bureaucratized public research centers to a much lesser extent address the need to create adequate knowledge intended for public governance (Coccia, 2009, 45-48).

The change in Western European PAS after the 1980s could be expressed in two concepts: politicization and externalization (Craft, Halligan, 2017, 48). Politicization is the process of differentiating knowledge about governance by tying it to group interests and values. The consequence of this process is public policy debate, which often masks or stimulates political debate. In current polycentric advisory systems, the privileged position of the bureaucracy as a provider of policy advice is being challenged by external actors such as private consultants, think tanks, policy advisors, policy laboratories (Hussain et al. 2024, 713). The shift towards increasing externalization of policy advice reflects a more pluralized, polycentric universe of advice provision (Vesely, 2013, 199-200) and involves the transfer of knowledge creation and provision functions to organisations external to public administration. It is this process that outlines the now existing complex PAS, which has at least three levels:

- The advisory level, which includes the public research centers and the personal advisors of the representatives of power. These organisations and individuals are part of the administrative structure;
- The consultation level, where institutions and external organisations exchange policy knowledge in a formalized structure;
- The competitive level of knowledge supply and expertise involves private organisations, independent of government, competing for influence over governance through formal procedures. The three levels are not arranged hierarchically. Each operates according

to its own logic of design and function. Their impact on policies depends on various institutional and cultural factors, which vary depending on the specific context.

Open PAS changes the role of administration. From a "headquarters of the governance" (M. Weber), it becomes an "organizer of the policy process" (Christensen et al. 2022, 24-25). The administration retains its control functions, but over the process. At the same time, it loses its influence on policy goals and instruments. Like any public relations model, open PAS has its strengths and weaknesses. Both are potential – they may or may not happen depending on how they are introduced and implemented. There is a wide range of activities that fall within the function of policy advisory, such as research, data analysis, proposal development, stakeholder consultation, formulation of advice to decision-makers, guiding policy through governmental and parliamentary processes, and ex post evaluation of policy outcomes (Gregory, Lonti, 2008, 838).

### **BULGARIAN CASE**

The delineation of the current PAS in Bulgaria is largely a spontaneous process, in which independent research centers or individual researchers create their own influence, incl. generate resource through their casual or traditional (acquaintance-based) access to political power. It is created gradually as a result of deinstitutionalization, which is comparable to the practices of the West after the 1980s, but does not proceed as a reform of existing institutions, but as an initial accumulation of resource and distribution of influence in the field of knowledge. The main factors for success in this process are proximity to political power and presence in international expert networks.

The Bulgarian case is interesting not only for its own sake. The administrative reform in Bulgaria largely destroys the old system linked to the totalitarian past and establishes new rules and practices without regard to the inherited legacy. This is particularly evident in the PAS analysis. No matter how strange it may seem at first glance, the introduction of expertise in Bulgarian public administration took place more or less at the same time as in Western European political systems - in the 1970s and especially in the 1980s. As far as PAS can be said before the transition to democracy and a market economy, it was part of the then one-party political system and consisted of research structures under the ministries and a central academy of social sciences and governance. Selection and promotion in these structures are the same as in the entire party-state system. Funding for a governance policy support is public and unlinked to any performance indicators.

The administrative reform of the early 1990s abolished existing policy expertise structures without creating new ones. The adoption of new practices based on the competitive knowledge market (Halligan, 1995, 150-152), is carried out in conditions where influential research centers are absent. The expert elite that existed at the beginning of the 1990s was connected in one or another form to the old power and to the old scientific paradigms. A significant proportion of those employed in closed organisations create or join newly established organisations seeking to mobilise resources. This initial stage of the spontaneous formation of PAS in Bulgaria resembles something like an "initial accumulation" of expertise, in which the presence in international expert and domestic political networks is capitalized.

This attempt at creating a competitive knowledge market in Bulgaria is interesting for at least two reasons. On the one hand, his analysis allows identification of the advantages and disadvantages of the competition-based PAS: in Bulgaria, due to the above-mentioned peculiarities, it exists in its pure form without being adapted to any existing structures or institutions. On the other hand - as in any other European democracy, the contradictions between the practices of public administration and the current changes caused by the social consequences of the development of technologies are felt in Bulgaria. Outlining the post-Weberian state (Lottholz, Lemay-Hébert, 2016, 1478-1481) is a process that only reflects the new social realities without finding (at least for now) the lasting solutions in relation to the formulation and implementation of the collective will. At the same time, the public policy system is viewed in the literature as a vast repository of policy knowledge, encompassing the relationships and flows of policy-related knowledge and information between people, organisations, and institutions that have roles and responsibilities for policymaking (Hussain et al. 2024, 713).

In this sense, analysing the Bulgarian case serves three main purposes: to identify the unique features of PAS in the country and, based on this, to determine the common and current challenges facing practices rooted in a competitive market of expertise. We believe that Bulgaria's issues are not due to the country's backwardness but are instead driven by modern challenges that neither the Weberian nor the post-Weberian administrative approaches effectively address. All these challenges revolve around the complex issue of internal and external policy expertise and their combined functioning amidst horizontal interactions, unpredictability, and increasing deterritorialization.

Policy advice is not only knowledge used in public management processes but also an integral part of the policy process (Barker, Peters, 1993, 3-5). It is therefore not merely a set of techniques for generating policy evidence but also a means through which new actors enter the policy arena, bringing with them specific attitudes, ethical principles, convictions, and interests. Policy-making should be seen as a system. The actors in this system include ministers, government departments, businesses, charities, universities, research institutes, NGOs, consultants and individual citizens (Howard, 2012, 6).

Producers of policy advice are one of many actors in the policy process, usually near the center of the policy community, whose influence should not be underestimated. It is for this reason that "who" provides policy advice should be an essential question in the study of the policies. Reliance on experts can introduce bias and limited perspectives, potentially narrowing the range of policy options considered. Inadequate public participation further exacerbates these limitations, undermining inclusion and democratic accountability (Hussain et al. 2024, 736).

That the professional policy-making method is not indifferent to the attitudes and beliefs of its own author has been commented on many times (Weimer, Vining, 2017, 29-32). However, the view that professional policy advice follows only scientific rationality continues to prevail. At least because the main argument for the presence of the professional policy advice in the process of its development and implementation is precisely the "scientific truth", which does not depend on the individual perception of social facts and their intuitive explanation.

Overstating such a view obscures the fact that science and related expertise are not one and the same.

A drastic separation of science from government practice denies one of the reasons it is really used – to help us decide what to do. This does not mean, however, that scientists should take the place of politicians or experts in administration, and that their ability to offer a solution to facilitate the process or even its content is as important as their science. Pretending that science will truly settle a political dispute about values or money leads to confused thinking and distorted debates that are harmful to both science and management in the long run (Boehlert, 2007, 2-3). Indeed, it is not the presence of expertise but the debate between experts that characterizes the modern policy process. Also, the expert is not necessarily the scientist. The policy expertise comes in the public administration of democracies in seek for someone to speak "truth to power" (Wildavsky, 1979, 3-4). Probably in the 80s of the last century, in the period when Western European democracies were actively creating their PAS, these two roles were performed by the same person – the scientist was the expert and the expert was the scientist. However, the roles are different - unlike the scientist, the expert "can shape and nurture people's attitudes" (Gobo, Sena, 2022, 25-38). The influence of the scientist and his recognition largely depends on the relevant scientific community and the rules introduced in it. The expert becomes influential by virtue of whether he is trusted by other participants in the policy process and especially by the community of citizens affected by them.

Since the 1980s, the notion of an "expert" has evolved to the point where, thanks to new media, anyone, regardless of their education, professional qualifications and experience, can become an expert and influence public attitudes. This creates a generic problem for PAS – it is in competition with informal expertise and therefore has to fight for public recognition.

Public perceptions of a policy 'expert' are contradictory, unstructured and largely dependent on pre-conceived attitudes. Scientists, politicians, journalists, influencers participate in the policy debate, and citizens usually recognize as an expert the one who expresses positions close to theirs (Christensen et al. 2022). We are getting to the point where it is not the expert who influences public attitudes, but the public attitudes that define the expert. In this situation, new problems arise that can hardly be addressed with the old paradigms.

For a number of reasons, the generic problems of modern PAS manifest to a greater extent in the Bulgarian case. Due to the increased competition between those who offer knowledge, the Bulgarian society is not able to unite around a single thesis, which makes the policy process risky regardless of the sector or the level of impact. As a result of the high degree of politicization, the policy debate is not aimed at searching for effective options, but at maximizing electoral support for the respective political force.

At first glance, the Bulgarian PAS is highly bureaucratized, in the sense that it is dominated by representatives of the political-administrative system. The macro level (advisory level) at which the control over the supply of knowledge for public administration should be carried out practically does not exist. These functions are carried out by the ministers themselves or by the state experts, without, however, being formally included in their duties.

The meso-level (consultation level) was created and functions primarily to meet the need for inter-institutional and inter-organisational coordination. It consists of a large number of consultative councils that also act as an arena for the exchange of policy knowledge.

In this regard, one of the mechanisms for seeking coordination and combining external and internal expertise in Bulgaria is the possibility of creating working groups for the preparation of draft laws or other expert proposals on specific issues within the competence of the Government, in which representatives of different administrations and external participants could participate. The composition of the working group may include experts from different administrations, with the scope of inclusion largely depending on the decision of the specific executive body. Thus, the participation of external experts and representatives of public groups and organisations is rare.

While working groups work on a specific document or procedure, advisory councils act as a permanent unit in the policy-making process. In global practice, consultative councils are one of the most popular forms of interdepartmental coordination and structured dialogue between state institutions, social partners, businesses and non-governmental organisations. In Bulgaria, this form of coordination is used intensively - currently there are 76 interdepartmental advisory councils established as permanent units. The mechanism for their creation is regulated by the Law on Administration, which provides that such units are formed by the Council of Ministers or by the Heads of Ministries and State Agencies. Advisory councils participate in the preparation of proposals for new and/or amendments and supplements to existing regulatory documents, strategies and other policy documents, prepare specific recommendations for amendments, present individual opinions, positions and statements. In general, the result of the work of this type of advisory council is a broader discussion and consultations with other structures of the administration and interested parties. In very rare cases, they may provide specific services, issue licenses, set quotas or approve standards, going beyond their purely advisory nature.

Almost all councils have a legally regulated possibility to attract external experts and create working groups on specific issues and tasks related to the immediate performance of their functions. There are generally two models for involving external experts and other interested parties in the work of advisory units:

- some representatives of administration or of NGO have a permanent status and participate in the meetings of the relevant council. They do not have the right to vote or have the right to an advisory vote;

- on certain topics, some experts are invited to participate in specific meetings to provide information or opinions on specific issues. This is the more frequently applied mechanism for attracting external experts to the work of councils. Usually, the invitation is issued on the initiative of the chairman and/or by decision of the consultative council.

A large number of consultative councils (42 out of 76) are established by law. They are necessarily interdepartmental in nature and may have a wider scope of representation, including civil society structures. The composition of the consultative councils proves to the greatest extent the thesis about the strong bureaucratization of PAS in Bulgaria. All 76 advisory councils are dominated by ministers, deputy ministers, executive directors of agencies and representatives of the administration. In some councils, the administration is not

represented at all. According to the nature of representation, consultative councils can be divided into two categories: councils with an interdepartmental nature, which include only representatives of ministries and departments (39 out of 76 councils); and councils with a wider scope of participation, where, in addition to representatives of ministries and departments, representatives of non-governmental organisations, economic and social partners, representatives of academia, business, etc. participate. (37). Thus, about half of the active councils are focused almost entirely on interdepartmental coordination.

Among the visible weaknesses in the work of the advisory councils are the limited participation of some of the members and the insufficient financial and material support, including the lack of a separate, independent secretariat. It should also be noted the significant share of advisory councils in the field of internal affairs, security and public administration. Almost a third of the coordination structures are in these areas. Moreover, the functional areas of the councils range from entire policy areas, such as tourism or demographic policy, to highly specific topics, such as sign language or metrology.

In a significant part of the consultative councils, NGOs are not included. Where they are present, their number varies from 1 to 24. One organisation, the National Association of Municipalities in Bulgaria, is present in many councils. An international organisation is present on one consultative council. In general, the presence of civil society in consultative councils is greatly underestimated. In addition, there is no logical explanation for the selection of the included organisations. Some of them are present only in part of the councils whose activities fall under their purview. There is also no logical explanation why influential non-governmental organisations are not present in the councils. The likely reason lies in the way consultative councils are formed – it is largely random and depends on the interest in inclusion that external organisations express.

Consultative councils are not essential to the policy process. They meet infrequently, and this is mostly due to the lack of interest of their members. Representatives of civil society prefer other ways of exerting pressure. According to the administration itself, very often, not only in consultative councils, but also in other forms open to civil participation - working groups, public discussions, etc., representatives of civil organisations refrain from taking a position, and only after a decision has been taken, they dispute it mostly through the media and social networks. Attitudes according to which direct access to power and its representatives is the most direct and effective way to spread or support policies continue to be widespread in Bulgaria. To a large extent, this renders the existence of consultative councils meaningless, especially in terms of carrying out one of their formally defined functions - policy discussion. The third level (level of expertise) of PAS involves the open, competitive supply of expertise. In it, based on public procurement or program funding, certain organisations that can demonstrate capacity receive grants to create knowledge. In principle, organisations such as think tanks should be key players in PAS because they can provide expert, long-term and forward-looking policy input and play their role in strategic policy development (Hussain et al. 2024, 733). Almost 1,000 non-profit legal entities voluntarily maintain their registration on the public NGO site and identify themselves as organisations engaged in advocacy and public policy development. The review of the activity of those of them who have renewed their registration for the current year shows that their main funding comes from international and,

above all, European funding. The contribution of private financing is insignificant. In addition, only one organisation has publicly announced the concrete private funding organisations that have supported its activities. This funding structure explains the list of topics on which the research organisations work. It practically coincides with the European agenda and mainly includes the protection of minority groups, incl. women, children and migrants; youth policies, ecology. In fact, it is difficult to say that these organisations are involved in shaping society's agenda. Rather, they propagate an agenda formulated elsewhere. This conclusion is also confirmed by the fact that the activities carried out in the last three years are primarily educational and training.

In fact, policy advice is mostly provided informally – in practice, the administration is isolated from this process, the macro level of PAS does not exist, the consultation level does not work in an effective way, and the expertise level rather creates advantages and ultimately capacity for certain organisations.

Several specific problems can be identified. Probably the biggest among them is the lack of a public organisation(s) to develop policy advice based on the activities of the consultations and private expertise. In this case, it is not a matter of choosing an existing research organisation, which in this way guarantees public funding, but of creating a research center that will represent the first level in PAS, develop and control compliance with ethical and professional rules in the creation and offering of expertise.

The existence of such an organisation would compensate for the apparent lack of criteria for outsourcing expertise. The public procurement mechanism is not a sufficient guarantee for the introduction of such criteria. Moreover, it is a control of the entrance. Output control in practice doesn't exist. The Bulgarian administration accepts outsourcing as a mandatory practice. However, its effectiveness depends on many factors.

In the policy area, it is rather ineffective. At the same time, consulting is a form that is expanding in governments across Europe and globally (Ylönen, Kuusela, 2019, 1). Their growth can also be partly explained by the drain of experience and capacity from public administration due to budget cuts and staff reductions. The increasing use of consulting is legitimised by the image of consultants as independent and neutral, contributing specialised, complementary knowledge. It is argued that it is cheaper to acquire external knowledge than to build internal competence, but this can also be a way to circumvent regulatory provisions (Steiner, Kaiser, Reichmuth 2018, 479).

Despite the widespread use of external consultants and the recognised benefits in streamlining processes and striving for evidence-based policies, the widespread use of consultancy in central governments limits the role of internal staff at the expense of consultants and some define it as the privatisation of politics (Ball, 2009, 88) or consultocracy (Hodge, Bowman, 2006).

A significant problem also relates to the relative isolation of universities from the policy advice market and, as a consequence, to the overvaluation of individual think-tanks, consulting firms, as well as individuals. In fact, this problem is caused by the behavior of universities, especially those that receive a government subsidy. Since access to the currently existing PAS depends on the activity of research centers, on their ability to position themselves in the competitive market of knowledge, it is difficult for universities to enter it.

The result is that small organisations with extremely limited capacity become more influential than traditional research centers. This situation is further aggravated by the prevailing patterns of individual behavior – a large number of researchers prefer to realise their expert potential on their own.

Returning to the Weberian idea of administration as a "headquarters of government" that knows what to do is not easy. On the one hand, external research centers are influential enough to allow this idea to see the light of day. On the other hand, the administration itself lacks the capacity and self-confidence to take on roles other than those of an implementor.

At the same time, in-house expertise potentially holds a huge advantage. If it has sufficient capacity, which necessarily includes its ability to influence the attitudes of those affected by policies, it will limit the partisanship of the policy debate. In fact, the combination of internal and external expertise is at the heart of an effective PAS. Relative centralisation of the chaotic marketplace of expertise can only help.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis demonstrates that contemporary policy advisory systems rely on a complex interplay between internal administrative expertise and external knowledge providers. In Bulgaria, this relationship is particularly fragile due to the spontaneous and unstructured emergence of advisory practices after the transition of the 1990s. The lack of a central, authoritative public research organisation results in weak coordination, inconsistent standards, and insufficient quality control of outsourced expertise. At the same time, the dominance of bureaucratic actors within consultative councils limits pluralism and reduces the effectiveness of policy discussion. The expanding role of external consultants—often driven by international funding—further skews the policy agenda away from local priorities. Universities, despite their potential, remain marginal players in the policy advice market. This fragmentation increases politicization and undermines public trust, making policy debates less focused on evidence and more on electoral incentives. For PAS to function effectively, a balanced integration of internal and external expertise is needed, supported by clear rules, institutional capacity, and transparent mechanisms for knowledge production. Only then can Bulgaria develop a coherent advisory system that supports informed, democratic, and legitimate policymaking.

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