

Research Notes on the Post-Communist Civil Service Reforms and Good Governance  
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In the past few years, economists, political scientists, students of public administration, and international donor organizations have focused their attention on post-communist civil service reforms. Good governance is a highly desirable quality because it is believed to condition good economic performance, legitimacy of political systems, and quality of life. Civil service reforms became one of the priorities for the region because those types of reforms are expected to improve the quality of governance and that, in turn, should lead to the entrenchment of new (democratic) political systems and capitalist economies.

The literature on civil service reforms in post-communist Eastern Europe and Eurasia mostly addresses the issues of timing, content, strategies, bureaucratic resistance, and the outcomes of reforms. However, the fundamental question of why a reform is needed in the first place has generally been pushed aside. The answer to this question, however, in many ways preconditions more policy-relevant conclusions about initiation, reform agenda, and implementation criteria. In my opinion, research on bureaucratic failures and their implications (if any) for political leadership is essential for creating a relevant set of expectations and evaluation criteria for the analysis of the civil service reforms that have been implemented in virtually all post-communist countries.

Two issues are central to my research agenda. The first has to do with an analysis of the ways in which state bureaucracies across post-communist space have failed or succeeded in performing the tasks associated with political and economic transformations of their societies. Functioning bureaucracies have existed at the start of economic transition across all of Eastern Europe and the former USSR. Some were better than others in governing their respective societies. All of them, however, have performed the much more demanding tasks of managing the state-controlled economies then their counterparts in capitalist societies.

Why were East European bureaucrats, who have been capable of organizing production and responsible handling of Sputnik and atomic weapons, managing universal healthcare, achieving full literacy, and overseeing an all-encompassing ideological indoctrination, were incapable of overseeing the much simpler tasks of rule-enforcement in the new capitalist settings? Or why were they presumed to be? What are the identifiable bureaucratic failures that necessitate civil service reforms? It is unclear why many post-communist bureaucratic machines emerged as grossly inefficient and disintegrating at the time of post-communist transition.

My research suggests that the domestic pressure for and the political will to implement administrative reforms in the post-communist countries are directly linked to the depth of economic transformation and the entrenchment of civil society institutions. I build on the notion that the need for civil service reform is felt by the domestic public and political elites when the disparities between organizational management in the public and private sphere grow large (Kamarck, 2007). Unlike some research postulating post-communist institutional failure (Bunce, 1999), I believe that East European bureaucracies never failed in the absolute terms. Instead,

public and political perception of their quality and effectiveness of policy implementation have changed. The greater the transformation of the private sphere institutions, the stronger the domestic demands for reforming civil service.

The second issue that I find to be essential for comparative research on East European civil service is the task of disentangling fundamental reforms from cosmetic measures. In their rhetoric, most east European administrative reform projects are remarkably similar. They call for greater professionalism, separation from political authorities, performance-based rewards, meritocratic promotions, accountability, and anticorruption measures. This rhetoric is mainly influenced by EU conditionality and foreign donor institutions. However, the end results of reform programs that seemingly attempt to achieve the same goals vary drastically. Not all reforms, in fact, produce positive results of better governance or qualitatively different outcomes. Some are just cosmetic; some are thorough, but still substantively diverge from their stated goals.

My research on the reform of public administration in Kazakhstan, a country that was not influenced by the prospects of EU enlargement and, thus, did not experience much of the direct foreign influence on the initiation and implementation of reforms, illustrates this point. When inaugurating civil service reform programs in 1997, Kazakhstan proclaimed the central principles of professional and accountable government. Reforms were directed at establishing clear promotion criteria, separating administrative and political appointments, and focused on offering better pay, transparency, accountability, and oversight. The rhetoric of reform agenda has been adopted from the EU and World Bank statements. The content, goals, and outcomes of the reform programs currently underway in Kazakhstan, however, undermine rather than promote good governance. Kazakhstan's civil service reform project has little to do with the desire to improve bureaucratic effectiveness, efficiency, and professionalism—the primary ingredients of good governance—and have more to do with strengthening the executive grip on power. In a sense, reforms promote state-building. However, they strengthen a particular kind of authoritarian regime that does not care about creating a public-serving civil service.

When analyzing civil service reform programs, it is important to examine political interests that promote these projects. It should be recognized that some reforms are never intended to achieve the ideal-typical bureaucratic structure that is imposed by a scholarly understanding of perfect bureaucracy. Therefore, such reforms should be evaluated on their own terms. Different civil service reforms are likely to be initiated and carried out for different reasons; thus, it would be unwise to automatically link the discussion of good governance with the analysis of administrative reforms.

Approaches to design and evaluation of post-communist bureaucratic reforms based on Weberian notions of professional, impartial, and independent from the politics bureaucracy are misguided because the Weberian rational bureaucracy no longer meets the needs of the modern post-communist society. Not all reforms are improving the quality of governance that is ultimately measured by the effectiveness of policy implementation. Goal-oriented managerial approaches are needed to establish relevant criteria for evaluating the content and outcomes of the current bureaucratic transformations in the post-communist countries of Eastern Europe and Eurasia.