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Career Profiles of Agency Directors in Patronage Setting: What the Data (do not) Tell Us

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Abstract:

This article investigates the career paths of top officials in the highly politicised context of Central and Eastern Europe, with a specific focus on Slovakia. It examines the professional trajectories of directors of agencies ($n = 1322$) across all regions of Slovakia from the establishment of each agency to 2024. The goal of the study is to uncover patterns, experiences, and career trajectories in a context that has not been systematically explored before. The findings indicate a relatively frequent prior political experience, frequent absence of managerial backgrounds, and generalist education among the directors. These findings support the existing literature and point to specific areas, such as the intersection of political and managerial roles, that merit deeper investigation in future research. The research further highlights a persistent issue of limited data availability.

Keywords:

agencies, career paths, Central and Eastern Europe, politicisation, top officials

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1. Introduction

Empirical research on top officials' career paths has gained increasing prominence over the past decades, driven by the valuable insights that career-related information can provide (see Bach & Veit, 2017; Veit, 2025; Veit & Scholz, 2016). Such data are fascinating for two reasons: to gain insights into officials' competences, and as a means to measure and study the dynamics of politicisation and patronage. Particularly in patronage contexts, career-based data can uncover politicisation and appointment practices (Kopecký et al., 2016; Veit, 2020; Veit & Vedder, 2023).

Despite the potential of career-based data to uncover patterns of politicisation and patronage, existing research on top officials' career paths remains concentrated in Western European contexts, where data availability is generally higher, such as Germany (Bach & Veit, 2017; Fleischer, 2016; Veit & Scholz, 2016), Sweden (Dahlström & Niklasson, 2013), Norway (Askim et al., 2021), Denmark (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2020), or international comparative research by Ennsner-Jedenastik (2016). In Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), characterised by a highly politicised context (e.g. Meyer-Sahling & Veen, 2012; Staroňová & Rybář, 2021), career data have been utilised to a lesser extent (but Kopecký et al., 2022; Krajňák et al., 2020; Meyer-Sahling, 2008; Raiu & Mina-Raiu, 2023; Rybář & Podmaník, 2020). This scarcity can be explained, as Staroňová and Hajnal (2025) recently argued, by the fact that many CEE countries represent a case of 'difficult' research setting with low administrative data availability and quality, due to the reluctance of public administration bodies to share or collect them, or the absence of relevant information in the archival records (see Staroňová & Hajnal, 2025).

From an organisational perspective, the research is usually limited to central state administration (Bach & Veit, 2017; Meyer-Sahling, 2008; Veit & Scholz, 2016; Veit & Vedder, 2023). Career-based studies in CEE follow a similar pattern, focusing primarily on executive politicians (Morgan-Collins & Meyer-Sahling, 2021) or political appointees within central state administration bodies (Kopecký et al., 2022; Krajňák et al., 2020; Meyer-Sahling, 2008). In contrast, comparatively little attention has been devoted to career-based research at the agency level (Dahlström & Niklasson, 2013).

Agencies, semi-autonomous organisations responsible for implementing policies in a particular area, operate at 'arm's length' of the government and face less political influence than the rest of the government bureaucracy (Verhoest, 2018). However, as Verhoest (2018) notes, this formal autonomy does not prevent politicians from seeking to reassert political control, often through the recruitment of top officials (Bach et al., 2020; Ennsner-Jedenastik, 2016; Lewis, 2012; Meyer-Sahling & Veen, 2012).

Agencies in CEE have been particularly vulnerable to politicisation due to fragmented public service systems, where agency personnel often differ in status from core civil servants. This institutional setup makes agency heads formal political appointees and exposes them to patronage (Staroňová & Rybář, 2025). The region is also among the most 'agencified' globally, with a broad delegation of tasks to semi-

autonomous bodies (Beblavý et al., 2012; Staroňová & Rybář, 2025). In Slovakia, the proliferation of agencies and the absence of a unified regulatory framework (Beblavý et al., 2012) have resulted in most agency heads being political appointees. Even when directors were selected through nominally merit-based procedures, these processes were often undermined by structural politicisation, effectively reclassifying their positions as political (Bayerová, 2024; Beblavý et al., 2012; Staroňová, 2017; Staroňová & Knox, 2024). As a result, successive governments have been able to use agency leadership posts for patronage-based appointments.

In contexts where political influence heavily shapes administrative appointments, examining the career paths of public officials offers valuable insights into both professional trajectories and patterns of politicisation. This study focuses on the career trajectories of top officials—specifically, agency directors—in Slovakia’s highly politicised environment. Adopting an exploratory approach, it addresses two main research questions: (1) How accessible is career-related data on top officials, who are agency directors? and (2) What career patterns are most common among these officials? In doing so, the study helps fill the institutional and geographical research gaps outlined above.

The article is organised as follows. The first section provides an overview of existing knowledge on the career paths of top officials, including their key determinants and broader trends in their career trajectories. The second section outlines the research methodology. A presentation of the main findings follows, and the article concludes with a discussion and final reflections.

2. What do we know about top officials’ career paths

Research on the careers of top officials encompasses two interrelated lines of inquiry: examining career profiles as an object of study and exploring the dynamics of politicisation. The first line of research focuses on defining and categorising civil servants’ profiles and on investigating how their professional characteristics and competencies shape policy implementation and organisational outcomes (Trangbæk, 2023), such as organisational performance (Decarolis et al., 2020).

The second line of research uses career-based data to understand relationships and dynamics within the executive triangle (Bach, 2020; Veit, 2020, 2025; Veit & Vedder, 2023). The widely accepted definition of politicisation, proposed by Peters and Pierre (2004), explicitly links the absence of meritocratic criteria and their ‘substitution for political criteria’ (p 2) in the recruitment process with the presence of politicisation. As Veit and Vedder (2023) mention, while meritocratic criteria are clearly defined, the political criteria often lack formal specification. The use of career-based data for the analysis of professional characteristics and work experience, including possible political experience (see Veit & Vedder, 2023), allows for the identification of selection criteria

for top officials and, therefore, for the identification and measurement of politicisation.

Consequently, career-based data can be used to uncover patronage practices (Veit, 2020; Veit & Vedder, 2023), which involve appointments to positions within the professional civil service based on political criteria (Kopecký et al., 2016). Particular insights provide longitudinal career datasets, which can be used to detect trends in officials' careers and to explore the effects of particular political events, such as changes in government or civil service reforms (see Veit, 2025), allowing a richer and more nuanced picture of politicisation and patronage in the specific setting.

Although the two lines of research share most of the same variables, some are specific to the former. Scholars commonly employ variables such as last professional positions before the appointment (Rybář & Podmaník, 2020), professional skills and qualifications including education (Christensen & Opstrup, 2018; Ferraz, 2020; Veit & Scholz, 2016), past work experience (Rybář & Podmaník, 2020; Veit & Scholz, 2016), leadership experience, experience in public sector (Veit, 2025) to characterise the professional profiles of civil servants systematically. In conjunction with indicators of political proximity, such as party membership, professional experience in the political sector, an appointed position within the government bureaucracy, and relevant interest groups and think tanks (Kopecký et al., 2022; Veit, 2025), these variables provide an analytical basis for assessing politicisation. The following section examines selected variables commonly used in career path research. This overview is not exhaustive, and the variables discussed represent broader categories that encompass more specific indicators.

In the analysis of educational background in career-based research, the literature distinguishes between generalists who possess education in general fields such as law, economics, and political science, as opposed to specialists who have received education in technical and highly specialized fields, such as chemistry, construction, medicine, and veterinary medicine (Christensen & Opstrup, 2018). A generalist education is often considered more suitable for leadership positions in the public sector (Jann & Wegrich, 2019), which is confirmed by data from central state administration bodies across Europe, including Germany (Bach & Veit, 2017; Veit & Scholz, 2016), Czech Republic (Rybář & Podmaník, 2020), Portugal (Ferraz, 2020) and Slovakia (Krajňák et al., 2020) conclude the prevalence of generalists for both meritocratic civil servants, as well as political appointees in top positions. Thus, it can be expected that top officials- directors of agencies will follow this general trend of generalist education.

The last position before the appointment to a top-level position was examined in two cases: meritocratically recruited political civil servants in Germany (Veit & Scholz, 2016) and career civil servants in Portugal (Ferraz, 2020). In both cases, the data indicate that the majority of meritocratically recruited top civil servants come from the public sector. It is important to note that, in both cases, the research focused on senior positions in the civil service, where prior public-sector experience is often required. Among meritocratic civil servants in the Czech Republic, the most common position before

entering the civil service was also within the civil service. In contrast, the second most common was political office (e.g. mayor, member of parliament, and the like) (Rybář & Podmaník, 2020).

In the case of length of employment, the differences between findings from western European Portugal (Ferraz, 2020) and Germany (Veit & Scholz, 2016), on the one hand, and the Czech Republic (Rybář & Podmaník, 2020), on the other, are pronounced. In Portugal, the majority (87.7%) of examined civil servants had worked in the public administration for more than 11 years (Ferraz, 2020). Data on political civil servants in German ministries, who are usually appointed to the position from civil service, also indicate a high proportion of long-term employment in the civil service, with 33.7% of officials continuously working in civil service and 22.5% continuously working in the public sector, since completing their higher education (Veit & Scholz, 2016). However, in the Czech Republic, the public and private sectors represented equally frequent phases in the career paths of the examined civil servants, accounting for 17.2% in both cases (Rybář & Podmaník, 2020). In light of previous international research, a high proportion of top officials at the agency level can be expected to come directly from the public sector. However, considering the influence of NPM reforms, their career paths are unlikely to follow a strictly linear progression.

In the context of researching civil servants' career paths, prior political experience has been interpreted as partisan loyalty and is considered an indicator of partisan politicisation. As Bach and Veit (2017) explain, partisan loyalty enables ministers to ensure that the bureaucracy is responsive to their policy preferences. The appointment of party loyalists may serve to ensure political control (Peters & Pierre, 2004). The phenomenon that Veit and Vedder (2023) call the 'ally principle' suggests that ministers prefer to work with civil servants who share their ideological preferences.

A closer look at the type of political experience of civil servants before their appointment allows for the examination of political criteria in the selection of top officials beyond party loyalty. Veit and Vedder (2023), in their research on political civil servants (appointed from within the civil service), distinguish between two primary types of political experience: frontstage and backstage. Frontstage political experience signals a previous role of an elected politician (indicating first-hand experience in parliament or cabinet, election campaigns, and the like). In contrast, backstage political experience refers to prior engagement in non-elected positions closely related to politics or politicians (such as in the executive branch of parliament, political staff of parliaments, parties, and the like) (Veit & Vedder, 2023).

As Veit and Vedder (2023) conclude in the context of political civil servants in Germany, the demand for skills has changed during the past decades, emphasising the ability (acquired through backstage political experience) to support the minister in dealing with the media and the public, reaching agreements and building networks. While this is true for bureaucrats in the second hierarchical rank, for administrative state secretaries in the first rank, previous experience in frontstage politics is more likely (Veit

& Vedder, 2023).

Another extensive body of research measures party loyalty as party membership (Bach & Veit, 2017; Ennser-Jedenastik, 2016). The idea behind this approach is to determine whether civil servants with prior professional ties to political parties are likely to remain supporters of the party in question after entering the civil service (Veit, 2020). This data has been used primarily in the analysis of political appointees in the context of Western Europe (Bach & Veit, 2017; Ennser-Jedenastik, 2016; Veit & Vedder, 2023). Ennser-Jedenastik (2016), on the case of German agencies, demonstrates how politicians tend to compensate for the loss of control due to the dispersion of authority by appointing politically loyal civil servants. Similar findings on the importance of party loyalty were reported for German ministries (Bach & Veit, 2017).

International comparative research based on survey data on patronage appointments across 22 countries (Kopecký et al., 2016) indicates that the role of political loyalty is perceived as particularly pronounced in CEE countries. Whereas in Western Europe political loyalty was perceived as the second most important selection criterion for appointments, following professionalism, it emerged as the primary criterion in CEE countries.

The variables related to career-based research of top officials remain largely unexplored within the highly politicised context of CEE (see Staroňová & Rybář, 2021), particularly in relation to agencies. This gap in knowledge does not arise from a lack of scholarly interest but rather from the limited availability and poor quality of career-related administrative data, characteristic of the 'difficult' research environments found in many CEE countries (Staroňová & Hajnal, 2025). The challenge of data scarcity becomes even more pronounced when attempting longitudinal analyses (Veit, 2025). Accordingly, we expect substantial gaps in the availability of relevant data.

2.1. Contextual determinants of top officials' career paths

Top officials' career paths are determined by various factors, such as the civil service system, the implementation of new public management (NPM) reforms, and the level of politicisation. The literature distinguishes between two civil service systems: a career-based system and a position system, both operating in meritocratic conditions. While a career-based system of recruiting civil servants selects candidates for the civil service as a whole, typically at the beginning of their professional careers, the position-based system recruits officials for a specific position in the civil service, based on previous work experience and qualifications (Veit, 2020). A career-based system, unlike a position-based system, is characterised by stable, continuous employment within the public sector (Veit, 2020), fostering linear careers with limited intersectoral mobility.

The NPM influenced bureaucratic career trajectories by introducing changes to personnel management systems to enhance civil servants' motivation and performance. These reforms sought to increase the flexibility of human resource managers in recruitment, promotion, and dismissal processes by decentralising decision-making

from central authorities to local agencies (Ritz & Weißmüller, 2025). Consequently, the civil service becomes more open, producing more diverse (Hallinag, 1991, In: Veit, 2020), boundaryless career paths, with officials moving between positions in different sectors (Ridley, 1993, In: Veit, 2020).

As the composition of public administration—who enters and advances—depends on the selection criteria in place, bureaucratic career paths are also shaped by the recruitment and promotion patterns of a given context. Meritocracy refers to the recruitment of civil servants through predefined selection procedures that prioritise candidates' professional qualifications, with the underlying expectation of appointing the most competent individuals to public positions (Peters, 2001). On the other hand, the patronage system involves politicians appointing civil servants based on political criteria, thereby politicising the civil service (Kopecký & Scherlis, 2008).

Recent literature on politicisation and patronage has begun to highlight a third, hybrid model, in which a largely meritocratic, multi-phase selection process concludes with a final decision made by politicians based on political criteria (Staroňová & Knox, 2024). Civil servants selected through this model thus combine professional competence with political responsiveness (Mamshae, 2025; Staroňová & Knox, 2024; Veit & Vedder, 2023). Thus, as politicisation and patronage shape officials' careers only through altering the selection criteria, whether formally or informally, or the criteria for promotion.

In highly politicised settings, where political criteria play a central role in the selection and promotion of officials (Kopecký et al., 2022), these dynamics are likely to be reflected in their career trajectories. Accordingly, among top officials at the agency level in CEE, a high degree of politicisation can be expected to manifest through extensive prior political experience and close professional ties to the political party of the appointing minister.

3. Research design

This research presents a case study of the career trajectories of top officials—specifically, agency directors—in Slovakia. It seeks to fill a research gap in career-based research on top officials in CEE agencies. To this end, the study adopts an exploratory approach. It aims to answer two key research questions: (1) How accessible is career-related data on top officials who are agency directors? and (2) What career patterns are most common among these officials?

The examined variables align with the existing literature on the career paths of top officials. Variables related to the level and field of education, prior professional experience, and the last position held before appointment are analysed to define the career trajectories of top officials and to determine their professional profiles. Variables related to the first occupation after leaving the director's office, as well as the nature of political experience (back-stage vs. front-stage, see previous sections), are analysed not

only to capture past professional experience but also to serve as indicators of political proximity. In response to the recent call by Staroňová and Hajnal (2025) for greater transparency in reporting data availability in CEE, this study emphasises variables on data accessibility and data sources.

3.1 Data sample

The sample includes top officials managing agencies on two levels: central agencies and their subordinate agencies. While central agencies are primarily based in the capital city, their subordinate agencies are based in cities, typically spread throughout all regions. To ensure a representative research sample of directors nationwide, the study includes only agencies with offices distributed throughout the country, identified through a systematic search through the organisation schemes of all ministries.

Although the research sample does not cover all agencies in the country, determining the precise share of included agencies relative to the total would require a separate research effort. In particular, it would require a manual identification and verification of the total number of agencies under each ministry. We report this information in response to the recent Staroňová and Hajnal (2025) contribution, stressing the absence of relevant data in the CEE patronage context and their call to report limited data coverage systematically. The agencies included in the research sample and their specifications are listed in Table 1.

3.2 Researched time span

The research design aimed to include all directors who have held office since the establishment of their respective agencies. However, this was not possible in all cases, as some agencies were unable to provide the data—either because they do not maintain complete archives or because structural reorganisations led to the loss of archival records. In some cases, the agencies lacked an efficient data management system, making the retrieval of older data particularly laborious and time-consuming. In such instances, it was agreed to use the most recent year for which the agency could lawfully provide data within a reasonable timeframe. Consequently, the assembled dataset comprises all accessible data dating back to the earliest possible period. The research time span for each agency is listed in Table 1.

Table 1:

Distribution of agencies in the research sample

Central Agency	Subordinate agencies (Number of subordinate agencies' offices)	Ministry	Examined time span
Slovak Trade Inspection	Inspectorates of the Slovak Trade Inspection (8)	Ministry of Economy	1995–2024 (city-specific, depending on agency founding; 1995 is the earliest observed year)
Main Mining Office	Regional mining offices (5)	Ministry of Economy	1987– 2024 (city-specific, depending on agency founding; 1987 is the earliest observed year)
The Financial Directorate of the SR	Customs Offices (9)	Ministry of Finance	2012 (limited by the data management system and the data availability)
	Tax Offices (8)		2012 (limited by the data management system and the data availability)
	Financial Administration Criminal Office (1)		2010 (limited by the data management system and the data availability)
Slovak Road Administration	Investment Construction and Road Administration (4)	Ministry of Transport	2002– 2024 (information before 2002 is not available, due to a change to a new information system)
State Veterinary and Food Administration	District Veterinary and Food Administrations (40)	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development	1960– 2024 (city-specific, depending on agency founding; 1960 is the earliest observed year)
Mountain Rescue Service	Mountain Rescue Service Area Centres (9)	Ministry of the Interior	2003– 2024
Not applicable	District offices (72)	Ministry of the Interior	2014– 2024
Central Labour Office	Labour Offices (42)	Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family	2004– 2024
National Labour Inspectorate	Labour Inspectorate (8)	Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family	2004–2024
Slovak Environmental Inspection	Environmental Inspectorates (6)	Ministry of the Environment	2003–2024
Regional Offices of School Administration	Regional School Administration Offices (8)	Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth	2022– 2024
Public Health Authority of the Slovak Republic	Regional Public Health Authorities (36)	Ministry of Health	1955 – 2024 (city-specific, depending on agency founding; 1955 is the earliest observed year)

Source: Author's own elaboration, 2026

3.3 Data collection and analysis

The data collection was carried out in two phases. In the first phase, the lists of all directors, including their academic titles and tenure dates, were collected. We requested this information under the Freedom of Information Act (Law no. 211/2000) through formal requests for information addressed directly to the agency, which is a standard procedure for data gathering in the CEE context (Staroňová & Hajnal, 2025). We were provided with all the requested information, except for the State School Inspectorate, which is not included in the sample, and the District offices. In the case of the District offices, the names of past directors were not available in all offices (except one), nor were they available from the Ministry of Interior. We obtained that data through a manual search of the resolutions from government meetings.

The examined agencies do not share CVs due to GDPR or unavailability. The career profiles of the directors were, in most cases, not available through official sources either. The following phase of data collection consisted of online research into the biographical data of the directors of the offices, based on their list of names. Due to the limited availability of complete CVs, partial biographical information was also collected to reconstruct the career paths of the examined top officials. The collected data were processed to form an original dataset. The dataset was coded and analysed using descriptive statistical methods to identify patterns and summarize key characteristics of the sample.

3.4 Research sample characteristics

The sample consisted of $n = 1,322$ directors of agencies. The distribution of the sample between different agencies is listed in Table 2. Geographically, the research sample covers all eight regions in the country (Figure 1). The largest share of directors in the research sample is from the Banská Bystrica region (15.66%), followed by the Prešov region (15.05%) and the Košice region (14.67%). The least represented region is the Trnava region (8.93 %).

Table 2:
The distribution of the sample across agencies

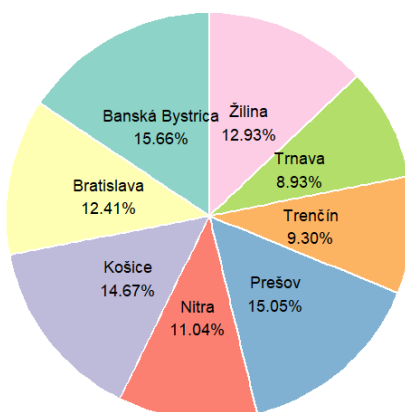
Agency	Number of observations	Share of full research sample
Labour offices	389	29.4%
District offices	277	21.0%
District Veterinary and Food Administrations	145	11.0%
Regional Public Health Authorities	131	9.9%
Labour Inspectorate	62	4.7%
Customs Offices	51	3.9%
Tax offices	42	3.2%
Inspectorates of the Slovak Trade Inspection	31	2.3%
Regional mining offices	29	2.2%

Regional School Administration Offices	27	2.0%
Mountain Rescue Service Area Centres	17	1.3%
Financial Administration Criminal Office	15	1.1%
Environmental inspectorate offices	14	1.1%
Investment Construction and Road Administration	12	0.9%
State Veterinary and Food Administration	12	0.9%
Slovak Road Administration	11	0.8%
National Labour Inspectorate	9	0.7%
Slovak Trade Inspection	9	0.7%
Public Health Authority of the Slovak Republic	8	0.6%
The Financial Directorate of the SR	7	0.5%
Main Mining Office	7	0.5%
Slovak Environmental Inspectorate	7	0.5%
Central Labour Office	7	0.5%
Mountain Rescue Service	3	0.2%

Source: Author's own elaboration, 2026

Figure 1:

The distribution of regions in the research sample

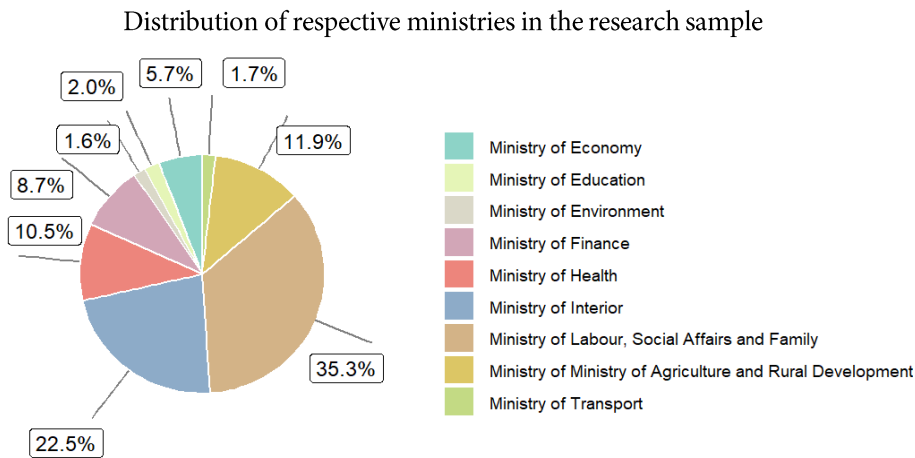


Source: Author's own elaboration, 2026

The research sample covers 9 out of 15 Ministries (Figure 2). The most represented ministry (under which respective agencies fall) in the research sample is the Ministry of

Labour, followed by the Ministry of Interior. The Ministries of Defence, Justice, Foreign and European Affairs, Culture, Investments, Regional Development and Informatisation, and Tourism and Sports are not represented in the sample.

Figure 2:



Source: Author’s own elaboration, 2026

The sample includes both politically appointed and merit-recruited senior civil servants. However, due to limited data availability and the exploratory nature of this study, no distinction is made between these two groups. Moreover, the modes of appointment—some of which have evolved—are often complex and context-specific, and therefore fall outside the scope of this analysis.

4. Career profiles of directors of agencies

4.1 Education

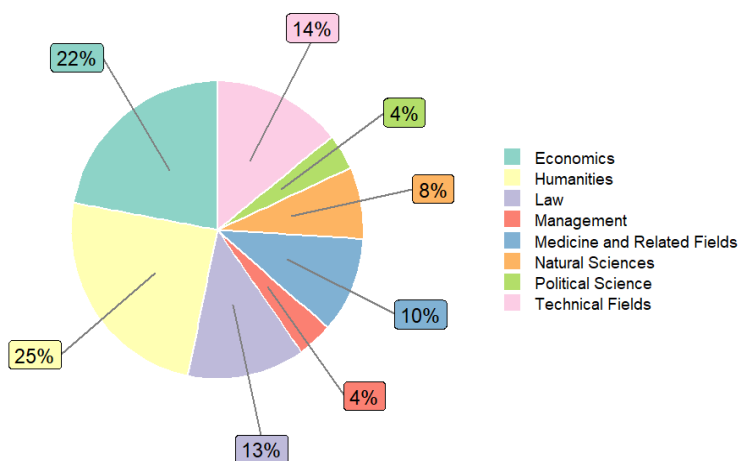
The data on educational attainment were derived from academic titles listed alongside the names of district office directors, as provided by the respective agencies or ministries. In the case of one agency, the District offices, we were unable to derive academic titles for all the directors, as their names were primarily obtained from parliamentary appointment decisions, which typically do not include academic titles. Therefore, academic qualifications were included only for individuals currently holding office for whom it was possible to verify an academic title through publicly available sources. Subsequently, 15.7% of the sample lacked data on educational attainment.

Most directors in our research sample (63.9%) possess a second-level university qualification, such as a master's degree or an equivalent advanced academic credential. An additional 19.1% have attained a doctorate or higher academic distinction, indicating a considerable representation of individuals with advanced education. Only a small proportion of respondents hold a bachelor's degree as their highest qualification (0.5%) or have no university education (0.8%).

The distribution of fields of study among directors indicates that the largest share (3.9%) have a generalist background, while 1.9% possess a specialist background. The analysis of specific fields of study (Figure 3) indicates that among those with identifiable fields (5.8% of the entire research sample), the most common disciplines were economics, humanities and law.

Figure 3:

The distribution of specific fields of study



Note: The figure shows the distribution of specific fields of study within the part of the sample for which data were available.

Source: Author's own elaboration, 2026

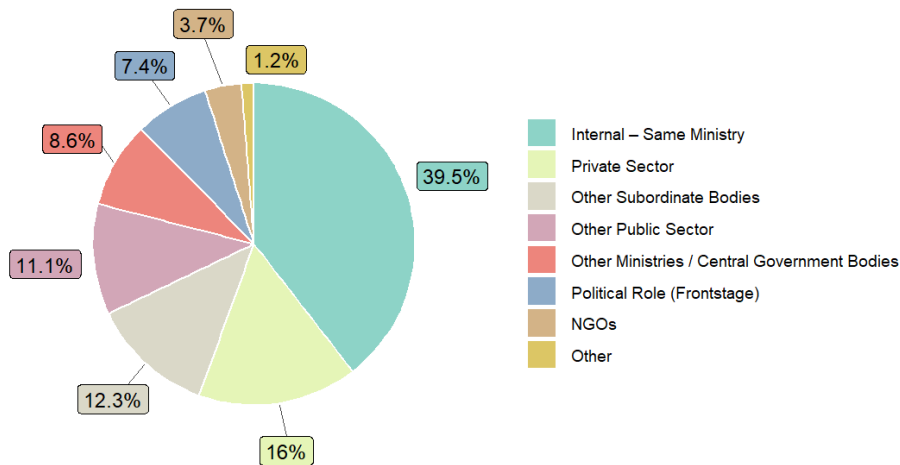
4.2 Past professional experience and managerial competence

The analysis of the last occupation directly before the appointment as the director of the agency reveals that among the cases with available data (6.2% of the entire research sample) (Figure 4), the largest share of the appointees were previously employed in the

public sector, specifically within the same ministry, indicating a notable level of internal continuity. A relatively considerable share also originated from the private sector, followed by roles in subordinate public institutions.

Figure 4:

The distribution of last employment before appointment as agency director



Note: The figure shows the distribution of specific fields of study within the part of the sample for which data were available.

Source: Author’s own elaboration, 2026

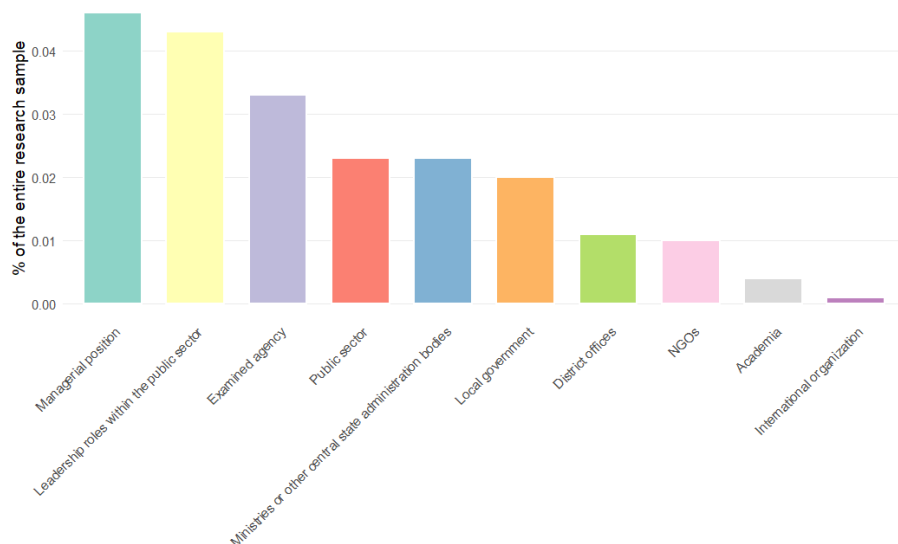
The analysis of the place of previous employment shows that the vast majority of the directors for which we were able to obtain this information had their previous occupation before the appointment in Slovakia (96%), and only 3% were employed in a foreign country. We were unable to determine the length of prior employment in any of the cases due to incomplete CVs and insufficient biographical information.

While the variable ‘last occupation before appointment as agency director’ refers specifically to the most recent position held immediately prior to the appointment, the following variables capture professional experience regardless of when it was obtained (Figure 5). Analysis of prior public-sector experience indicates that most directors held lower-level managerial positions, such as department heads, prior to their current appointments. A notable share had no prior managerial experience, while others had served in senior management roles overseeing higher-level units or sections. In addition, a considerable proportion had experience leading entire organisations, including

ministries or agencies.

Figure 5:

The distribution of past work experience variables



Source: Author's own elaboration, 2026

A total of 2.3% of the overall research sample possessed prior experience in the public sector. Additionally, 2.3% of the sample had prior work experience in ministries or other central state administration bodies (excluding the examined agency), while 3.3% had worked in the examined agency itself. Only 1.1% had previous experience in district offices (local state administration), and 2% had worked in local government at the regional or municipal level. Another 2 percent had experience in other public sector institutions, such as the police, the Social Insurance Agency, the public broadcaster RTVS, and interest-based self-government bodies.

Experience in NGOs was identified in 1% of the sample, and 0.4% had worked in academia. Only one individual in the sample had prior experience in an international organization. Furthermore, 4.6% had held a managerial position, and 4.3% had previously worked in leadership roles within the public sector. Notably, 1.4% of the directors had worked exclusively in the public sector.

4.3 Career after leaving the office

The majority of observations (95.4%) lack data on the first job after leaving the agency director position. From the available data, we have concluded that 2.9% of the directors left for managerial positions. Among the recorded cases, the most common post-office placement was in the same ministry or central state administration body where they had previously served (1.5%). A small number transitioned to other public institutions, such as local state administration offices (0.3%), other ministries (0.2%), or territorial self-government (0.5%). Very few entered the private sector (0.4%), NGOs/third sector (0.1%), or academia (0.1%). Political roles, including elected positions like MPs, mayors, or city council members, were also rare (each $\leq 0.2\%$).

4.4 Past political engagement

Confirmed instances of past political engagement were identified in 3.5% of the entire sample, all of which involved either party membership or candidacy. We did not confirm backstage political involvement (work for a political party) in any of the cases. While 0.2% of directors were previously members of one of the ruling coalition parties in power at the time of assuming office, 0.5% were members of the political party of the respective minister (in power at the time of assuming office). 1.8% of directors held a political office before assuming office, and 1.2% held a political position during appointment.

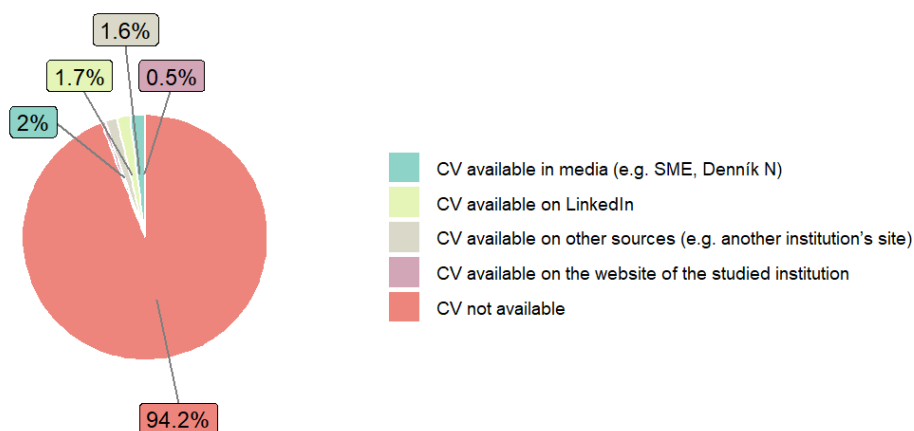
4.5 Data availability

Only 5.8% of the entire research sample (77 cases) had their CVs publicly available online. In most of these instances, the CVs appeared in media articles, typically in the context of appointments to new positions as profile articles in local media (26 cases), followed by LinkedIn profiles as the second most common source (23 cases). In 21 cases, CVs were accessible through other publicly available sources, often linked to unrelated selection procedures. Only in 7 cases was the CV available directly on the relevant agency's website. The distribution of CV source types is visualised in Figure 6.

Additionally, for 7.4% of the sample, partial biographical information was available, allowing completion of at least one of the examined variables. Other examined variables regarding education, such as the year the education was obtained, the length of the course, and the course language, were not available. We were unable to confirm foreign education in any of the cases.

Figure 6:

The distribution of sources of the CVs



Note: For individuals in the research sample whose CVs were unavailable, we attempted to reconstruct career information using alternative sources.

Source: Author's own elaboration, 2026

In none of the cases was it possible to obtain information on the directors' age, year of birth, or place of birth, as these details were not a standard part of the available CVs. Gender was inferred based on name-based identification methods. Of all individuals in the dataset, 861 (65.1%) were identified as men and 461 (34.9%) as women.

5. Discussion and conclusion: Alignments and departures from existing research in meritocratic settings

To evaluate the assumption that top officials in politicised settings often possess prior political experience, we analysed the professional backgrounds of agency directors. Among the small subset with available data, most had prior experience in a political office or party membership. Although not statistically significant, this finding supports our assumption that top officials in politicised settings often possess prior political experience. The limited availability of data, however, does not allow for further conclusions about the specificity of the political experience, e.g. which political party they were affiliated with, or for comparisons between directors who were meritocratically recruited or appointed.

Similarly, our analysis indicates that 1.2% of individuals held elected political office at the time of their appointment. Even though the percentage is relatively modest, we find this observation noteworthy, as the phenomenon of overlapping roles between career trajectories, specifically, the intersection of managerial and elected political positions, has not been systematically examined and reported by researchers in either Western or CEE contexts. However, we contend that such overlaps are symptomatic of highly politicised settings and warrant greater attention in future research.

The analysis of other variables related to past professional experience revealed no substantial deviations from findings reported in existing international research- most had previous experience within the same ministry, the private sector, or other public administration bodies. Broader data on past professional experience further indicate that while a notable proportion of directors had held lower or higher-level managerial roles, a significant share had no prior management experience at all, an unexpected finding given that the position of agency director represents a top-level managerial role. This finding, however, reinforces the earlier discussion regarding the absence of meritocratic selection criteria in patronage-based systems.

The analysis of directors' educational backgrounds confirmed the general trend toward second-degree generalist university education (Bach & Veit, 2017; Ferraz, 2020; Rybář & Podmaník, 2020; Veit & Scholz, 2016). The relatively high share of doctorates can be explained by the inclusion of both traditional PhD degrees and so-called 'small doctorates' in the analysis, with the latter typically representing a one-year programme in Slovakia culminating in a *rigorosum*, a shorter thesis, and its defence.

The conclusions presented above offer only a partial view of agency directors. Nonetheless, they lend support to the argument that politicisation has a substantial influence on the career paths of top officials, as evidenced by the prevalence of prior political experience and the limited representation of managerial backgrounds among appointees. Future research should, where possible, build on these findings and also examine the role of contextual factors, such as the agency's location outside a capital city, where the pool of potential candidates may be limited.

The study revealed a significant lack of available data, with fewer than 6% of agency directors' CVs accessible online. Consequently, the analysis had to rely on reconstructed career paths, which were often incomplete, or on fragmentary biographical information. This data limitation prevents meaningful comparative analysis across categories within the dataset, whether by mode of appointment (merit-based vs. political), geographic factors (agency location), or institutional affiliation (specific ministries). It also precludes international comparisons. Such scarcity of reliable data, therefore, poses a significant obstacle to producing systematic, comparable career-path studies of top officials in the researched context.

The lack of available data observed in this study is consistent with previous findings in the literature (e.g. Bayerová, 2024; Krajňák et al., 2020). The CEE context is widely recognized for its limited data accessibility. This pattern appears to correlate with the

degree of politicisation in these environments: as the degree of politicisation increases, the accessibility of information declines correspondingly (Staroňová & Rybář, 2023). Staroňová and Hajnal (2025) further highlight that conducting research in such contexts, often resembling semi-autocratic or highly politicised systems, presents specific challenges related to data access, methodological design, research ethics, and conceptual framing. The relevance of these issues is increasing as such restrictive and research-unfriendly environments become more common across the region. Future research should engage more deeply with the implications of data unavailability, particularly within the context of career-path research, while also examining its potential structural and institutional causes.

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