

POLITICIZATION OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN ROMANIA AND ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR GOVERNANCE IN TURBULENT TIMES

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Abstract

The article aims to analyze the level of politicization of civil service in Romania, its goals, and consequences. We adopted a rather narrow perspective on politicization and we concentrated mainly on analyzing the recruitment, promotion, and dismissal of civil servants based on political criteria. The research findings were used to discuss the consequences of politicization on the governance of public institutions during turbulent times. In this regard, we conducted an email-based survey of the civil servants. The majority of the sample was composed of graduates of public administration programs at four major universities in Romania, who work in public institutions. We collected the data between May and November 2023 and we obtained 211 valid questionnaires. We found that appointments based on political criteria lower the work motivation of public employees, and increase the level of incompetence and instability of public institutions. The most affected are public employees in management positions, those who have longer work experience in the public sector, and those who work in public institutions that are part of central administration. Therefore, frequent changes based on political criteria lower the capacity of public institutions to respond to disruptive events by generating a loss of expertise, instability, and discontinuity in policy implementation. However, turbulent times require flexibility and adaptation to unexpected and unpredictable events, and political appointees might be more responsive and cooperative.

Keywords: politicization, patronage, instability, governance, turbulent times, Romania.

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1. Introduction

The article aims to analyze the politicization of public administration in Romania and its implications for governance in turbulent times. We adopted a rather narrow perspective on politicization and we concentrated mainly on analyzing the recruitment, promotion, and dismissal of civil servants based on political criteria, and the consequences of politicization on the functioning of public institutions. Politicization can influence how prepared public institutions are for challenges generated by crises. Ansell, Trondal and Øgård (2017) define turbulence as events that are unexpected, unpredictable, and inconsistent, but turbulence may also refer to non-crisis situations caused by technological changes. Elected or appointed politicians are those who prepare, adopt, and implement public policies, and manage on a day-to-day basis public institution. The changing environment of public institutions affects the continuity of public policy implementation (Howlett and Ramesh, 2023), and frequent changes in political decision-makers, and extensive politicization of public institutions might further impact the efficiency of public policies (Bach, Meyer-Sahling and Staroňová, 2020). Therefore, during turbulent times, public administration should ensure stability and routine (Trondal, 2023), but at the same time, decision-makers should develop new knowledge and practices, and adapt to shifting conditions (Lund and Lotte, 2023; Ţiclău, HinŢea and Andrianu, 2020). Adaptability and professionalization of decision-makers are important to ensure the quality of public services delivered to citizens. At the same time, there is the dilemma of whether the recruitment of loyal, political employees in the civil service, who lack professional expertise but are responsive to the political leaders reduces the preparedness of public institutions to crises.

There are few systematic studies regarding the impact of politicization during turbulent times (Bach, Meyer-Sahling and Staroňová, 2020). Even more, there are few studies conducted on politicization in Romania even though this phenomenon is still prevailing in the former communist countries (Meyer-Sahling and Veen, 2012; Staroňová and Rybár, 2020; Kohoutek and Nekola, 2021). The legacies of the relatively weak institutions of former communist countries provided the grounds for the emergence of political patronage of the recruitment in the civil service and of many policy domains (Kopecký and Spirova, 2011). Studies showed that even though former communist countries adopted reforms for civil service professionalization during the pre-accession to the European Union, politicization increased afterward and politicians found informal practices to appoint loyal subordinates, reward party clientele or extract public resources (Gajduscsek and Staroňová, 2023; Tomić and Pavlović, 2023; Čehovin and Haček, 2015). These practices generated a movement back toward patronage (Peters and Bianchi, 2023; Staroňová and Rybár, 2020). However, the study conducted by Duong (2021) on the Vietnamese authoritarian regime showed that the politicization of public institutions does not exclude meritocratic recruitment and promotion in the civil service.

The existing studies conducted on politicization in Romania showed it is widespread at all levels of public administration (Radu, 2014; Volintiru, 2015). A survey based on in-depth expert interviews conducted between December 2012 and February 2013, as part

of an international comparative study, highlighted that Romania had one of the highest scores of party patronage in the European Union, and in domains such as economics, media, and healthcare the political influence was higher comparatively with other domains (Volintiru, 2015). The survey conducted by Andrei, Profiroiu and Oancea (2012) found a small percentage of civil servants belonging to political parties, but political party affiliation was an important factor in the promotion of employees to management positions (even though it was more important for public institutions at the central level than for public institutions at local level). Efforts to depoliticize and professionalize some categories of public employees, such as prefects, did not succeed and eventually were reversed. An analysis of the biographies of the prefects conducted in 2021 showed high levels of politicization, and criteria such as fidelity and belonging to a political party were the main conditions for the appointment of prefects (Profiroiu and Negoită, 2021). To limit the influence of politicians on the recruitment of civil servants, political advisers were appointed to the dignitaries' cabinets (Cobârzan, 2008; Radu and Radu, 2019), but this measure did not reduce the politicization of public institutions. The few appointments of technocratic ministers in Romanian cabinets did not reverse the impact of politicization (Raiu and Mina-Raiu, 2023).

In the following section of the article, we analyze the scope and consequences of politicization. In section three, we analyze the legislation regarding the relationship between political and administrative positions in Romania, while in section four we present the research methodology. We present the research findings in section five, and in the last section of the article, we summarize the main results and discuss the consequences of politicization for governance during turbulent times.

2. Making sense of politicization: definition, goals, forms, and consequences

The dilemma of whether civil servants should be loyal to decision-makers, or they should exhibit neutral competence toward their superiors is a long-lasting one (Peters and Pierre, 2004; Christensen and Opstrup, 2018; Ebinger, Veit and Fromm, 2019), and it has a large impact on the effectiveness of public institutions. Politicians have to balance the demand for neutral competence and responsive competence (Aberbach and Rockman, 1994) when they decide on the appointment of their personal advisers and top civil servants. Neutral competence means that civil servants carry out tasks objectively, in the best possible way, without regard to the political party in power, to protect the public interest. On the other hand, responsive competence means that elected politicians have a legitimate claim for the support and cooperation of the civil servants in carrying out their decisions or political-tactical issues. Even though countries having different administrative traditions approached this dilemma differently, politicization remains an important problem that hinders the activity of public institutions (Peters, 2012).

The concepts of politicization, patronage, and clientelism are connected and are often used interchangeably. Even though politicization and patronage are more similar concepts, there are more significant differences between these and clientelism. Clientelism looks at

party politics and it is a form of exchange of electoral favors of the governing political parties (Volintiru, 2015; Gherghina and Volintiru, 2021). Politicization is a form of controlling the government, and most often refers to the recruitment, selection, promotion, reward, and dismissal of public servants based on political criteria and loyalty (Peter and Pierre, 2004; Duong, 2021; Kopecký *et al.*, 2016; Shaw and Eichbaum, 2020). Even though most often politicization refers to civil servants' recruitment or dismissal (Bach, 2020), it also involves the use of political considerations in the decision-making process and the allocation of resources or public contracts based on political interests (Van de Walle, 2018). The following subsections will investigate the main goals and forms of politicization and its consequences on the functioning of public institutions.

2.1. Goals of politicizations

The goals of politicization vary across administrative traditions and political systems (Ebinger, Veit and Fromm, 2019), and politicization has both positive and negative consequences (Bach, 2020; Kim, Jung and Kim, 2022). The main motivation to influence civil servants' appointments is to ensure partisan allies (Bach, 2020) and the responsiveness of civil servants to steer better policy-making, implementation, and evaluation (Peters, 2012; Peters and Bianchi, 2023).

Another important goal of the political appointments in key positions is to retain control over public institutions and public resources (Tomić and Pavlović, 2023), and therefore to influence the policy processes (Staroňová and Rybár, 2020). In countries with extensive politicization, politicization is used to reward loyal supporters and party members with jobs in public institutions (Kopecký *et al.*, 2016). In some cases, politicization includes the allocation of different forms of rewards, public contracts, or projects (Kopecký *et al.*, 2016) or the creation of coordination institutions at the governmental level (Rouban, 2012). Voters adhere to a political party to have access to jobs in public institutions (Peters and Bianchi, 2023), and this is a form of vote buying when voters are promised public jobs (Volintiru, 2015). Peters *et al.* (2022) argue that the goal of politicization in developing countries is to provide jobs for party members and loyal people, while in developed countries, politicization is used to control the policy-making process.

2.2. Forms of politicization

Politicization can result from formal legislative arrangements regarding the functioning of public institutions or can be the choice of political leaders. There are several mechanisms to make political appointments and they can take the form of direct, formal, functional, or administrative politicization (Peters and Pierre, 2004; Hustedt and Salomonsen, 2014). The most obvious form is direct politicization (Peters, 2012), which takes place when political leaders directly appoint political loyalists. This form of politicization is rarer and legal rules limit it. However, when formal-legal rules allow ministers to choose top-level bureaucrats without major procedural restraints, such as entrance criteria, it is formal politicization (Meyer-Sahling, 2001). Functional politicization refers to the political behavior of civil servants who perform activities that are considered political (Peters and Pierre, 2004).

This can take more subtle forms, such as the replacement of career civil servants who do not meet the requirements of political leaders with other career civil servants who are perceived to be more compatible and trustworthy (Christensen, Klemmensen and Opstrup, 2014). Van Dorp (2023) draws attention to ‘proxy politics’ or anticipatory politicization as a form of functional politicization, that takes place when civil servants self-politicize in anticipation of the ministers’ needs by ‘self-censorship or anticipatory compliance’ (Van Dorp, 2023, p. 427). In addition, the study conducted by Grøn *et al.* (2022) showed that demographic dissimilarities between career civil servants and political leaders increase the risk of turnover in anticipation of political changes in public institutions.

A mechanism to control the activity of government or a policy domain is to create redundant structures (Peters, 2012) that monitor the activity of career civil servants. The most important redundant structures are the ministerial cabinets where ministerial advisers are appointed. They perform political tasks in addition to providing expertise on policy choices (Shaw and Eichbaum, 2020; Staroňová and Rybár, 2023).

The extent of politicization of the civil service varies across countries. There are countries with mass politicization that is spread throughout the administrative system, and countries that professionalized their civil service and eliminated mass politicization but continue to have elite politicization (Peters and Bianchi, 2023). In this case, elite politicization refers to the appointment of highly qualified advisers to assist political leaders in governing better.

Several studies showed that the degree of politicization differs across public organizations with differences existing between ministries and agencies (Kopecký *et al.*, 2016; Bach, Hammerschmid and Löffler, 2020) and that the resistance of bureaucrats can also affect the level of politicization (Cooper, 2018). Van de Walle (2018) found that the size of a public institution has no impact on perceived politicization; on the contrary, the field of the public sector influences the level of politicization. Contrary to the expectations, civil servants sitting lower in the organization hierarchy perceived more politicization compared with top officials.

2.3. Consequences of politicization

Mechanisms of politicization have consequences on the performance of civil service and the efficiency of public institutions. The outcomes depend on administrative traditions and the process of political appointments in public institutions (Cooper, 2018). There are important differences in how merit and non-merit criteria are prioritized across different countries (Cooper, 2021; Askim, Bach and Christensen, 2024). In countries with Germanic and Napoleonic traditions, recruitment based on political and personal connections is more extensive compared with the Nordic and Westminster countries (Cooper, 2021; Bach, Hammerschmid and Löffler, 2020). However, the appointment based on political criteria does not imply a lack of professional competence (Rouban, 2012; Bach and Veit, 2018). Germany is well-known for the ‘professional politicization’ of senior civil servants (Peters, 2012), which involves the recruitment of members of political parties, who are highly qualified professionals (Ebinger, Veit and Fromm, 2019; Veit and Scholz, 2016).

The majority of the outcomes of politicization are negative. The direct and extensive politicization leads to lower professional qualifications or incompetence among the administrative workforce as poorly qualified individuals who lack relevant expertise are recruited (Hustedt and Salomonsen, 2014). Reduced civil servants' expertise impedes the performance of public institutions and reduces the work motivation of public employees (Kim, Jung and Kim, 2022). A high turnover of senior civil servants and the instability of governments affect the continuity of policy implementation, and therefore the policy success. Not only the dismissals of senior civil servants grounded on political criteria are problematic for public institutions, but also the voluntary departures caused by personal conflicts between political leaders and executives, distrust, or loyalty issues (Rattus and Randma-Liiv, 2019).

Although the politicization of the civil service is much criticized, when the selection of loyal employees is from highly qualified individuals, it enhances the overall expertise of public institutions (Bach, 2020). In addition, the direct political control of the actions of the bureaucracy is a democratic process (Peters, 2012), and could be desirable to overcome bureaucratic resistance (Rouban, 2012). When civil servants are more responsive to the priorities of democratically elected politicians, this might lead to greater correspondence between public policies and electoral results (Peters and Pierre, 2004). For example, research conducted on Iran (Peters *et al.*, 2022, p. 22) showed positive consequences of civil service politicization, such as higher commitment and motivation, innovation, and responsiveness.

Overall, politicization is a pervasive issue that lowers the capabilities of public employees, corruption, and lowers trust in public institutions and political leaders (Peters *et al.*, 2022). When political appointments duplicate the existing positions, the government becomes big, loses resources, and the work commitment of non-political civil servants lowers.

3. Romanian legislation regarding the relationship between political and administrative positions

In Romania, even though a clear distinction between political and administrative positions exists in public institutions, in reality, this distinction is rather blurred, and the practice illustrates that there are situations when civil servants are appointed based on political and loyalty criteria, rather than knowledge, expertise or professional experience. At the level of each ministry, the minister is helped by deputy ministers (called secretaries of state), and sub-secretaries of state, and all of them are politically appointed. The number of secretaries of state varies between 2 and 7, depending on the size of the ministry, while the number of sub-secretaries of state varies between 1 and 4. All of them have dignitaries' cabinets where advisers are appointed mainly on political and loyalty criteria (Radu and Radu, 2019). The recruitment of civil servants should be based on professional criteria, but, informally, they are sometimes appointed based on political criteria. According to art. 436 of the Administrative Code (Government Ordinance no. 57/2019), civil servants are allowed to be members of political parties, but they must refrain from the public expression or

manifestation of their political beliefs and preferences, and they should not favor any political party when they exercise their public function. According to art. 436, civil servants are prohibited from: participating in the collection of funds for the activity of political parties, providing logistical support to candidates for positions of public dignity, displaying, within public institutions, insignia or objects inscribed with the logo and or name of the political parties, using the documents they carry out in the exercise of their official duties to express or manifest their political beliefs, and participating in public meetings of a political nature during working time.

Civil servants have the right to move to political positions, and during this time their appointment as civil servants is suspended and they can return to this position after the political appointment ends. According to the art. 420 of the Administrative Code, civil servants have the right to be elected or appointed to a position of authority or public dignity. This situation is encountered in the case of civil servants who have expertise in a field and are appointed temporarily in positions of public dignity, such as secretaries of state. After their mandate ends, they return to their previous positions. Civil servants can carry out remunerated activities in the public and private sectors, but they have to comply with the legal provisions regarding incompatibilities and conflicts of interest.

4. Methodology

The research aims to analyze the perception of public employees on the politicization of public institutions, the scope of politicization, and its consequences. The research findings are used to discuss the consequences of politicization on the governance of public institutions during turbulent times. In this regard, we conducted an email-based survey of the civil servants.

Measuring the public administration politicization in Romania is difficult because it is a widespread phenomenon and very sensitive. Therefore, to collect accurate and honest information, we decided to ask the graduates of public administration programs of four universities in Romania, who worked in public institutions at local, county, and central levels, to fill out a questionnaire. In addition, we asked people working in public institutions whom we knew to answer the survey and distribute the questionnaire to their colleagues. We assumed that by emailing directly public institutions and asking them to distribute the questionnaire to their public employees we would obtain more inaccurate and dishonest answers than sending the questionnaire to the graduates of public administration programs and other public employees we knew. We were aware that our decision would lead to a reduced number of questionnaires since the sample of graduates of public administration programs is much smaller compared to the population of civil servants. However, we decided to value the quality of the responses rather than the higher number of filled-out questionnaires.

The majority of the sample was formed of graduates of the following universities: Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca and its branch campuses in Bistrița, Reșița, Satu-Mare and Sfântu Gheorghe, Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest, National University

of Political Studies and Public Administration in Bucharest, and Alexandru Ioan Cuza University in Iași. Therefore, we aimed to have respondents from all regions of Romania and all administrative levels. We collected the data between May and November 2023 and obtained 211 questionnaires. The number of responses is not statistically representative of the entire population of public employees. Even though some of the responses had missing answers to some questions, we decided to keep all the questionnaires received. We estimated that any answer was valuable since it was very difficult to collect them.

5. Results

The majority of the respondents were females, representing 65.40% of the sample, while 34.60% of them were males (see Table 1). 33.33% of the respondents had a work experience of less than 5 years in the institution where they were employed, 27.62% had an experience between 6 and 10 years, 25.24% worked between 11 and 20 years, and 12.38% worked more than 20 years. The majority of the respondents worked in an institution located in the urban area (75.24%), in an institution that was part of local administration (56.40%), and had the status of civil servants (53.85%).

Table 1: Description of the sample

1. Gender	Female	138	65.40%
	Male	73	34.60%
2. Work experience in the public sector	Less than 5 years	71	33.65%
	Between 6 and 10 years	58	27.49%
	Between 11 and 20 years	53	25.12%
	Over 20 years	26	12.32%
	No answer	3	1.42%
3. Location of the public institution	Rural	52	24.76%
	Urban	158	75.24%
4. Administrative level of the institution	Local level	119	56.40%
	County level	45	21.33%
	Central level	47	22.27%
5. Category of employee in the public institution	Junior civil servants (employed less than one year)	6	2.88%
	Civil servants	111	53.85%
	Civil servants occupying management positions	35	16.83%
	Contractual employees	55	26.44%

Source: Authors' research

Respondents reported a low level of politicization in institutions where they work (see Table 2). For example, 20.88% of the respondents acknowledged that recruitment was always and very often made based on political criteria. 19.05% of the respondents answered that the promotions were always and very often politicized, while 8.09% of them said that dismissals were always and very often made on political criteria. When asked whether politicization was done without taking into consideration the professional background of the

candidates, 30.93% of the respondents answered that always and very often recruitments, promotions, and dismissals were made with the violation of professional competence. The percentage of those who answered that they ‘do not know/do not answer’ was high for all the options.

Table 2: Assessment of politicization of public institutions

	Never	Sometimes	Often	Very often	Always	I don't know/ I don't answer
1. How often have hirings been made based on political criteria?	15.17%	31.75%	14.22%	14.22%	6.66%	18.01%
2. How often have promotions been made based on political criteria?	24.29%	27.62%	10.48%	12.86%	6.19%	18.57%
3. How often have public employees been dismissed from the institution (resigned or transferred to another public institution) based on political criteria?	35.24%	28.57%	8.57%	6.19%	1.90%	19.52%
4. How often have hiring, promotion, and dismissal based on political criteria been made with the violation of professional competence?	20.92%	27.55%	16.84%	8.16%	5.61%	20.92%

Source: Authors' research

Respondents were provided with the following definition of politicization as the recruitment or promotion of employees based on political criteria, and they were asked to assess on a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 represents ‘very small degree’ to 5 represents ‘a very high degree’) their perception of the politicization of public administration in Romania. Respondents reported a higher level of politicization compared to the level of politicization in the institution where they work (see Figure 1). 63.9% of them perceive that public

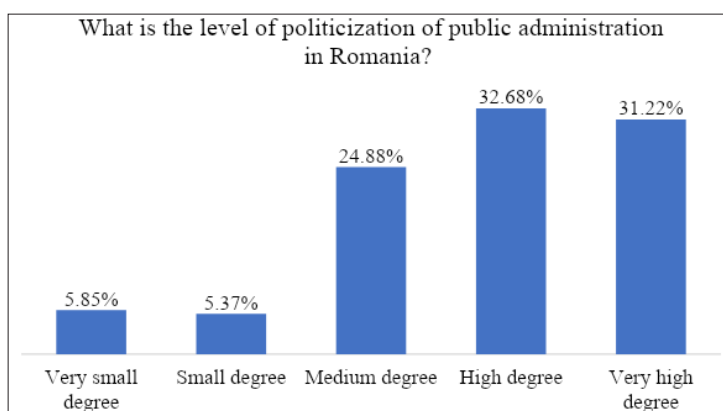


Figure 1: Perception of politicization of public administration in Romania

Source: Authors' research

administration in Romania is politicized to a high and very high degree. The reluctance to acknowledge the politicization of their institutions can be one of the possible explanations for the differences that we identified, or there can be other forms of politicization that are more important than recruitment and promotion based on political criteria.

When comparing the mean values of the perception of politicization among different categories of respondents, we did not find any statistically significant differences. Therefore, a general perception of a high level of politicization of public administration exists among all categories of the respondents.

We asked the respondents to assess the degree of importance of several motives for politicization in the institutions where they work. We cumulated the answers for the options to a high and very high degree, and the results showed that the main goals of politicization are to appoint loyal people who will execute decisions (48.66%) and to reward party members who helped in the electoral campaign (47.06%) (see Table 3). Other important reasons are to control public institutions (36.17%) and to respond to the request or pressure of a political party (35.14%). Controlling the access to financial resources of an institution plays a less important role in politicization (26.52%).

Table 3: Scope of politicization

Scope of politicization	To a high and very high degree	Mean	St. Deviation
Appointment of loyal persons in an institution to execute the decisions	48.66%	3.13	1.427
Rewarding people who helped in the electoral campaign (party members or people close to them)	47.06%	3.05	1.516
Controlling a public institution or a domain within a public institution	36.17%	2.71	1.482
Hiring was made at the request/pressure of the political party	35.14%	2.63	1.509
Controlling the access to financial resources of the institution	26.52%	2.50	1.471

Source: Authors' research

We also measured the perception of public employees on the impact of politicization on the activity of public institutions. We cumulated the answers for the options to a high degree and very high degree, and we found that politicization lowers the motivation of public employees (45.79%), and increases the level of incompetence (42.16%) and the instability of public institutions (38.62%). It also creates problems with the continuity of projects or strategies (36.02%). A small percentage of the respondents (7.45%) agreed that political appointees help public institutions function better because they collaborate better with the leaders of public institutions.

The opinion of the respondents is not uniform regarding the outcomes of politicization. We identified statistically significant differences depending on the location of the public institutions where respondents work, the administrative level of the institutions, and the position of the respondents in the institutions. We did not identify statistically significant differences in the outcomes of politicization depending on the gender of the respondents. Additionally, the majority of the respondents, disregarding their characteristics, perceive that politicization does not help public institutions function better.

Table 4: Outcomes of politicization

Outcomes of politicization	To a high and very high degree	Mean	St. Deviation
Appointments and promotions based on political criteria lowered the work motivation of public employees.	45.79%	3.13	1.489
The level of incompetence increased in public institutions as a consequence of political appointments.	42.16%	3.02	1.518
Political appointments led to institutional instability.	38.62%	2.85	1.447
The replacement of a public employee having vast experience led to the loss of an important expertise in a field.	36.02%	2.72	1.444
The replacement of public employees affected the continuity of a project or strategy implementation.	33.51%	2.69	1.462
The public institution functions better because people employed on political criteria collaborate better with the leader of the public institution	7.45%	1.83	1.015

Source: Authors' research

Public employees who work in public institutions located in urban areas perceive a higher impact of politicization compared to those who work in institutions located in rural areas (see Table 5). The effects such as demotivation, increased incompetence, instability, loss of expertise, and discontinuity of projects are significantly higher among public employees of institutions located in urban areas. The highest difference is in terms of lower work motivation (the mean value for urban institutions is 3.36, while the mean value for rural institutions is 2.42). Therefore, public employees working in urban institutions are more demotivated when appointments are made on political criteria in their institution.

Table 5: Differences in the outcomes of politicization depending on the location of the respondents

Location of the public institution		Lower work motivation	Increased incompetence	Institutional instability	Loss of expertise	Loss of continuity in project implementation
Rural	Mean	2.42	2.38	2.33	2.07	2.02
	N	45	45	46	45	45
Urban	Mean	3.36	3.24	3.04	2.94	2.92
	N	144	139	142	140	139
Sig.		<.001	<.001	.004	<.001	<.001

Source: Authors' research

Civil servants occupying management positions are the most demotivated by politicization compared to other categories of public employees (see Table 6) (the mean value is 3.42 for civil servants occupying management positions, while the mean value for junior civil servants (having a work experience less than one year) is 1.83, and for contractual employees is 2.75). One possible explanation is that they interact more often with political heads of public institutions and, therefore, learn more often about the cases of recruitment of new employees based on political criteria or about the promotions of political protégées or the replacements of competent career civil servants. This might be an explanation for

the fact that civil servants occupying management positions perceive to a higher degree the negative impact of politicization on the continuity of project implementation. Civil servants occupying positions of execution perceive an increased level of incompetence in the institutions where they work. A possible explanation is that they notice more often when employees appointed on political criteria cannot perform their responsibilities because they lack the expertise or work experience.

Table 6: Differences in politicization outcomes depending on the category of public employee

Category of public employee		Lower work motivation	Increased incompetence	Institutional instability	Loss of expertise	Loss of continuity in project implementation
Junior civil servants	Mean	1.83	2.17	1.83	1.83	1.83
	N	6	6	6	6	6
Civil servants	Mean	3.29	3.28	2.91	2.88	2.82
	N	97	96	98	95	95
Civil servants occupying management position	Mean	3.42	3.16	3.21	2.94	3.13
	N	33	32	33	33	32
Contractual employees	Mean	2.75	2.50	2.59	2.35	2.31
	N	51	48	49	49	49
Sig.		0.016	0.014	0.078	0.057	0.029

Source: Authors' research

When looking in more detail at the perceptions of the impact of politicization on public institutions located at different administrative levels, we found that politicization has a higher impact on institutions that are part of the central public administration (see Table 7). The most significant consequences are the increased incompetence (mean value for central administration is 3.45), the loss of expertise (3.11), and the loss of continuity in project implementation (3.30). In these cases, statistically significant differences exist among the perceptions of the employees from different administrative levels. The level

Table 7: Differences in politicization outcomes depending on the administrative level of public institutions

Administrative level of the public institution		Lower work motivation	Increased incompetence	Institutional instability	Loss of expertise	Loss of continuity in project implementation
Local level	Mean	2.89	2.79	2.67	2.46	2.43
	N	104	100	103	101	100
County level	Mean	3.33	3.11	2.82	2.92	2.64
	N	39	38	39	38	39
Central level	Mean	3.47	3.45	3.28	3.11	3.30
	N	47	47	47	47	46
Sig.		0.055	0.046	0.057	0.023	0.003

Source: Authors' research

of specialization is higher at the governmental level, and therefore recruitment of incompetent people is more visible and has a higher impact on the activity of such institutions, while frequent political changes impact the continuity of projects and strategies. The research showed rather similar perceptions of public employees from different administrative levels that politicization lowers work motivation and increases institutional instability.

Recruitment based on political criteria impacts those employees with longer work experience in the public sector (see Table 8). For example, employees with work experience over 20 years reported the highest level of loss of motivation (mean value is 3.59) and the highest perception regarding discontinuity of project implementation. Civil servants who work for many years in a public institution witness many appointments, promotions, or changes based on political criteria, as well as the impact they have on the continuity of projects and strategies. Politicization lowers the work motivation of public employees who have a longer experience in the public sector and therefore their commitment to the performance of public institutions.

Table 8: Differences in politicization outcomes depending on the work experience

Work experience in the public sector		Lower work motivation	Increased incompetence	Institutional instability	Loss of expertise	Loss of continuity in project implementation
Less than 5 years	Mean	2.75	2.62	2.58	2.44	2.28
	N	67	63	65	63	64
Between 6 and 10 years	Mean	3.17	3.12	2.83	2.57	2.75
	N	53	52	54	53	53
Between 11 and 20 years	Mean	3.39	3.30	3.02	3.02	2.95
	N	46	47	45	46	44
Over 20 years	Mean	3.59	3.33	3.32	3.14	3.18
	N	22	21	22	22	22
Sig.		0.044	0.068	0.158	0.079	0.026

Source: Authors' research

6. Conclusions and discussions on the impact of politicization on governance during turbulent times

The article analyzed the politicization of public administration in Romania, and we defined politicization as the recruitment, promotion, and dismissal of public employees based on political criteria. We found that the perception of politicization is much higher at the level of public administration in Romania compared to the perception of politicization of the institutions where respondents work. The main goals of politicization are to appoint loyal people who will execute decisions and to reward party members who helped in the electoral campaign.

The present research showed that appointments based on political criteria have significant negative outcomes on the management of public institutions. The most significant

effects are the reduced work motivation of public employees, increased level of incompetence, loss of expertise, and instability of public institutions. Civil servants occupying management positions and public employees who have a longer work experience in the public sector are the categories of employees most affected by politicization. The most significant impact on them is the lower work motivation. In addition, politicization has important consequences for employees who work in central public administration, and they perceive that politicization leads to a loss of expertise and an increased level of incompetence in public institutions, as well as a discontinuity in project or strategy implementation. The consequences of politicization are much more significant among employees working in institutions located in urban areas compared to rural areas.

Most of these results follow the findings of the previous studies; however, we aim to discuss their implications for the governance of public institutions during turbulent times. Governance during turbulent times requires innovation, flexibility, and adaptation to new and unpredictable circumstances, but stability and continuity in the functioning of public institutions and service delivery are equally important. The politicization of the public sector impairs the decision-making process and public policy implementation if appointed employees lack professional expertise. Appointments of loyal employees can be beneficial to achieving policy goals if they offer greater support and cooperation to political leaders in the implementation of public policies. Changes in the contexts of public institutions require dynamic robust policies that adapt policy goals and tools to the new circumstances (Howlett and Ramesh, 2023), and political appointees can be more flexible and responsive to such policy changes. In the long term, if political appointees lack professional expertise, the general level of professionalization of public employees lowers, and, as a consequence, the knowledge to conduct analyses to better substantiate policies is reduced. Overall, politicization weakens the capacity of public institutions to make good decisions in a rapidly changing environment. In addition, frequent political changes generate institutional instability and low work motivation that will impact the continuity of strategies implementation and the commitment of public employees to the goals and values of the public sector.

The article contributes to the literature on politicization because it presents original empirical findings on the extent, goals, and consequences of politicization in Romania. The present research has some limitations. The findings of the research cannot be generalized because the sample of respondents is not representative of the entire population of public employees. Even though we emailed the questionnaire directly to public employees to obtain accurate information, the non-response rate for the perception of politicization in the institutions where respondents worked was high. This illustrates that respondents were reluctant to honestly disclose the extent of politicization in their institutions or that politicization happens through other mechanisms than political recruitment in the civil service. Further research should combine surveys with in-depth interviews with civil servants or experts to grasp a better understanding of the mechanisms of politicization (Rouban, 2012).

There are no other studies conducted in Romania that use a similar methodology. However, the conclusion we reached that public employees perceive a high level of

politicization in public administration is similar to the finding reached by Volintiru (2015) who conducted research based on in-depth interviews. In 2013, when the research was conducted, Romania had one of the highest levels of party patronage in the European Union, and political influence impaired the performance of public institutions. Some other results of the present research are in contradiction with other studies. For example, we found that civil servants occupying management positions perceive more politicization compared with public employees sitting lower in the organizational hierarchy, which is in contradiction with the findings of Van de Walle (2018) who conducted a survey of public institutions in fifteen countries. We found a higher perception of politicization among employees of central public administration compared to the local administration, and Christensen, Klemmensen and Opstrup (2014) reached an opposing conclusion when analyzing politicization in Denmark. Therefore, the results on politicization should be interpreted taking into consideration the particularities of the formal institutions and particular practices of the country analyzed.

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