



'Strategic support for the recruitment of competitive public service personnel'

Case study of a Hungarian ESF project under the study 'Progress Assessment of the ESF Support to Public Administration' (PAPA)

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Project background

Strategic support for the recruitment of competitive public service personnel (PADOP-2.1.5)

Operational Programme	PA 2: Strengthening a service-oriented approach and ethical operation in public service SO 2.1: In the key areas of public administration, a human resource management system is introduced, providing the competencies necessary for service-oriented task performance and complying with the career model (TO11)
Beneficiary organisation	Ministry of the Interior National University of Public Service
Target groups	Employees of the civil service and armed forces
Project duration	January 2016 ¹ – December 2020
Budget	6,500 million HUF (EUR 19,618,494); EU co-financing: 5,090 million HUF (EUR 15,366,210)
Project manager (email address)	Dr. Enikő Szekér Kovácsné, Head of the Department for Public Service Development and Strategy, Ministry of Interior (eniko.szeker@bm.gov.hu)
Partners	NISZ National Infocommunications Service Company Ltd.
Project/organisation website	https://bmprojektek.kormany.hu/verseny https://fejlesztisprogramok.uni-nke.hu/kofop-projektek/kofop-215-vekop-16-2016-00001/a-projekt-adatai

This case study was produced as part of the project 'Progress Assessment of ESF Support to Public Administration', contracted by DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion of the European Commission. The purpose of this project was to present specific cases of ESF-funded public administration reform and capacity-building initiatives, as well as to show the role of ESF financial support to public administration, for the purposes of accountability. This report recounts the story of the project '**Strategic support for the recruitment of competitive public service personnel**'. This account discusses the context and purpose of the project; the characteristics of the team implementing it; the main challenges faced and difficulties encountered during its implementation; key developments during the implementation process; the results and impacts achieved; as well as lessons learnt and the contribution of the ESF.

¹ Grant agreement was signed on 20 December, 2016.

Strategic support for the recruitment of competitive public service personnel

Introduction: the context of the project

At the time the study team carried out the interviews for this case study, stakeholders were still getting to grips with new regulations on civil service, which had entered into force quite unexpectedly two months earlier. These regulations were expected to fundamentally change the basis upon which Hungary's civil service system operates. The head of the project management team within the Ministry of Interior (MoI), reassured us: 'We are busy creating and maintaining stability and predictability for civil servants in the midst of the constantly changing strategic, legal and organisational context in which the system operates.' Indeed, as the project 'Strategic support for the competitive recruitment of public service personnel' reveals, the policy and practice of Hungary's civil service are in constant motion.

This story of systemic change of the civil service system begins in 1992. This was the year in which the new civil service law² was adopted, explicitly aiming to create a closed, career-based civil service system. Notably, it was the first civil service legislation to be passed in the post-Communist region. However, despite its declared policy objectives, in reality the emerging civil service system displayed many characteristics of spoils-based system of patronage, with political appointees, and a position-based system, in which both internal and external candidates can apply for specific posts. Such inconsistencies persisted: in 2006, for example, a short-lived attempt (financed by State Reform OP 2007-2013) was made to openly transform the system into a corporate-minded, position-based one.

From 2010 onwards, the Orbán government's reforms of Hungary's state structures began with the civil service. Paradoxically, while the rhetoric surrounding the post-2010 reforms promoted a closed, career-type civil service, most of the actual measures and real-life practices had the opposite effect. The main pillar of career-type systems – protection against arbitrary dismissal – was eliminated, and politicisation and unpredictability grew significantly at all levels of the system.

These developments, in particular the diminishing security and predictability that was still favoured by many employees, did not help a public service that increasingly lagged behind in its competition with the private sector to attract Hungary's diminishing active labour force. The term 'competitive' has thus a double meaning in relation to the civil service: it refers not only to its operational efficiency, but also to its increased appeal towards existing and potential employees.

In addition, few civil service policy measures in recent years can be regarded as increasing the sense of employment security enjoyed by civil servants. Due to changes in organisational and legal status, a civil servant carrying out the same job at the same table over the past decade might have worked first as a civil servant (*köztisztviselő*) of a central agency, then as a 'government official' (*kormánytisztviselő*), and since 2017, as an employee of a ministry (into which their agency merged for instance). At the same time, other officials in similar positions might have ended up as an employee of a government-owned enterprise working under the standard labour code. Such organisational and legal changes have affected practically all public administrators working in central and local administrations alike. The below table presents the

² Law XXIII of 1992 on the Legal Status of Civil Servants.

changes in the legal categories of civil servants over the post-2010 years (in parentheses we provide the number of employees in the given category)³.

Table 1. Evolution of legal categories of civilian administration

ADMINISTRATIVE TIER	1992-2010 (DATA AS OF 2009)	2011-2016 (DATA AS OF 2016)	2016-2018 (DATA AS OF 2018)	2019-
Local self-government	Civil servants (<i>köztisztviselő</i>): 111,413 (of which central government, incl. at regional level: 66,378)	Civil servants* (<i>köztisztviselő</i>): 33,007	Civil servants (<i>köztisztviselő</i>): 35,579	Civil servants (<i>köztisztviselő</i>): n/a
Public bodies not subordinate to the government				
Central government at regional level		Government officials (<i>kormánytisztviselő</i>): 80,492	State officials (<i>állami tisztviselő</i>): 38,176	government officials (<i>kormánytisztviselő</i>): n/a
Central government			Government officials (<i>kormánytisztviselő</i>): 32,743	

Source: Author's own compilation based on data in NUPS (2015, 2016, 2017, 2018)

The latest step in this administrative reform came on 1 March 2019, when an entirely new regulatory framework⁴ appeared, affecting all civilian central administration. This framework fundamentally upends the centralised civil service policy of the preceding years. The new, expressly open civil service framework marks, on the one hand, the formal abandonment of special employment conditions for civil servants (such as the annulment of seniority principle in pay schemes and privileges, fringe benefits etc.), and on the other hand, the shrinking to a minimal level of any centrally regulated uniformity of employment conditions. This latter element means that key features and parameters of human resources (HR) policy are, within the new framework, largely at the discretion of the employing organisations (rather than that of the civil service system as a whole).

One would imagine that such a major shift in administrative policy would be preceded by the conscious and careful construction of a clear strategic framework. In reality, however, no such framework was put in place. The Magyar Public Administration Development Strategy (hereinafter referred to as *Magyary Plan*), adopted in 2011-2012, stipulated a uniform public service regulatory framework, to cover the entire civilian administration, as well as the armed services. This uniformity was expected to contribute to the flexibility and efficiency of public service HR (allowing, for example, personnel from the armed forces to continue their careers within the civilian administration after finishing their active service).

From 2014 on, however, an institutional vacuum arose in the space created by the elimination of the core-of-government Ministry of Public Administration and Justice (*Közigazgatási és Igazságügyi Minisztérium*). It may be partly a result of this that in subsequent years, legislation regulating various segments of the civil service has increasingly diverged, and lacks a common and coherent core idea. While the regulation of the police and disaster management forces (incl.

³ Note that these terms are literally translated into English; the terminological anarchy – the most spectacular illustration of which is the fact that one subset of civil servants was called 'state officials' – is thus a feature of the legal regulation itself. In the main text of the report, we nevertheless use terms such as 'civil servants' according to their customary English meanings.

⁴ Law CXXXV of 2018 on governmental administration.

fire services, civil protection etc.) is based on the concept of a classical, closed civil service system, the status of military personnel has followed a more open regulatory concept. The new (and already terminated) category of 'state officials' – designating those who work in the regional (sub-national) offices of central government – represented a further step towards openness and a lack of uniform, centralised regulatory elements.

Our source, working in academia, summarised these changes in the strategic context as follows: 'As the institutional locus of the government's civil service policy gradually fragmented, the uniform civil service policy envisioned by the Magyary Plan became unfeasible. From 2014 on, individual branches of the public service started to create, one after another, their own, separate status laws. In practice, these operated as instruments to improve salary conditions by (re-)negotiating the budgetary status of the respective branches, rather than providing a compound human resource management (HRM) system for each.' Table 2 reflects this heterogeneity of wages and the corresponding 'bargaining power' across the public service branches.

Table 2. Employment in public service according to legal statuses (2015)

LEGAL STATUS	NUMBER EMPLOYED	AVERAGE MONTHLY SALARY PER PERSON (EUR)	TOTAL WAGE BILL (MILLION EUR)
(1) Civil servants (köztisztviselő)	34,500	880	30.4
(2) Government officials (kormánytisztviselő)	78,900	950	75.0
(3) Law enforcement (incl. police, disaster management, prison service etc.)	64,000	1,060	67.8
(4) Military forces	18,000	1,030	18.5
All personnel	195,400	980	191.5

Source: data of Ministry of Interior

The Public Administration and Public Service Development Strategy of 2015 – projecting measures for the 2014-2020 programming period – still continues to talk about a 'public service (lifelong) career' system, as did the earlier Magyary Plan. Note, however, that the meaning of the key term – '*életpályamodell*' (sometimes called '*közzolgálati életpálya rendszer*'), which literally translates as 'lifelong (public service) career system' – is a term that was put forward by the reformers, but whose meaning was never precisely defined. Moreover, the term was / is given widely varying meanings in the official documents⁵. The 2015 strategy is more cautious regarding the unification of civil service regulations, it envisions an integrated HRM system operating across the civilian administration and branches of armed services. Notwithstanding this strategic objective, one of the main features of the 2019 civil service reform is the devolution of key HRM functions to the level of individual organisations – an element that was not contained in the prevailing strategy documents.

⁵ In the following text, we will refer to this term as 'public service career system', in quotation marks.

It was in this unusually volatile policy context that the planning of the current project commenced, after the inauguration of the third Orbán government in 2014. In charge of the project was the Ministry of Interior, the entity responsible for the development of the 'public service career system'. As Zoltán Hazafi, associate professor at NUPS, notes: 'One could sense that it wouldn't be feasible to harmonise the three legal statuses, although flexibility and horizontal mobility between the main public service corps continued to be an expectation as regards HRM systems. While the MoI played a coordinating role, individual ministries continued to be in charge of their own personnel policies.'

During the first phase of the project planning, a map of problems was drawn up. This served as the basis for the subsequent identification of project objectives. Around this time, the civil service system faced a number of complex challenges – a major one being its relative lack of attractiveness of civil service in comparison to the private sector. Civil service jobs failed to attract a sufficient number of young people entering the labour market. Although a number of policy measures introduced during the 2007-2013 programming period improving the situation in this regard (particularly within central government), the proportion of young employees remained low, particularly in the sub-national tiers of administration.

Another negative trend during the project implementation has been increasing staff turnover among civil servants, presumably also as a result of the low attractiveness of employment in the civil service. High turnover leads to a continual loss of organisational knowledge and expertise, and hinders the proper transfer of job-related skills and competences to new employees. Although, no reliable figures exist regarding turnover, on the basis of existing data on employment status termination and expert assessments, its annual rate can be estimated at around 15%.

Another problem was created by the systemic barriers to planning for the workforce in the long and medium term. Recruitment happened in an *ad hoc* manner, without reference to the HRM strategy objectives of the organisation as a whole. Some sectors and branches of the civil service were over-staffed, while others faced a lack of sufficient human resources. Rational, long-term planning was systematically hindered by frequent budget and hiring freezes, and by the constant re-shuffling of tasks, responsibilities and organisational structures. In addition, many of the HRM instruments, such as mobility policy or career planning, that would have enabled more effective management of the civil service, were either missing or under-developed.

Overall, the government lacks the ability to think and act strategically in the field of civil service policy. This inability is illustrated in the observation that the government is currently not even able to acquire a real-time, overall figure reflecting the total number of staff employed by the civil service.

Below the governmental level, the public organisations as employers found themselves in an unprecedented need for tackling HR related problems, too. According to Ms. Etelka Palich, chair of the Hungarian Government Officials' Corps (*Magyar Kormánytisztviselői Kar*), the volatile legal environment strengthens rather than undermines the rationale behind, and justification for, the project. 'In addition to a changing legal environment, another important factor was the constant and long-term trend of continual organisational reshuffling at both central and sub-national levels. Consequently, HR departments face new challenges from these newly merged organisations with varying statuses and employment conditions from the former bodies, together with increased staff size.'

Changes in personnel are closely connected to the quality of HR resource management. As our interviewee on behalf of the project team notes: 'During the planning phase, we established that a transitory state between personnel management and HR management is prevalent in all

spheres of the civil service. In this intermediate state, personnel operations are primarily administrative, bureaucratic, operational and heavily regulated in nature.' In other words, HR organisational units and experts usually follow instead of leading the way forward. An integrated or strategic approach is rare.

Design and execution of the ESF-funded project

The project was conceived as an instrument to tackle the fluid and complex set of problems outlined above. The Ministry of Interior's objective was to create the preconditions for a stable and competent civil service by ensuring the existence and proper operation of HRM functions to support it both on the macro (policy) and the micro (organisational) levels. As our interviewee on behalf of the project team put it, the project's mission is 'to create a public administration consisting of competent personnel, which would be service-oriented, citizen-friendly, quick and efficient in operation.' The motto of the project reflects this ambition: 'attracting, preparing and retaining employees within the public service'. Project activities and expected results to be described later can also be rendered to these three domains.

Figure 1. Three domains of the project



Source: Ministry of Interior⁶

Previous ESF-supported projects

As the legal successor to the abolished Ministry of Public Administration and Justice, in 2014 the Ministry of the Interior 'inherited' both the project's antecedents and responsibility for the project. As an official with insights to the project put it, 'we had to start everything from scratch, however not on a blank page'. That is to say, the project has a number of predecessors that operated during the 2007-2013 State Reform Operational Programme (SROP). The Managing Authority explicitly required that the project should connect well with these. SROP-2.2.1 (2007) Capacity building of Government HR Centre and performance assessment project included:

- The development of the Government HR Service Application (*Kormányzati Személyügyi Szolgáltató Rendszer / KSzSzR*) used by several ministries to support everyday personnel management.

⁶ Logo retrieved from the 26 January 2018 Kick-off event leaflet. Available at: https://bmmprojektek.kormany.hu/download/6/cd/02000/Nyitorendezveny_szorolap_KOFOP215.pdf.

- An information system created to match workforce supply stemming from lay-offs with unmet labour demand in other organisations (TARTINFO).
- The online portal kozigallas.hu ('public administration job'), on which vacancies at public organisations must be advertised.
- The TÉR system for performance assessment and performance-based incentivisation.

The project's aim was to further develop and integrate these ICT-based systems. As a key actor put it 'In the framework of the new PADOP project, building on the KSzSzR, TARTINFO and KOZIGALLAS systems [see above] is both an objective and an obligation at the same time. Changing user expectations and habits, as well as the changing government ICT environment, requires us to substantially improve these partially outdated systems.'

The most important forerunner of the project is the SROP-2.2.17 (2012) measure entitled the 'new public service career system' (*Új közszolgálati életpálya*). This was based on the concept of a systemic framework for a unified civil service (also extending to the armed services) envisioned by the Magyar Plan. It included, among other elements, a system of promotion for the police services, and methodological tools for job analysis and assessment. The current project relies on these pre-existing components in several ways, since they constitute generic tools for HRM (such as the creation of a nomenclature of positions/ managerial job descriptions). The system developed under the SROP measure was introduced in the police force in February 2015 and continues to be used. Because horizontal permeability between major public service corps was an important requirement during its development of the system, its application can be extended both horizontally, to segments of the public service other than the police force, and vertically to lower, non-managerial positions.

Design of the project

The project design reflected the above holistic mission, as it was not restricted to the development of IT systems, but – taking the sustainability of results into consideration – accentuated the importance of methodological groundwork to ensure that the renewed HRM practices would best fit into the functioning and management of the public administration. The Ministry of Interior invited the National University of Public Service (NUPS) to the project consortium, in order to incorporate the research logic and scientific background for the development activities. NUPS applies a single development scheme for all project interventions. This starts with an exploratory analysis of needs and situation, followed by conceptualisation of targeted activities, which are put to pilot testing, being monitored, and then fine-tuned. All these steps have to be taken prior to the legal and technological (ICT) implementation. 'This makes our project unique by starting with hypotheses instead of merely executing predetermined measures' as Dr. Gabriella Csóka, NUPS side Deputy Head of Professional Project Team remarked.

Although the initially designated beneficiary organisations have undergone a restructuring process (having affected the whole central government in 2016), thus the Directorate General of Public Service HR Development (*Közszolgálati Személyzetfejlesztési Főigazgatóság*) merged into the former supervisor MoI, the key individuals remained in the same positions. Due to the consortium setup, the project team has a dual structure enabling both administrative and professional project management on each partner's side. Besides employees of the MoI/NUPS, individual experts (trainers, researchers, mentors, practitioners) are contracted for short term periods too, while companies are commissioned mainly for ICT development via public procurement tendering. Professional work is organised into working groups related to project components.

Other stakeholders had also had to be involved in the project implementation. For example, the development of ICT-based data management components had to comply with a broad range of legally defined technical requirements. In order to ensure this, the government-owned enterprise NISZ Zrt (National Infocommunications Service Company Ltd., responsible for the operation of government-wide ICT systems such as the Government Data Centre and Cloud, which serve as the infrastructure of the project's KSZDR⁷) was invited to participate. In a similar vein, another government-owned enterprise, IdomSoft Zrt (charged with supervising the majority of software development within the government) was invited to participate in the development of project's software components (TARTINFOR⁸, KÖZSZOLGÁLLÁS⁹, the Knowledge Base Portal). These two companies – both supervised by the MoI – were granted membership and voting rights within the public procurement committees.

The objectives and instruments of the project

The project belongs to Priority Axis No. 2 (Strengthening a service-oriented approach and ethical operation in public service) within PADOP (*Közigazgatás- és Köszolgáltatás-fejlesztés Operatív Program / KÖFOP*). More specifically, it contributes to the measure 'Ensuring the conditions for a career in public services' under Specific Objective 2.1. (In the key areas of public administration, a human resource management system is introduced, providing the competencies necessary for serviceoriented task performance and complying with the career model).

As already noted, the general aim of the project is to construct HRM instruments that enable the civil service system to attract, prepare and retain personnel in public service. To this end, it aims to develop systems and methodological instruments, as well as developing ICT resources, to support these functions. The project includes elements that target specific organisational competences (such as HRM instruments, events and training materials), as well as elements that covering overarching, horizontal aspects of good governance (such as an HRM data base and management information system with a broad scope).

Thus, the main elements of the project – grouped according to its major objectives – are the following:

- 1) Attracting employees to the public service:
 - a. Introductory courses on policing and public administration will become elective subjects in secondary school curricula.
 - b. New post-secondary certificate programmes (*OKJ*) in policing and public administration will be designed.
 - c. A new, competence-based selection system for the armed services will be elaborated.
 - d. Events popularising public service careers will be organised.
- 2) Preparing employees for public service:
 - a. Creation of a mentor system in public administration and in the police force.
 - b. Further development of system of promotion within the police force, and adapting it to civilian administration.
- 3) Retaining employees within the public service:

⁷ KSZDR as in Kormányzati Személyügyi Döntéstámogató Rendszer (*Government HR Decision Support System*).

⁸ TARTINFOR as in Tartalékállomány Információs Rendszer (*Information System for the Reserve Pool* - from which to recruit civil servants).

⁹ KÖZSZOLGÁLLÁS as in Köszolgáltatási Állásportál (*Recruitment Portal for Public Service*).

- a. Improving components of the HRM system that support mobility between public service corps (e.g. TARTINFOR).
- b. Creation of an HRM knowledge base and online portal.
- c. Introduction of KÖZSZTÉR, an organisational-level performance measurement system.
- d. Creation of the KSZDR data warehouse system, supporting HRM decisions and operations.

In conclusion, the project aims to increase the appeal of public service, and correspondingly increase the number of civil servants. The coherent and state-of-the-art HRM tools are hoped to reduce attrition in early stages of employment. Finally, an evidence-based and data-driven HRM is envisioned on the basis of the KSZDR data warehouse. The project leadership and management are divided among the two implementing organisations responsible for the respective project components. Thus, under the overall responsibility of the consortium leader Minister of Interior, the sponsors are the Deputy State Secretary for Human Resources and the Vice Rector of NUPS. The specific project components are led by senior civil servants who fulfil their project roles as part of their ministerial or academic jobs. Due to the continuation of the results of previous projects, the professional staff predominantly consists of those colleagues who have already been managing the HR system components to be further developed by this Project. Although systemic information is not available we can estimate that they total ca. 30 experts. Regarding the technical/administrative project management staff, around 20 colleagues are hired particularly for running ESF projects including this Project.

Implementation of the ESF project: main developments and challenges

The substantive project implementation in the three main domains began in Summer 2017 and followed the stages of the development scheme described above. Mapping needs and expectations of the target groups, collecting international best practices about the proposed HRM tools were the first ones among the project activities that took place. Findings resulting from these activities have been well reported and disseminated via open workshops and symposiums throughout the next year (for example, the 'Assessment of the effectiveness of career guidance programs'¹⁰).

Upon the discussions, the respective working groups have prepared the concept papers in each domain. For example, the 'Preparing employees' domain adopted the 'Methodology and toolkit for mentoring entrants in public administration'¹¹, which could serve as the basis for launching the pilot of mentoring component of the project. At first, 47 trainers were trained in order to let them prepare an additional body of 300 mentors (partly coming from the civilian administration and partly from the armed forces, selected on a competitive basis). Next an additional pilot mentoring of 40 police officers took place in two rounds at the end of 2018. The results have been systematically monitored and evaluated within the internal monitoring framework tailored for the professional implementation of the project activities. As Dr. Csóka explains, 'we initiate processes that have never occurred in the public service so far, this is why it is crucial to measure

¹⁰ Csóka-Szakács (eds.) (2018), A közigazgatási pályaaorientációs képzéssel kapcsolatos igényfelmérés eredményei [Results of training needs assessment on the career guidance of civil servants], In: A közszolgálat emberierőforrás-gazdálkodási rendszerének fejlesztését szolgáló kutatások jelentései I. [Developing Public Service Human Resources Management System. Final Research Reports I.], Budapest: NUPS.

¹¹ Krauss-Magasvári-Szakács (2018), Módszertan a közszolgálati mentori rendszer bevezetéséhez [Methodology for implementing mentoring system in public service], Budapest: NUPS. Available at: https://fejlesztესiprogramok.uni-nke.hu/document/fejlesztესiprogramok-uni-nke-hu/M%C3%B3dszertan%20a%20k%C3%B6zszolg%C3%A1lati%20mentori%20rendszer%20bevezet%C3%A9s%C3%A9hez_hiteles%3%ADtett.pdf.

them from the very first seconds'. The assessment techniques enabled the project experts to amend the mentoring methodology applied. The civilian counterpart of this pilot is about to commence only in September 2019 due to the lack of new entrants into the public administration resulting from the general hiring freeze announced in 2018.

Within the 'Attracting employees' domain, the new secondary school curricular elements have been drafted, according to which the training materials would be developed, once the Minister responsible for education affairs, approves them. Meanwhile, methodological training focussing on career guidance have been organised for secondary school teachers in 2019.

The 'Retaining employees' domain targets those civil servants (excluding the armed forces), who have already been employed for a couple of years, and focuses on individual talent management. 62 mentors have already been trained since the end of 2018, and the pilot has begun in the middle of 2019 with the participation of 51 pairs (mentor and mentored).

Meanwhile, progress in relation to the competence management component previously used by the police force has been more spectacular. The predecessor to this component had been used by the police force in determining promotions. At the start of the project, this HRM tool was earmarked to be extended to the selection of new recruits and the special development of gifted service members, as well as to other branches of public service. This is how the horizontal and vertical extension of the promotion system (to civilian administration and to multiple employment levels, respectively) began. Erika Malét-Szabó, the leader of this project component, provides an insight into the system: 'The promotion system and the accompanying evaluation test tool are based on a so-called 'neural model', developed jointly with researchers at the University of Debrecen. According to this method, senior managers construct the competence profiles for various positions (so-called 'neural models') using a standard typology of competences. A total of 30 such models were elaborated for jobs covering investigative and operative work, and the areas of public safety and security, and border guards.'

However, differences exist between the ways the system is applied to the police and to civilian areas. In the police system, the ranking of candidates under the system provides the compulsory basis for selection/promotion and the results of the ranking may be disregarded only in exceptional cases. In the realm of civilian administration, meanwhile, the rules allow much greater flexibility.

As Malét-Szabó explains: 'I started on the project with a track record of 15 years continuous work in the field. The project means you have to get on both with the tasks and with the people involved, and accommodate their needs and demands.' She refers to the case of a survey of first- and third-year police officer students, the purpose of which was to assess their competencies and thereby establish whether or not it makes sense for them to continue with their studies. The survey was instigated by the HR Director of the National Headquarters of the Hungarian Police (*ORFK*), due to a significant dropout rate. Initially, the survey created a sense of fear among the trainee police officers, who were concerned that their competencies might be deemed as insufficient, and they might thus be advised to give up their studies. In order to allay these fears, Malét-Szabó invited all first- -year students to a group meeting at which she presented the objective of the exercise and answered questions posed by the audience. Students achieving the lowest scores in the survey underwent individual consultation and counselling, and were advised on what personal development measures they could take to tackle the issue of their competence gaps. Another positive result of the exercise was that it revealed that the cooperation and social skills of students are generally at a very low level. From the upcoming semester onwards, a new training component improving such skills will therefore be added to the curriculum.

Challenges

As a result of the strategic gap outlined earlier, two major decisions had to be taken at the outset. First, the project planners narrowed their focus down to two (out of the three) corps of public service: the police force and the civilian administration. The military became a secondary object of project activities. This meant that instead of a unified and uniform 'public service career system', several such systems were to be developed. Second, the decision was taken to define the project's objectives in flexible terms, so that in the event of change in some major, systemic component of the civil service, the project would continue to deliver meaningful outputs and outcomes. A very challenging part of this ambition was to develop instruments and a system that could be used in both of the two corps of public service targeted by the project.

The major changes introduced by the March 2019 legislation pose yet another challenge to the project, since the marked weakening of centralised, uniform HRM regulation and oversight clearly bring into question the applicability of many HRM instruments. Nevertheless, as yet it is impossible to identify which, if any, specific dilemmas will need to be resolved.

While the constantly changing legal environment and organisational reshuffles have not fundamentally endangered the project's intervention logic, they have, however, resulted in more minor modifications. These have resulted in the slowing down of the implementation process. The member of the project team illustrates this difficulty with the following example: 'One output of the projects that had already been delivered was the set of new post-secondary training programmes (OKJ) in public administration and policing. However, the entire system of vocational training is in the process of transformation. It may easily be the case that they will need to be re-adjusted to new conditionalities.'

The fluid context in which the project began, and the necessary adjustments to its technical content have, understandably, had an effect on core tasks of project management. As the project coordinator puts it, 'We are lucky that the project's launch was so delayed by various policy and organisational changes that by the time the grant agreement was submitted, the re-shuffles were complete. Consequently, there was no need to relaunch lengthy modification procedures with the Managing Authority.'

On several occasions during the course of the project's implementation, activities had to be re-scheduled. The project has failed to achieve a number of milestones that were set before the end of 2018. Moreover, the KSZDR system was initially supposed to start in January 2019. Reasons for these delays include a lack of capacity on the part of the project beneficiary organisation (which could not begin the project on its own) and a delay in the completion of the grant agreement (which was due to a systemic slowdown in the operation of the PADOP Managing Authority). The Ministry of Interior was not able to pre-finance the project, so public procurements could not begin prior to the financing being made available. In response to this problem, project managers tried to launch so-called 'conditional public procurement procedures'; however, the scope and amount of these procurements were inevitably limited. This resulted in cascading problems, such as the project's limited ability to hire suitable people and involve the necessary partners.

However, there were systemic causes, related to the general EU funds management, behind the delays too. Beforehand, in the previous programming period a short technical specification was a sufficient basis for the agreement of a grant. Subsequently, however, this practice was changed in order to ensure that only solid grant agreements were made. As a result, the required technical specifications became longer and more detailed (sometimes as many as 500 pages where previously they may have been 20 pages long). This requirement caused delays to contracting. In addition, public procurement rules frequently posed unrealistic requirements. The applicable

rule stipulates a deadline of 30 days during which a public procurement contract must be concluded. In reality, the time necessary to do this can be up to 320 days. As the project coordinator puts it, 'Since these systemic problems were already known, the top management tended to accept the delays.'

At the time of writing, a state-of-the-art promotion system and a special training/mentoring system for gifted public servants have already been created. Post-secondary vocational training programmes, including training materials, have been created and certified. The public procurement procedures necessary for the implementation of the KSZDR system have been launched. But given the fact that none of the project's outputs have yet been put to use in real life, too early at this stage to talk about direct results.

Despite the delays and difficulties described earlier, progress has been made (Figure 1). The HRM IT system, which includes the HRM Knowledge Portal for providing HR managers and administrators with methodological support, as well as TARTINFOR, KÖZSZOLGÁLLÁS for the recruitment purposes and the KSZDR as data warehouse and management information system – are underway, as are public procurement procedures. As the project coordinator explains, 'the systems do exist on paper; there are detailed technical specifications for them'. According to her, 'this amounts to a progress level of approximately 5%. However, as soon as the contracts are concluded, actual technical implementation will start immediately, meaning much a greater progress level of 30-40%. What remains after that is the procurement of hardware and testing of the new systems.'

Figure 2. Research reports and methodology documents produced during the project



Source: Author's own photo

Conclusion: results, lessons learnt and the role of ESF financial support for improving the HR management in the public service

Main results

Despite all the difficulties encountered, the project's owners are optimistic and expect a well-operating multi-functional HRM toolkit to be created by the end of the project. In particular, the KSZDR system – based on, and integrating data from, existing data systems (currently operating on paper, or through Excel files) – will be able to provide real-time data and analytical results on HRM trends of Hungary's civil service. According to one expert, 'if the KSZDR system had

been operating at the time of the 2019 civil service reform, it would not be the same as it is now.' The HRM methods developed strongly support the selection/promotion processes and related HRM decisions.

In terms of the broader societal impacts expected, the project coordinator highlights two elements. First, 'the most important result is that the project will contribute to the attraction young people to work in public services'. Moreover, she adds, 'the political leadership will be able to base their decisions on reliable, factual information.' Furthermore, the project coordinator hopes that 'the project will smooth out HRM processes in the public services, which will make a difference even for individual employees.' Indeed, the head of the project team sums up the project by saying that 'the main result of the project is that, within a constantly changing and chaotic strategic environment, it brings a sense of stability to the personnel within the public services.'

Lessons learnt

The first important moral derived from the project's implementation so far is that one has to prepare for changes in the project environment. In other words, the instruments, activities or components of the project that serve a particular goal should be specified in a flexible way, in order to make them adaptable to changes in the legal or institutional context. Over recent years, legal and structural changes have been especially frequent. But although the three main segments of public service have diverged in terms of their HRM frameworks, the systems to be developed should prepare to encompass all relevant information relating to staffing in and by public services (irrespective of their legal status).

The project's second lesson is that it conveys great benefits to involve stakeholders. Multiple interviewees working in various roles in the project highlighted the importance of involving individual stakeholders and enabling inter-organisational cooperation to ensure successful implementation at diverse phases during the course of the project. Given the fact that these companies have the deepest technical understanding of the issues involved and will oversee the actual operation of the systems being developed, their inclusion was crucial.

The commitment of the project's organisational leadership, the scientifically grounded nature of the project components, and the involvement of experts who were already experienced and working in the area concerned, are all preconditions for the project's feasibility. In addition to their contribution to technical quality, the inclusion of experts has increased the acceptance of the project among the target groups, whose interests and world views are thus represented in the project.

The role of ESF funding

Interviewees agreed that without the benefit of EU funding, the project was unlikely to have been implemented – or, at least, not with its current size and scope. ESF support, to an extent, made a difference by enabling to base the project on the cooperation of a relatively broad array of academics and practitioners, rather than just on internal competencies of ministry officials. In addition, Hungarian public policy making in general and civil service policy in particular, has traditionally been characterised by large, sudden and unexpected shifts in policy that render earlier systems, as well as organisational or physical infrastructure, obsolete. In this case, the fact that the project was based on ESF funding provided a strong external constraint against this. In response to the 2018/2019 civil service changes, the project owners opted for a 'toolkit' approach, allowing organisational actors to pick and use tools at their discretion. In a sense, these two features – namely, the commitment to continue with the project irrespective of

domestic policy changes, and the project owners' decision to choose a 'toolkit' approach – may result in the increased sustainability of the project's results.

The KSZDR database, for example, can provide meaningful information for HRM policy making, while recruitment and promotion techniques with detailed methodology can serve the actual needs of employers, even if they not stipulated uniformly by legally binding regulations. The stakeholders also highlighted other benefits they had received by carrying out this ESF-funded project, such as learning what this type of project approach means and how to handle it, as well as gathering together experts from different fields and sectors, both inside and outside of public administration, to achieve a shared objective. As Malét-Szabó puts it: 'the project creates an opportunity to open gates, and to think and solve problems together'.

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