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Revisiting Public Administration education in Central and Eastern Europe: From establishing the discipline to facing marginalization

Revisión de la educación en Administración pública en Europa Central y Oriental: desde el establecimiento de la disciplina hasta la marginación

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: This article revisits the development of public administration (PA) education in the post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), tracing its evolution from disciplinary establishment after 1989 to its current challenges of marginalization and declining attractiveness.

Methodology: Drawing on a historical institutionalist perspective, the study examines how pre-communist administrative traditions, communist legacies, and post-communist reforms have jointly shaped the content, institutional positioning, and identity of PA education. The analysis covers PA programs in eleven Central European post-communist countries that became members of the European Union (EU) in three waves, notably the historic 2004 enlargement when 8 CEE countries join (Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia), followed by Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, and Croatia in 2013. The paper combines desk research, curriculum analyses from existing comparative datasets, and an original overview of programs accredited by the European Association for Public Administration Accreditation (EAPAA). **Results:** The findings demonstrate persistent diversity and fragmentation in PA education, with strong legalistic orientations remaining dominant despite gradual moves toward managerial and governance-based approaches. The paper further highlights growing tensions between internationalization and local

relevance, as well as between academic incentives and practical administrative needs. **Conclusions:** The article concludes that no unified PA identity has emerged in the region; instead, PA education in CEE reflects multiple, path-dependent trajectories shaped by historical legacies, external pressures, and contemporary political developments. Moreover, in recent years demographic decline, reduced prestige of the civil service, and democratic backsliding have exacerbated declining student demand that all together threaten PA programs sustainability.

KEYWORDS

Central and Eastern Europe; public administration education; post-communist countries; education; public administration; comparative.

RESUMEN

Objetivos: este artículo revisa el desarrollo de la educación en administración pública (AP) en los países poscomunistas de Europa Central y Oriental (ECO), trazando su evolución desde el establecimiento disciplinario después de 1989 hasta sus retos actuales de marginación y pérdida de atractivo. **Metodología:** partiendo de una perspectiva institucionalista histórica, el estudio examina cómo las tradiciones administrativas precomunistas, el legado comunista y las reformas postcomunistas han configurado conjuntamente el contenido, el posicionamiento institucional y la identidad de la educación en AP. El análisis abarca los programas de licenciatura y maestría en once países poscomunistas de Europa Central que se convirtieron en miembros de la Unión Europea (UE) en tres oleadas, en particular la histórica ampliación de 2004, cuando se incorporaron ocho países de la ECE (Chequia, Estonia, Hungría, Letonia, Lituania, Polonia, Eslovaquia y Eslovenia), seguidos de Bulgaria y Rumanía en 2007, y Croacia en 2013. El artículo combina la investigación documental, los análisis curriculares de los conjuntos de datos comparativos existentes y una visión general original de los programas acreditados por la Asociación Europea para la Acreditación de la Administración Pública (EAPAA). **Resultados:** las conclusiones demuestran la persistente diversidad y fragmentación de la educación en administración pública, con una fuerte orientación legalista que sigue predominando a pesar de los graduales avances hacia enfoques basados en la gestión y la gobernanza. El artículo destaca además las crecientes tensiones entre la internacionalización y la relevancia local, así como entre los incentivos académicos y las necesidades administrativas prácticas. **Conclusiones:** el artículo concluye que no ha surgido una identidad unificada de la administración pública en la región; en cambio, la educación en administración pública en Europa Central y Oriental refleja trayectorias múltiples y dependientes del camino recorrido, moldeadas por el legado histórico, las presiones externas y los acontecimientos políticos contemporáneos. Además, en los últimos años, el declive demográfico, la pérdida de prestigio de la función pública y el retroceso democrático han agravado la disminución de la demanda de estudiantes, lo que en conjunto amenaza la sostenibilidad de los programas de administración pública.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Europa Central y Oriental; formación en Administración pública; países postcomunistas; educación; Administración pública; comparativa.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The academic field of public administration (PA) education is a widely discussed issue, studied not only in individual states but also in a wider comparative setting (Pal & Clark, 2016; Staronová & Gajduscek, 2016; Reichard & Schröter, 2018; Salazar Morales *et al.*, 2025). Most of the work focusing on the European

continent focuses on curricula analysis (Hajnal, 2003; Staronová & Gajduschek, 2016), Europeanization (Randma-Liiv & Connaughton, 2005; Verheijen & Connaughton, 2003; Brans & Coenen, 2016) or interpretations of global convergence/divergence (Pal & Clark, 2016; Salazar Morales *et al.*, 2025).

The ambition of the present paper is twofold, descriptive and explanatory, drawing on Babbie's widely used terminology (Babbie, 2020, pp. 90-93). In line with the purpose of this special issue, we aim to review the most relevant aspects of the current state of public administration education (PAE) in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region, which largely overlaps with the group of Eurasian post-communist countries. We intend to explore a puzzling question related to the fundamental character of public administration (PA) education in this region. In fact, our research question asks if and why the conventional law-based disciplinary approach persists or if it has transformed and moved towards more multidisciplinary and managerial approaches? Given the scope of the paper, it is not possible to cover all such countries, including the Central Asian and Caucasian states and most European states of the Soviet Union or most countries of the former Yugoslavia. Instead, the analysis focuses on the 11 CEE countries that have joined the European Union: Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. The authors have professional experience in most of these countries and have previously conducted research on PAE in many of them. Methodologically, the paper relies primarily on desk research on public administration education.

We also attempt to explain the current state of PAE in the region, drawing on the historical institutionalist approach.¹ We argue that path dependency has played a crucial role in forming the present PAE setting in the region, even though discontinuity is a continuous feature of the region. Discontinuities or –using the terminology of historical institutionalism– critical junctions may be identified at roughly three points over the past hundred-plus years. Around the end of World War I. Most countries that were previously part of a larger empire (typically the Russian or Habsburg Monarchy) became independent and could build their own governments. At the end of the Second World War, these countries fell under Soviet control and were forced to adopt communist rule. Around 1990, the countries had again the chance to independently shape their own fate and administrative system. Whereas the second junction point enforced an extreme level of uniformity in governance, public administration, including the civil service, the first and third junction points offered, at least theoretically, countries the opportunity to choose their own path.

In the first part, we provide a historical overview that –we believe– is necessary to understand the current state of PAE, especially in terms of the composition of the curriculum. It is then followed by an overview of the development of PA education. After that, the current status of PA education in CEE will be examined.

2. THE HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF PA EDUCATION IN THE CEE REGION

Public administration scholars have long emphasized the importance of institutional theory, particularly historical legacies, for understanding public administration and administrative changes generally (e.g., Olsson, 2020; Peters, 2021; 2019; Painter & Peters, 2010) and specifically in Central and Eastern Europe (e.g., Meyer-Sahling, 2009). There is, however, also increasing interest in using institutional theory and historical legacies to reflect on public administration education. In fact, historical legacies may help explain several features of public administration education after the regime change although at the same time several authors have pointed out that there is a substantial lack of uniformity among European countries (Connaughton & Verheijen, 2000; Randma-Liiv & Connaughton, 2005; Meyer-Sahling, 2009). Simply, different pre-communism state traditions may lead to various identities and different approaches to the disciplinary, multidisciplinary, or interdisciplinary character of the study of public administration.

The history of PA as a practice and PA as an education is somewhat specific in the CEE region due to a long-standing autocratic tradition and the general experience of communism, issues that we will discuss in more detail below that have overcome historical legacies and cultural ruptures. CEE countries share some similarities that stem from a shared history, most importantly the communist past with its enforced uniformity, especially regarding constitutional and governmental arrangements as well as the research and higher education system. Consequently, exploring PA programs in CEE demands that attention be paid to both sides of the coin –the field and its environment. Relentless changes in the context, in the state and public

¹ Historical institutionalism is applied to PA most influentially by Guy Peters (2019) but also Meyer-Sahling (2009); Staronová & Gajduschek (2016).

administration reforms, as well as in the higher education system, reveal continuous adaptation in search of their identity.

Although Western scholars often focus solely on the communist period in their commentary on CEE countries, a deeper understanding of the region requires consideration of its longer historical trajectory. The strong legal orientation of public administration programs can be traced to pre-war traditions in both Germanic-oriented and Napoleonic-oriented administrative systems, where legal subjects dominated generalist training. Communism was a major historical shock that interrupted the region's earlier Western orientation in governance and public administration. At the same time, it is argued that communism may also be interpreted as an extreme manifestation of Central Europe's long-standing autocratic traditions (Schöpflin, 2018).

2.1. Pre-communist era

From the mid-1800s onwards, most countries in the region followed the continental development path: either the Germanic or Napoleonic administrative model (Painter & Peters, 2010; Kuhlmann *et al.*, 2025). This was largely dependent on which empire they belonged to, primarily the Russian, with its Napoleonic model-orientation or the Habsburg, with the Germanic model-orientation. This approach was almost exclusively composed of public law, which remained dominant until the post-communist period.

Before communism, academic life in the region was also closely connected to Western European and global academia. Many scholars studied and/or taught abroad, and proficiency in foreign languages was widespread.

2.2. Communist era (1940/5/8 – 1989)

Soviet occupation reoriented these countries eastwards, accompanied by the characteristic features of Byzantine-style governance and social organisation. The communist turn severed these ties and introduced the Soviet model of strict separation between university teaching and academic research. Universities were tasked exclusively with instruction, whereas research was concentrated within the Academies of Sciences. The Academies operated specialised institutes –e.g., in physics or chemistry or law– but many social sciences, such as political science or sociology, were dismissed as “bourgeois pseudo-sciences”. Consequently, no corresponding institutes were established. This structural divide between research and education persisted after 1990, and universities required years, sometimes decades, to rebuild research capacity and reintegrate teaching and research.

During the communist era PA occupied a peculiar position: it was a very marginal, almost non-existent university discipline (Jenei & Mike, 2008; Gajduschek, 2007). Communist ideology viewed state bureaucracy in capitalist countries as a tool of oppression and an “alienated” social stratum. Lenin famously argued that the majority of state functions could be reduced to simple tasks –e.g., registration, filing, checking– potentially performed by every literate person, such as washerwomen (Lenin & Chretien, 2015, Ch. III). The Marxist theory of labor division into productive and nonproductive spheres held that administration fell into the latter, which was not the focus of the communist government. As a result, public administration was deemed unnecessary as an academic discipline. In practice, CEE countries did not have specialized PA education programs in the conventional understanding until the fall of communism in the 1990s. The Baltic countries –Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania– became part of the Soviet Union in 1940 but did not have any type of PA education until they regained their independence in the 1990s (Sarapuu & Saarniit, 2020).

In CEE countries, which were formally independent yet practised Soviet-type communism, PA education was developed after the post-Stalinist liberalizations in the late 1950s. One of the first PA programs was established as early as 1956 in the former Yugoslavia (Ljubljana), where a College of Public Administration was established (Stare & Vintar, 2008). It began offering a two-year programme in 1957, followed by Poland where in the 1960s 3-year programmes of Professional Administrative Studies (Polish abbreviation ZSA) were created at certain Law Faculties (Mikulowski, 2008). These programmes were organised exclusively as weekend sessions (every two weeks) and were directed toward the communist party apparatus, police and security services, the army, public administration, and enterprise officials occupying managerial positions with no formal higher education qualifications. In Hungary, the first institution offering full-time education and an equivalent of a bachelor's degree in public administration was developed in 1978 out of a central training institute for municipal officials (Gajduschek & Hajnal, 2022).

These very early institutions had several issues in common. First, these programs were incorporated directly into the law faculties, thus instituting the strong subordination of public administration studies into legal studies or a single discipline (PA) faculty² that continues to be offered today by German technical colleges of public administration (Fachhochschulen). This trend is particularly observed in the former Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and the former Yugoslavia, where the early PA programs concentrated on legal issues, focusing on public law, such as administrative and financial law (Hajnal, 2003; Kopríc, 2013; Marcetic *et al.*, 2013; Staronová & Gajduscek, 2016).³ Second, many of these programs were at the bachelor level and mostly provided education and practical training for civil servants against the backdrop of the single-party political system, planned economy, and state ownership.

In the 1980s, yet another type of early PA programs at economic faculties appeared in the former Czechoslovakia with a focus on the “economics of non-productive services”, including public administration, public utilities, and human services (i.e., schools and hospitals) (Staronová & Gajduscek, 2016; Placek *et al.*, 2025), which provided master level equivalents. It was exactly these sub-disciplines that were later transformed into some of the first “true” PA programs with an interdisciplinary character.

2.3. Post-Communist Era

After the fall of communism in 1990, the transition created a critical juncture, allowing and somewhat necessitating deviation from earlier trajectories. First, the introduction of the curricula and their content was largely dependent on the individuals leading the work and often required explaining what public administration as a scholarly field was conceived of (Randma-Liiv & Connaughton, 2005). Only the processes of Europeanization of the public administration as a profession strengthened and broadened both the professional and academic communities around public administration, creating a momentum for change in PA as an academic discipline.

In the democratic transition, the biggest question for these programs was whether higher education in PA represented a separate field of study or just a sub-field of law or economics. The fight for ‘independence’ has defined the profile of PA programs; it remains an issue in several CEE countries today. This era can therefore be best described as the search for a PA identity within an institutionalized dual structure, i.e., PA as a subfield of law or economy and PA as an interdisciplinary field.

The difficulty in establishing public administration as a separate field stemmed from the peculiarities of the public sector: the supremacy of public law over public administration. The renewed emphasis on the rule of law (or rather the German concept of Rechtsstaat) reinforced the prominence of legal education, which is visible through an examination of the career paths of top civil servants from selected countries, and which suggests that most of them still have a legal education (Rybář & Podmanik, 2020; Krajnák *et al.*, 2020). This meant that the traditional law faculties became dominant and offered law-based PA programs emphasizing administrative and constitutional law. In this vision of PA education the problem-solving process is reduced to a simple issuing and implementing of rules and regulations. Staronová & Gajduscek (2016) pointed out that this view is quite dominant among MPA programs.

At the same time, during the 1990s, international organisations (e.g., World Bank, IMF, SIGMA/OECD) strongly promoted NPM-inspired reforms, including the managerial approach to public administration education. In the early 2000s, however, newer PA programs were established that were based on interdisciplinary and managerial principles, predominantly at new social science faculties that emerged after the fall of communism, emphasizing governance, strategic planning, policy analysis and other problem-solving aspects. In these cases, the PA programs were established as a completely new discipline, often supported by international partnerships and support. The Network of Institutes and Schools of Public Administration in Central and Eastern Europe (NISPACEe), could also assist programs in interested universities to form adequate PA programs, as will be discussed later. Higher education in general and PA education utilized a number of horizontal mechanisms to increase Europeanization, such as managing and recognizing student and staff mobility,

² During communism a proliferation of *singlediscipline universities* (e.g., economics, engineering) could be observed. After the transition, these institutions were often reorganised into multifaculty universities, sometimes hastily, which typically did not improve, frequently damaged educational quality, as these universities were top schools in the field, similarly to the French grand écoles.

³ Obviously, the legal focus was not due to the appreciation of the rule of law. Law, in this context, functions as a generalized order from the party-governmental center. Law is the instrument of implementation.

networks and projects for strengthening links of the PA scholarly community (Randma-Liiv & Connaughton, 2005; Verheijen & Connaughton, 2003).

The Bologna Process, introduced at the end of the 1990s and formally institutionalized through the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) brought about major changes in European higher education, including PA programs. Its most important features include the introduction of a three-stage degree structure, the establishment of a system of comparable degrees and transferable credits (ECTS), and the development of quality assurance frameworks. The Bologna reforms required a clear distinction between bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs, replacing the earlier dual structure of socialist tertiary education, which consisted of two perfectly independent and closed paths: "college degrees" (typically three years) and "university degrees" (typically five years). The Bologna framework increased flexibility and opened new educational and career pathways by facilitating movement across academic fields. At the same time, it obliged universities to design master's curricula that did not merely duplicate bachelor-level content, while still accommodating students from diverse disciplinary backgrounds by providing foundational knowledge traditionally covered in the early years of the previous system.

ECTS generally enables the mutual recognition of diplomas and study periods among EU member states, albeit with certain limitations, particularly in fields such as public administration. Based on the ECTS framework, universities within the EU can establish joint degree programs, in which a single diploma is awarded jointly by two or more institutions, for example, a CEE university and a Western European partner. The system also facilitates student mobility, allowing students to complete part of their studies (one or more semesters) at another institution, with credits earned abroad recognized by their home university. Such mobility has become widespread through the Erasmus Programme of the European Union, which supports participating students by waiving tuition fees at host institutions.

It is worth noting that, unlike in the United States and several Western countries, public universities in the CEE region are generally considered of higher quality than private ones. The ease of establishing private institutions in the post-transition period encouraged some profit-oriented providers to minimise costs at the expense of educational quality. For instance, these institutions rely mostly on instructors on a contractual basis (e.g., hiring attorneys, judges to deliver lectures as a part-time activity), rather than having full-time research staff.

2.4. Illiberalism⁴

To understand higher education in the PA today, it is essential to consider the broader political transformation that is taking place in some of the countries, notably Hungary since the 2010 elections, Poland under President Kaczynszky (2005-2010), Czechia headed by Babiš as Prime Minister (2017-2021 and from 2025), and recently Slovakia, since the 2023 elections. Although it is premature to discuss its full effects on PA education, Hungary provides the best case study with the longest reign of illiberal and authoritarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán since 2010.

Among the most radical effects of illiberalism on PA education was documented in Hungary, which entered yet another completely different path with the establishment of a state-based National University of Public Service (NUPS) in 2012, by integrating the National Military Academy, the National Police Academy and the former Faculty of Public Administration from Corvinus University of Budapest. The law establishing NUPS removed it from the institutional framework of regular higher education institutions and put it directly under the supervisory regime of the Ministry of Public Administration and Justice, which does not have to go through the regular process of institutional accreditation performed by the independent higher education accreditation body. Hajnal (2014) rightly notes that the idea of merging civilian and military/police education into a single higher education institution with a monopoly over civil service education was highly unusual from an international perspective. However, it fits the institutional reforms of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to create a "strong state" with almost unlimited control over various sectors.

⁴ By illiberalism we mean a political and governmental arrangement with –at least the formal– presence of major democratic attributes (most importantly the presence of elections) but lacks major elements of the rule of law. Basic individual rights and especially minority rights may be –occasionally or systematically– limited or broken. From an institutional point of view, judicial review (both of executive rule-making and administrative adjudication) is restrained or missing. More generally, the system of checks and balances is compromised, resulting in the executive's dominance. For an early conceptualization of the phenomenon in the region see: Grzegorz Ekiert (2012); a recent overview: Michael Bauer (2025).

At the same time, the law practically abolished the right of any other university to issue the MPA degree, which was previously offered by most universities' law faculties, and so the state institution became a monopoly for the education of civil servants. Starting in 2019, the Central European University, the most prestigious international university of the region offering US accredited PA programs (Staronová & Gajduschek, 2016), in terms of international rankings in political science and related fields was forced out of the country as Hungary refused to sign an agreement allowing it to operate. This action, seen as targeting the institution founded by George Soros and a blow to academic freedom, led to the closure of most teaching activities in Budapest. The European Court of Justice later ruled that Hungary's actions breached EU law. The move was widely condemned as an attack on academic freedom and an attempt to silence critical voices in Hungary.

TABLE 1. PATH DEPENDENCY – MAJOR PERIODS IN THE HISTORY OF CEE COUNTRIES AND RELATED GOVERNMENTAL AND EDUCATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Period	Political system	System of tertiary education
Before WWI	Mostly authoritarian, mostly as part of a larger empire (Russian, Habsburg), following either the Napoleonic (Russian) or Germanic model, conveyed and somewhat distorted by the occupying power. Both models favour lawyers in generalist / managerial PA positions.	Similar to, though somewhat lagged behind the Western arrangement.
After WWI	Most countries become independent and can build their own system of government and a PAE system adequate for the needs of governance.	Similar to, though somewhat lagged behind the Western arrangement.
After WWII	Communist system. PA is considered as an organization responsible for directly implementing government (that is ultimately communist party) decisions. Civil service is not acknowledged as a "profession"; PA is not recognised as a discipline, nor as a "techne" (a specific set of practical knowledge and skills).	PA is typically not accepted as a field of scholarly discipline or as a field of university education/degrees. A strict institutional separation of research and university education.
After 1990	Transition from the communist system. A challenging period without clear directions and tested solutions at the beginning. A new system of democracy and the rule of law, in which a PA –mostly inherited from the communist regime– has to function. PA identity is questioned. Various pressures: internal: legal tradition; external: managerial mainstream.	The place of PAE is in question, theoretically and practically (growing out of law or economics schools or an independent PA identity). Challenge from EU accession: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Europeanization of the curriculum. • The Bologna process. • Restructuring education BA–MA –PhD. • Opportunities for European cooperation.
From 2010+	Illiberal governmental arrangement with great differences among countries. Some general features: cutback of rule of law institution; an increasing power of government within society, the executive within government, the political top (around one person) in the executive. Diminishing role of professional civil service, especially in policy-making. Professional career is limited.	Typically no change in the system of tertiary education.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

3. METHODOLOGY

In this paper we combine desk research, university programme documents and data analysis from existing datasets on PA programs in 11 CEE countries that have entered the European Union, notably Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

Desk research is used to obtain information on the historical development of public administration fields, primarily through scientific articles. We also relied on scholarly articles on PA programs and their curricula, as well as relevant information. The publications that we found most relevant (among others for their comparative character) are summarized in table 2. We relied mostly on these items, as well as on our own research and information from our personal networks (sometimes critically called “anecdotal evidence”).

In most of the publications, the unit of analysis was the PA program. In addition to these, narrative sources from individual cases (unit of analysis = country) were utilized, notably Czechia (Maly *et al.*, 2025; Placek *et al.*, 2025), Estonia (Sarapuu & Saarniit, 2020), Hungary (Gellén, 2014; Hajnal, 2016), Poland (Mikulowski, 2008), Romania (Hintea *et al.*, 2006), Slovenia (Stare & Vintar, 2008).

TABLE 2. LITERATURE AND COMPARATIVE DATA USED IN THIS STUDY

Authors (date)	Countries	Dataset (N)
Hajnal (2003)	22 EU countries (12 post-communist: Bul, Cze, Est, Hu, Lat, Lith, Mold, Pol, Ro, Yug, Sk, Ukr)	191 PA programs
Nemec <i>et al.</i> (2012)	Cze, Pol, Sk	76 PA programs
Kopric (2013)	6 Yugoslav countries (BiH, Cro, Mac, Mon, Slo, Serb)	70 PA programs
Marcetic <i>et al.</i> (2013)	12 post-communist (6 EU CEE: Bul, Cze, Hu, Pol, Ro, Sk, Slv + 6 former Yu: BiH, Cro, Kos, Mac, Mon, Ser)	114 PA programs
Hajnal (2014)	10 EU countries (5 CEE: Cze, Hu, Ro, Sk, Slv, Ukr)	13 expert surveys
Staronová & Gajduscek (2016)	5 CEE (Est, Cze, Sk, Hu, Slv)	53 PA programs curricula + 26 expert surveys
Reichard & Schröter (2018)	Executive MPA programs. Most West European, contrasted with the Polish case	10 countries, programs as examples
OECD (2017)	National Schools of Government, not only EU countries	From CEE Poland only
Pevcin <i>et al.</i> (2019)	11 EU CEE countries (Bul, Cro, Cze, Est, Hu, Lat, Lith, Pol, Ro, Sk, Slv)	11 expert surveys
Jahoda <i>et al.</i> (2022)	Cze, Sk	Expert survey
Gajduscek & Hajnal (2022)	11 EU CEE countries (Bul, Cro, Cze, Est, Hu, Lat, Lith, Pol, Ro, Sk, Slv)	Summary of existing research

Note: Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Bulgaria (Bul), Czechia (Cze), Croatia (Cro), Estonia (Est), Hungary (Hu), Kosovo (Kos), Latvia (Lat), Lithuania (Lith), Macedonia (Mac), Mouldova (Mould), Montenegro (Mon), Poland (Pol), Romania (Ro), Serbia (Ser), Slovakia (Sk), Slovenia (Slv), Ukraine (Ukr).

Source: Prepared by the authors.

The relevance of curricular composition points well over the PAE itself. It is generally considered as an indicator of PA identity in a given country. Besides the political culture (especially that of the elite) and governmental arrangement, PAE is also influenced by the system of education. For this reason, we also review the system of tertiary education in the region. These two aspects (government and education) and their impact on PAE will be discussed below. In the next major section of the paper, we provide an overview of important

aspects of PAE in the region. In that regard, aspects that are usually considered relevant not only by academics but also by practitioners may be the following.⁵

- Curricula.
- Method of teaching, the didactic approach applied.
- Internationalization.
- Adequacy to the job market to PA practical needs and the demand for PAE.⁶

We will emphasize differences from the mainstream of PAE. Mainstream here is meant mostly the standards set up by the PAE in the US, and most Western countries.

PAE for the purpose of this paper includes bachelor's and master's programs in "Public Administration", "Public Policy", "Public Management" and "Public Affairs".

In the second step, we aimed to identify programs that are accredited by EAPAA. This was based on filtering from all of the accredited programs for CEE countries that have entered the EU. The analysis covers 16 programs in 7 CEE countries (see table 3) and it excludes accredited programs from non-EU countries, namely in Kazakhstan and Russia.

4. MAIN FEATURES OF PA EDUCATION IN CEE – IDENTIFYING (DIS-)SIMILARITIES

4.1. Content and Curricula: strong legal and technical focus diminishing, though still present

Curriculum composition is frequently seen as an indicator of public administration identity. Education may be influenced by public administration practice, on one hand, and academic approaches, on the other. Thus, the disciplinary balance is assumed to reflect how experts –both practitioners and scholars– understand the goals of government and the appropriate means to achieve them which is the basic understanding of public administration identity.

Hajnal's (2003) seminal study analysed the presence of eight disciplinary fields in roughly 200 public administration programmes across 22 European countries. Cluster analysis produced three groups that may be interpreted as educational but also as an indication of general administrative identity types. Namely, the *corporate*, the *public*, and the *legal clusters*.

- The *legal cluster* was marked by the dominance of legal subjects, including legal regulations governing public finance and human resource management.
- The *corporate cluster* emphasised generic management topics.
- The *public cluster* highlighted political science and socialscience approaches.

Hajnal's clusters broadly correspond to the three administrative traditions identified by Painter & Peters (2010) and Kickert (2008): AngloAmerican, Napoleonic, and Germanic.

CEE countries were spread largely between the *legal* and *corporate* clusters. Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Yugoslavia belonged to the former, while Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovakia belonged to the latter.

An inventory undertaken by Staronová & Gajduschek (2016) analyzed curricula of all PA programs in Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Slovakia, and Slovenia. It indicates that since Hajnal's (2003) categorization the development of PA programs has stimulated a gradual reaction to the importance of interdisciplinarity, management and Europeanization by increasingly incorporating comparative, analytical and methodological courses into curricula. Their main findings are presented in table 3.

⁵ For instance the European Association for Public Administration Accreditation sets up standards on 16 fields, of which we will address eight. We do not address issues that may be relevant for accreditation (e.g. admission and assessment of students, diversity, services) but less relevant for scholarly purposes or that cannot be reasonably generalized.

⁶ In a previous study (Staronová & Gajduschek, 2016), based on a comprehensive data-collection exercise, we analysed the composition of the faculties in great detail, addressing professional background, level of education, foreign experience/origin, practical experience (more extensively than any other paper known by us), but we cannot discuss this issue here. Our impression is that the characteristics discussed there remained relatively constant.

TABLE 3. PROPORTION (%) OF VARIOUS DISCIPLINES IN CURRICULA

	Law	Pol. Sci.	Economy Finance	Management	Policy analysis & methodology	Policy fields	Other
Czech Republic	21 %	15 %	21 %	10 %	12 %	6 %	14 %
Slovakia	24 %	21 %	19 %	18 %	10 %	4 %	21 %
Estonia	5 %	25 %	7 %	11 %	22 %	6 %	14 %
Hungary	26 %	20 %	13 %	16 %	7 %	0 %	15 %
Slovenia	11 %	50 %	6 %	0 %	0 %	0 %	11 %

Source: Staronová & Gajduscek (2016, p. 262).

The region –especially when contrasted with the US– remains characterised by a strong legal and technical orientation. The above-mentioned research found that in three out of five East Central European countries examined, legal subjects accounted for over 20 % of public administration curricula, while specialised public administration schools devoted around 40 % of coursework to legal topics (Staronová & Gajduscek, 2016). Kopic (2013) observed similar patterns (18-40 %) in SouthEastern Europe. Pevcin *et al.* (2019) in their qualitative analysis of 11 East Central European countries also reach a similar conclusion. Nemec *et al.* (2012) searched for managerial courses in the curricula of existing PA programmes and found only limited offerings (even in Czechia where PA programs arose from Economic faculties). This indicates that such curricula are supply rather than demand driven. Overall, most researchers agree that while the proportion of legal subjects has gradually declined in the past decades, it remains substantial.

In sum, CEE countries, similarly to other non-Western countries (Knox & Orazgaliyev, 2025; Salazar Morales *et al.*, 2025), continue to emphasise technical legal subjects in PA curricula. An outlier in this regard is Estonia where PA programs have a non-legal character of the curricula and a higher share of analytical, planning and strategic courses.

4.2. Curricula: Between-country and within-country differences

After 1990, change occurred gradually, leading to *divergence* in the disciplinary composition, reflecting public administration identity. For the first decade, trajectories depended heavily on how public administration and the civil service were positioned institutionally during the communist regime. Most public administration programmes were established from scratch in the 1990s. Many universities –especially new ones– created public administration programmes within law faculties, often relying heavily on parttime legal practitioners, which kept costs low. Obviously, such programmes were overwhelmingly legalistic. Other programmes emerged from economics faculties, reflecting managerial and financial emphases. In such cases (e.g. Czechia), the programs that originate from Economics Universities have limited or no law courses.

Where the autonomy of public administration was accepted or even institutionalised (e.g., in the form of specialised scholarly journals, perhaps educational units) during late communism, the legal model remained strong after the collapse of the system. Where public administration had no distinct tradition, managerial approaches –aligned with NPM and encouraged by international organisations– gained stronger influence (Pevcin *et al.*, 2019; Gajduscek & Hajnal, 2022).

In subsequent years, countries' longer-term administrative traditions regained importance. Former Habsburg countries typically gravitated towards the Germanic model, while others, such as Poland and Romania, exhibited features of the Napoleonic tradition. Since these traditions historically emphasised law, their revival partly explains why Hajnal (2003) could not identify a “public” cluster in the region at the time. However, in a follow-up study based on expert interviews, Hajnal (2014) found that several countries previously classified as ‘legalistic’ shifted towards the other categories, including the ‘public’ category, as the French administrative sciences extensively embraced sociology and political science, after WW2.

The origin of a programme within a specific faculty remains a strong determinant of its curricular profile. This, however, is gradually changing with the new admissions to the faculty as well as external pressures, the impact of other programs or accreditation requirements.

4.3. Method of instruction

We cannot rely up-to-date, valid, and generalizable scholarly information regarding the methodology of teaching. In our previous study that analysed all PA programs in five countries, we found that frontal teaching was still dominant. Partly this stems from the relative dominance of legal content within the curriculum. The classical style, still greatly present, of education in this field is still lecturing –to be somewhat sarcastic but still quite realistic– in a large room, for hundreds of students, by a prestigious, typically old, and boring professor. Seminars of a few dozen students accompany these lectures, where readings are discussed or judicial cases interpreted.

Education may transfer elements of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Frontal education may be adequate for knowledge transfer and less for the other two fields. It seems that the generally applied method of instruction and the focus of knowledge-transfer mutually reinforce one another.

This arrangement, however, may be challenged from several angles. First, it is the instructors' general experience at the universities that students are unable to focus on long lectures; actually, 10-15 minutes of lecturing seems to be the maximum.⁷ As more and more universities implement systems that allow students to evaluate instructors, and these results may be included in the overall evaluation system, instructors are encouraged to seek other strategies. This is most typical at prestigious universities. More interactive methods, including case studies, individual problem solution, group work etc. are more and more widely used. These methods may be imported from international experience (from Western Universities, both by the students and instructors). Originally, civil service training organized by international donor programs was crucial to introduce these techniques into the region. (Gajduschek & Hajnal, 2003).

Our impression is, although without a substantial, systematic scholarly evidence, that –while the teaching method is still relatively frontal– interactive training techniques are spreading and the difference from the mainstream is decreasing.

4.4. Internationalization vs. local needs

While schools and PA curricula in CEE replicate technical-professional themes mainly anchored in law, we also find that these topics often adapt to local settings and address contextual problems. In many PA schools and programs, partnership relations are reported (Staronová & Gajduschek, 2016; Placek *et al.*, 2025) in the process of training and developing curricula between universities and various PA organizations and institutions. The existing partnerships are mainly in two directions –with various public institutions at different levels of government (both with administrative structures of the central government and with municipalities and regional administrations) and with the NGO sector. The orientation towards these partners is primarily related to the understanding that these are the main structures in which students of public administration are expected to find their place. The search for a connection with potential employers is so far a rare but extremely positive trend.

There are two main organizations that play a crucial role in helping schools provide PA programs that meet international expectations. In 1994, the Network of Institutes and Schools of Public Administration in Central and Eastern Europe (NISPAcee) was established with international support, most notably from the United States, and to a considerable extent adopted the organizational model of the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration in the United States. NISPAcee has played a significant role in the consolidation of public administration (PA) as an independent academic discipline in the region (Staronová & Gajduschek, 2016). It has pursued this mission through various instruments, including a scholarly journal (NISPAcee Journal of Public Administration and Policy), handbooks addressing specific issues,⁸ and a practice-oriented newsletter. In addition, NISPAcee's annual conferences provide opportunities for scholars and educators from the region and from Western countries to meet, exchange teaching experiences, and present research findings. The organization has had a substantial, though typically indirect, impact on most PA

⁷ The issue and the possible ways to handle that are a regular topic, generating heated discussion in the Working Group (7) addressing "Public Administration Education" at the NISPAcee's annual conferences.

⁸ NISPAcee has published well over a hundred books (about 4 each year) addressing CEE-specific issues. Some of these books focus on specific issues of PA that may be used as literature of PA courses, others offer handbooks for PAE. Besides well-known scholars from the region, internationally renowned academics such as Gert Bouckaert, Guy Peters, and Allan Rosenbaum published in or edited these books. See the website for these publications: <https://www.nispa.org/press/publications>

programs in the region, particularly those with an international orientation. At the same time, NISPAcee offers forums for discussing issues specific to Central and Eastern Europe and for presenting scholarly approaches to these challenges, potentially within distinctive conceptual and theoretical frameworks. Overall, NISPAcee has continuously addressed the challenges facing PA education in the region by offering relevant content and pedagogical approaches.

The European Association for Public Administration Accreditation (EAPAA)⁹ plays a crucial role in shaping and promoting curricular standards in PA education (Nemec, 2006; Brans & Coenen, 2016). While EAPAA allows a relatively high degree of institutional autonomy in defining disciplinary orientations and methodological approaches, it nevertheless encourages a more coherent and balanced curricular framework for public administration programs. In this respect, EAPAA accreditation may help counteract the one-sidedness or disciplinary bias that characterizes some programs housed predominantly within law or economics faculties.

In post-communist countries, EAPAA has assumed an increasingly important role in safeguarding and enhancing the quality of public administration education. Over the past decade, institutions in these countries have sought EAPAA accreditation with growing intensity, reflecting both internal reform efforts and external pressures for international recognition and standardization. As of the end of 2025, more than one third of all EAPAA-accredited bachelor's and master's programs are offered by institutions located in post-communist countries. This trend underscores the association's growing influence in the region and highlights its function as a key mechanism for quality assurance and curricular convergence in public administration education.

TABLE 4. EAPAA ACCREDITED PROGRAMS IN CEE

Country	University	Name of Program	Level	Accredited
Czechia	Masaryk University	Public Administration	Master	2019-2026
		Public Economy and Administration	Master	2019-2026
Estonia	Talinn Uni of Technology	Public Administration and Governance	Bachelor	2023-2030
		Public Administration and Innovation	Master	2023-2030
Hungary	Corvinus University	Public Policy and Management (PUMA)	Master	2019-2026
		Public Policy and Management (KGKP)	Master	2019-2026
Poland	Cracow Uni of Economics	Public Economy and Administration	Bachelor	2019-2026
		Public Economy and Administration	Master	2019-2026
Romania	Babes-Bolyai Uni Cluj	Public Administration	Master	2022-2029
	National School of Political Studies and Public Administration	Public Administration	Bachelor	2018-2025
		Public Sector Management	Master	2018-2025
	Bucharest Uni of Economic Studies	Public Administration	Bachelor	2019-2026
Slovakia	Matej Bel University Banska Bystrica	Territorial Management	Bachelor	2019-2022
		Territorial Studies	Master	2019-2022
Slovenia	University of Ljubljana	Public Sector Governance	Bachelor	2025-2031
		Public Sector Governance	Master	2022-2029

Source: Authors, on the basis of reports for EAPAA accreditation.

⁹ See the website of the organization: <https://eapaa.eu>. For the standards (set-up requirements) see: <https://eapaa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/EAPAA-Standards-2023-1.pdf>

The majority of public administration programs in the region do not, however, seek EAPAA accreditation. In some cases, institutions may be completely unaware of this accreditation opportunity or may not perceive it as strategically relevant. In others, accreditation is regarded as unattainable or undesirable, particularly where programs fall short of EAPAA's relatively demanding standards and lack incentives or capacity to undertake the required improvements. This is especially pronounced in some private institutions, where higher costs associated with accreditation may not be offset by increased revenues, as well as in certain public institutions characterized by rigid personnel structures, organizational constraints, or entrenched power relations that hinder curricular and institutional reform.

More ambiguous cases include highly reputable programs such as the Public and Social Policy program at Charles University in the Czech Republic or the Public Policy program at Comenius University in Slovakia. These programs arguably meet EAPAA requirements and rank among the strongest in the region in terms of publication output (Placek *et al.*, 2025; Misík *et al.*, 2024). Their decision not to pursue international program accreditation may reflect the absence of a perceived need for an external quality label, limited financial and administrative resources, or the prioritization of national program or institutional accreditation processes that crowd out investments in international accreditation.

A more substantial barrier concerns the potential discrepancy between research-oriented academic incentives and the practical needs of public administration. On the one hand, academic careers and institutional evaluations increasingly depend on publications in high-ranking international journals, which require familiarity with dominant theoretical frameworks, concepts, and methodological standards. These journals tend to prioritize issues that are salient in Western, affluent contexts, while problems characteristic of less developed or transitional administrative systems receive comparatively less attention. On the other hand, public administration programs are also expected to equip students with practical skills relevant to domestic administrative environments. This tension may lead programs to prioritize international academic discourse over engagement with national and local governance challenges. Theories and policy solutions effective in highly developed administrative systems may prove less applicable in countries facing different structural, political, or socio-economic constraints. Issues central to public administration debates in the United States, for example, may be of limited relevance in contexts such as Bulgaria or Hungary. An additional tension arises between programs that emphasize analytical, problem-solving, and methodological skills and the expectations of public administrations that often prioritize legally trained, obedient, rule-oriented implementers, as reflected in traditional, law-centered civil service training models.

There is no singularly dominant name for accredited PA programs, accredited programs go by different names, although the title Master of Public Administration appears in a quarter of the cases. Other programs combine governance, management, public economy and innovation to label their programs. This was already noted by Staronová & Gajduschek (2016) in their analysis of 5 countries curricula as well as in single country observations in Czechia (Placek *et al.*, 2025). Neither do similar labels cover the same load. With a few exceptions where public management is at the heart of a program's focus, most programs core components comprise two or more core foci.

4.5. Attractiveness of the PA programs

An initial influx of public administration students was part of a rapid increase in students in the social sciences. Nevertheless, this boom in public administration education lasted for less than a decade. Since 2010, in all of the CEE countries, the number of students admitted to higher education institutions in general and PA programs in particular is shrinking (Staronová & Gajduschek, 2016; Jahoda *et al.*, 2022; Sarapuu & Saarniit, 2020). At a general level, demographic and societal changes have resulted in a declining number of potential students.

On a specific PA education level, the numbers are even more alarming. Most (interdisciplinary) programs face the challenge of a relatively small number of applicants, which in some cases leads to program closure (e.g., in Estonia and Slovenia). Initially, the low interest, especially in contrast to business administration programmes, was generally attributed to the enormous (10+ times) wage gap between otherwise equivalent private and public jobs.

Recently, the reasons may be different. Illiberal governments facing discontent from large or even dominant segments of society may lead to distrust of the public sector. Some scholars have documented that the problem of low PA study program attractiveness may be related to the low prestige of the civil service profession (Maly, 2014; Jahoda *et al.*, 2022), particularly at the eve of the democratic backsliding, accompanied by the limited trust in the government and public administration. On the other hand, illiberal governments do not seem to seek

professional advice from civil servants, do not trust them, and do not appreciate them as potential sources of technocratic knowledge. An increasingly deteriorating image of public administration may also be symptomatic of the propaganda of illiberal governments (Staronová *et al.*, 2025). As relevant civil service career paths seem to depend on political connections rather than professional achievements, PAE does not seem rewarding even for those who plan to work for the government. The low attractiveness threatens the future of programs, even those accredited by the European Association for Public Administration Accreditation (EAPAA).

5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has reviewed tertiary public administration (PA) education programs in post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) that are now members of the European Union. Drawing on a historical institutionalist perspective, it has argued that long-term historical trajectories and communist legacies in both governmental and educational systems have strongly shaped the post-communist configuration of PA education, while the past three and a half decades have generated new and evolving challenges. The past decades can be analytically divided into two main stages, the latter of which may be described as an emerging age of illiberalism.¹⁰ At present, empirical knowledge about the impact of this stage on PA education remains limited. However, Hungary's monopolistic National University of Public Service –integrating civilian, police, and military education– may represent a model characteristic of such regimes (Hajnal, 2016). A cautious projection for the future of PA education in illiberal settings suggests that these systems may have limited demand for problem analysis and problem-solving skills, as strategic decisions are increasingly centralized at the very top of political decision-making, while administrative systems primarily require reliable and compliant implementers across civil service positions.

The first two post-communist decades are better understood as a period of competition between two dominant models of PA education. The “classical” legalistic model can be traced back both to pre-communist traditions and, to some extent, to communist-era arrangements. In contrast, the managerial model –closely aligned with the principles of New Public Management– gained prominence during the 1990s and was strongly promoted by international donor organizations. Subsequently, a third, so-called public governance-oriented model also emerged, although its institutionalization has remained uneven across the region. No clearly defined PA identity can be identified, either within a single country across individual programs or across countries at the regional level.¹¹ Table 5 sums up the stages as reviewed in table 1 and indicating how these historical stages influenced PAE.

A persistent tension exists between the need to engage with international scholarly debates and the practical demands faced by PA practitioners operating in specific national and institutional contexts. In many cases, Western-derived approaches have proven only partially applicable or insufficiently responsive to local administrative realities.

TABLE 5. SUMMARY OF PRESUMED PATH DEPENDENCY EFFECT

Period	Political system	System of tertiary education	Impact on PA Education – especially curriculum/identity
Before WWI	Following either Napoleonic or Germanic model, conveyed/distorted by the occupying empire.	Similar to, though somewhat lagged behind the Western arrangement.	Clear legal focus as both the original Napoleonic and Germanic models emphasize administrative law and legal knowledge at this time.
After WWI	Independence as a country need for own government. Typically, continue to follow Napoleonic or Germanic model.	Similar to, though somewhat lagged behind the Western arrangement.	Clear legal focus as both the original Napoleonic and Germanic models emphasize administrative law and legal knowledge at this time. Potentially, a need to establish own programs.

¹⁰ This stage is not present in all CEE countries and is present in several so-called Western countries. However, Hungary and Poland were undeniably the frontrunners in building a fledgling illiberal political system.

¹¹ An exception could be Estonia with a clear managerial orientation and strong emphasis on analytical and problem-solving skills. On the opposite pole, Hungary could be identified with a clear legalistic approach, a strong emphasis on knowledge transfer preparing reliable implementers. It is in question at present, whether the Hungarian model foreshadows the future of PAE in illiberal settings, at least in the region.

Period	Political system	System of tertiary education	Impact on PAE – especially curriculum/identity.
After WWII	Communist system. PA is to implement party-government decisions. Civil service is not accepted as a “profession”.	PA is not accepted as a discipline. Separation of research and education.	Typically, no specific PAE at all. Part-time schools providing training for civil servants, with no, or maximum bachelor’s degree. Strong ideological-political overtones in PAE.
After 1990	Transition. A new system of democracy and the rule of law. No blueprint for the change. PA identity is questioned. Various pressures: legal tradition, managerial mainstream challenge from the West.	The place of PAE is in question, theoretically and practically. Challenges by the EU accession (details in table 2).	Various schools (private and public, emanating from legal, economics and other programs, or original PA program, typically by social science depts.). The legal approach is still dominant, because of tradition or practical reasons (cheaper, easier to find instructors). Choice between legal or managerial depends largely if PA as an independent discipline and/or field of education was present in the communist era. Later, some countries discover the modern Napoleonic PAE curriculum with stronger social sciences focus.
From 2010+	Illiberal government. Hungary, Poland, etc. Diminishing role of professional civil service, especially in policy-making. A professional career is limited thus not too appealing.	Typically no change in the system of tertiary education.	Not clear yet. The Hungarian case may foreshadow future. One special school, out of the normal education system, is solely entitled to provide PAE.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

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