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Blatant, not Latent: Patronage in Top-Level Appointments in Serbia

Slobodan Tomić¹, Dušan Pavlović²

Abstract

This paper examines the model of party patronage in Serbia and its impact on the professionalisation of public administration. Drawing on case studies of the appointment and subsequent performance of heads of three prominent public organisations – the National Bank of Serbia, the Anti-Corruption Agency, and the Electro Industry of Serbia – we demonstrate that, despite efforts to implement the Weberian principle of “neutral competence”, which involves the prevalence of meritocracy over partisan affiliation, patronage in Serbia has not only persisted but has become more overt and invasive. The given model of patronage involves the pursuit of multiple functions of partisan patronage – resource extraction, partisan campaigning (including through clientelism), and policy control. We suggest that this model results in the appointment of unqualified individuals to top positions, leading to poor governance and low efficiency of public institutions. The findings point to a “reform reversal” scenario, which departs from the trajectory of mild progress or stagnation usually observed in other cases across post-communist Europe that follow the adoption of Weberian standards. As a conceptual contribution, the paper develops a typology, centered around the question of perniciousness of various patronage models, that captures patronage models and trajectories of anti-patronage developments in a more nuanced manner than the existing frameworks that compare patronage patterns.

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Keywords:

patronage; politicisation; Serbia; Weberian standards; post-communist Europe; appointments

1. Introduction

Party patronage is a key phenomenon in the study of public administration, particularly in new democracies, including those in post-communist Europe. Patronage is usually framed as a negative phenomenon that might hamper the development of professionalised public administration (Rauch & Evans, 2000; Piattoni, 2001; Bearfield, 2009; Dahlström et al., 2012; Kopecký et al., 2012; Nistotskaya & Cingolani, 2016; Dávid-Barrett, 2023), damage policy efficiency (Nakrošis, 2015, p. 1), fuel state capture, and enable the misuse of public resources for illicit enrichment and partisan purposes (O'Dwyer, 2006; Grzymala-Busse, 2008; Stojanović-Gajić & Pavlović, 2021; Pavlović, 2022a, b). In some contexts, however, evidence has been found that patronage can have positive effects, such as improved policy implementation and coordination and enhanced monitoring within bureaucracy (Panizza et al., 2022; Toral, 2022).

In this paper, we explore the model of party patronage in Serbia, a transitional country in Southeast Europe and a “troubled” EU candidate (Radeljić, 2017; Kmezić, 2019; 2020)³, by analysing leadership appointments (2015–2022) in three institutions that belong to the group of least likely candidates for experiencing party patronage: the National Central Bank (NBS), a traditional paragon of technocracy and non-politicisation (Fischer, 1995); the Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA), whose mission mandates strict separability from partisan politics; and Serbia’s largest public enterprise, the Electro Industry of Serbia (EPS), which has been expected to professionalise over the last decade, in accordance with the adopted professionalisation agenda centred around the Weberian standards of neutral competence (Charron et al., 2016, p. 500), as promoted by external reform advocates, namely the EU (Meyer-Sahling & Toth, 2020, p. 110) and other international “good governance clubs” (see e. g. OECD, 2017, p. 44, or World Bank, 2021). Our central question is: Has patronage in Serbia reduced and/or become less blatant following its adoption of the Weberian standards in the 2010s?

Through a qualitative analysis of the three above-mentioned case studies, we diagnose a model of patronage that is more blatant and pernicious than the classic models of patronage set out in the literature. The model that we observed in Serbia is

3 In the last decade, Serbia has undergone a process of democratic backsliding, under the reign of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), and its leader Aleksandar Vučić, which coincided with the country’s continuing EU accession process and integration into the global economy (Freedom House, 2023).

based on the appointment of a cadre that is not only partisan but does not meet the competence criteria either, who then in practise undertake multiple negative patronage functions, including resource extraction, clientelism-based use of public resources for partisan campaigning, and policy manipulation or obstruction.

In setting out the “Serbian model” of patronage, we argue that its key motivation is to extract public resources for partisan purposes to sustain hyper-incumbency (Grzymala-Busse, 2007, 2008) rather than mobilise resources for public governance (Kopecký & Mair, 2012) or improve policy delivery (Panizza et al., 2022; Toral, 2022). Further, the appointment of an unqualified cadre – we suggest in our theoretical exposition – is not only instrumentally damaging (i. e. leading to less governing capacity) but also hampers appointees’ autonomy to filter out, mediate and resist the patron’s expectations of pursuing a never-ending range of patronage functions.

Our findings contribute to the moderately sceptical sentiment prevalent in scholarship that recognises that Weberian standards alone will not lead to major reductions in patronage (Lapuente & Nistotskaya, 2009, p. 443; Grindle, 2012; Gajduschek, 2013; Meyer-Sahling et al., 2015; Schuster, 2017), and that implementation in practice will be susceptible to various mechanisms of obstruction and “creative compliance” (Meyer-Sahling et al., 2015, p. 7; Panizza et al., 2018a, p. 7). However, we also suggest that when acknowledging that Weberian standards are being evaded and thus do not prevent patronage from happening, it is crucial to question which of the Weberian standards are being breached. We argue that violating the non-partisanship criterion is far more malign if the competence criterion is violated as well. The literature so far has given little attention to constellations of patronage that go beyond the proverbial “loyalty – yes, but competence ensured” trade-off (Zakharov, 2016; Hollibaugh, 2018; Hong & Kim, 2019). Our case study fills this gap and provides indications that when the competence criterion is violated, the implications are not only instrumental (less governing capability) but are motivational as well, leading to a model of patronage that is more pernicious than the models usually observed in post-communist Europe and more widely. The latter models either involve “scope-shrinkage” (Panizza et al., 2018b; 2022; Di Mascio et al., 2010), where patronage, even when remaining present, “recedes” mainly to the core of the executive and civil service (Meyer-Sahling, 2017; Zankina, 2017; Rybář & Podmaník, 2020; Staronova & Rybář, 2021; Kohoutek & Nekola, 2021) or “migrates” to lower positions in the public sector (e. g. Volintiru, 2016) and/or becomes more latent over time with less overt and blatant political intrusion, similar to the “sophisticated” forms of politicisation seen often observed in Western contexts (van Thiel, 2009; Ennser-Jedenastik, 2014; 2016; Bach & Veit, 2018).

As a conceptual contribution, the paper provides a newly proposed taxonomy of patronage models centered around their perniciousness. This enables us to go beyond the usual binary indicators of whether patronage is or is not observed/experienced in a given context (Dahlström et al., 2015; Kopecký et al., 2016) and contextualise

particular patronage models against their societal cost. The framework consists of three dimensions, namely: (1) the number of observed patronage functions; (2) the ease and intensity of the discharge of those functions – an indicator of the damage they cause per unit of time; and (3) the scope of patronage across the public sector’s breadth – whether patronage is pervasive beyond the usual “hotbed” of patronage situated in the government and civil service.

2. Patronage, Weberian standards and patronage models

Patronage refers to party control over public sector appointees holding non-elective positions (Kopecký et al., 2012; Panizza et al., 2022, p. 5). Patronage involves politicisation of public bureaucracy, although politicisation is a broader term that might involve various attempts to influence the work of public officials (Cooper, 2021, p. 565; Peters & Pierre, 2004, 2022; Bach et al., 2020a). One of the motivations behind patronage is clientelism – the exchange of public sector resources for support in partisan and electoral campaigning (Piattoni, 2001; Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007), a practice particularly widespread in the Western Balkans (Radeljić & Đorđević, 2020). Clientelism, though, is a narrower term than patronage; the latter can involve other motivations, such as policy control (Page & Wright, 1999; Christensen & Lægneid, 2006; Kopecký & Spirova, 2011; Bearfield, 2009; Jalali & Lisi, 2015; Kopecký et al., 2012, 2016, p. 420) or extraction of public resources.

In the context of the post-communist European space, patronage is seen as something that needs to be tackled. It is a widespread view in this part of Europe that patronage primarily serves partisan intentions to extract resources and sustain incumbency, thus hampering state-building (Grzymala-Busse, 2007, 2008). Across the CEE and SEE states, therefore, legislation has been adopted over the last decade to suppress patronage, putting in force the Weberian notion of “neutral competence”, which mandates that, in public sector appointments, candidates’ merit and qualifications should prevail over their partisan affiliation; for some positions, including those in semi-autonomous agencies and technocratic regulators the appointment of party members is often legally prohibited.

2.1 Towards a conceptualisation of patronage models: factoring in appointees’ autonomy

Patronage has so far been gauged through the binary notion of presence/absence (Kopecký et al., 2012, 2016; Dahlström et al., 2015), which refers to whether there is partisan influence over an appointee or not. However, to understand the impact of patronage on public governance and the public good, we need to go a step further and understand the nature of patronage and particularly the damage that it causes to the society. Current patronage models may not be suitable for this purpose, as a binary

observation of whether patronage was observed/experienced or not does not tell us much about the extent of harm caused by the pursuit of the patronage in question.⁴ The amount of damage will be determined by: (1) what functions are exercised in a particular context; and (2) how often those functions are exercised, i. e., how unconstrained the public officials are in exercising them. The framework provided later in this section offers a typology of different models of patronage, which orders the models according to their perniciousness.

While using Weberian standards may not completely prevent patronage, as there are means to bypass them (Meyer-Sahling et al., 2015, p. 7; Panizza et al., 2018a, p. 7), we argue that the way these standards are disregarded will have an impact on the model of patronage and its harmful effects in a given case. Weberian standards could be breached not only when political affiliations outweigh a candidate's merit, but also when the minimum competency requirements are not met. We suggest that blatant breaches of Weberian standards, where a candidate does not meet the competency criteria (i. e. lacks the required qualifications and/or professional experience), will result in more pernicious models of patronage.

When the competency criterion is violated in public sector appointments, the implication is not only that the appointed unqualified cadre will lack governing capacities. We suggest that such a cadre will have reduced personal autonomy to process, filter out, and mediate the ever-expanding expectations of serving the patron's interests. As a result, in practice, there will be minimal, if any, constraints on how far the appointee will go in abusing institutional resources to perform varying patronage functions.

Usually, appointees are not just "porous conduits" for the patron's will. They face internal and societal constraints that define how far they will go in serving others' preferences. Despite their dependence on the patron who facilitated their appointment, appointees might still have some reservations regarding the abuse of institutional resources they are expected to commit. First, personal ethical constraints limit how far one will go in abusing institutional resources. Second, reputational considerations exist. Appointees' actions are watched by audiences and, when perceived negatively, can inflict reputational damage (Carpenter, 2001; Busuioc & Lodge, 2016). This could affect their subsequent careers after they complete their given term in office. However, unqualified cadres appointed to lead public organisations will face fewer reputational constraints. Their professional fortunes are not steeped in so-called epistemic communities (Haas, 1992), whose judgments and norms can significantly shape the forms of acceptable and unacceptable conduct. Also, the immediate social surroundings of unqualified cadres are less progressive and less likely to sanction them. This surrounding value system, where integrity breaches are more

4 One also needs to consider whether the positive functions of patronage, recently diagnosed in some empirical settings (Panizza et al., 2022; Toral, 2022), even potentially outweigh the negative functions of patronage that are in place.

permissive, will further reduce the reputational cost for unethical conduct. Finally, alternative career options for unqualified cadres are scarcer. They will therefore stake their bets on party patronage as the only and/or main self-realisation mechanism, making them more ready to commit abuse by following the expectations of the party patron.

The bigger point that we are proposing here is that, in a patronage relationship, appointees have some personal autonomy to choose the patronage activities they will undertake based on their internal values and societal pressures. Appointees who lack competence or alternative career options, however, are likely to have lower autonomy and face fewer social constraints. We should therefore consider Weberian standards as not being there only for making sure that partisan motivations do not prevail. They also set a virtual threshold that filters in the “pool” of cadre for potential appointees; such appointees would have some societal and personal constraints to unbridled abuse of institutional resource in the subsequent work post-appointment.

2.2 Models of patronage: a framework for gauging patronage perniciousness

Measuring the impact of a particular patronage model with precision can be challenging. However, we can create a taxonomy of different patronage models to distinguish the most pernicious from the less pernicious ones. Our proposed framework has two main dimensions. The first dimension pertains to the extent of patronage functions carried out in a given patronage model. The second dimension refers to the scope of the public sector where these functions are pursued, i. e. whether patronage is present mainly in the core executive, or has captured a wider range of organisations, such as public enterprises, semi-autonomous agencies, and other public bodies structurally insulated from the government hierarchy. A third dimension could be added to indicate the intensity or ease of pressing public appointees or employees to perform patronage. This affects how frequently a given patronage function is performed. The perniciousness of abusing public resources for political purposes or extracting resources is not the same if it occurs once a year versus every month.

The net effect of a particular patronage model is based on the multiplier of those three dimensions. The following table summarises the models:

Table 1:
Possible models of patronage

<i>What patronage is prevalent</i>	<i>Exercised functions of patronage + their intensity</i>			
	Negative functions + High intensity	Negative functions + Low intensity	Positive functions + High intensity	Positive functions + Low intensity
In core executive	<p>MODEL 1</p> <p>Multiple functions Resource extraction; and/or</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clientelism (electoral support); and/or • Policy control (in a negative sense) <p>Practiced easily/with high intensity/frequency.</p> <p>Provisional utility: -5</p> <p>Note: The fewer negative functions are performed, the more the model is "benevolent".</p> <p>E. g. a Model 1.1 (a benign version of Model 1) would involve one or two negative functions performed rather than all three. The approximated utility would then be less than the above mentioned -5 (e. g. -3)</p>	<p>MODEL 2</p> <p>Multiple functions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource extraction; • Clientelism (electoral support), and/or • Negative policy control, <p>Practiced, but not with high intensity.</p> <p>Provisional utility: -2</p> <p>Note: The fewer negative functions are performed, the more is the model "benevolent".</p> <p>E. g. a Model 2.1 (a version of Model 2) would involve one or two negative functions performed rather than all three. The approximated utility would then be less than the above mentioned -2 (e. g. -1)</p>	<p>MODEL 3</p> <p>Policy control (seen through positive functions, i. e. improved coordination, monitoring etc.).</p> <p>Practiced (relatively) frequently</p> <p>Provisional utility: +5</p>	<p>MODEL 4</p> <p>Policy control (seen through positive functions, i. e. improved coordination, monitoring etc.).</p> <p>Practiced occasionally</p> <p>Provisional utility: +2</p>
	In the wider public sector	<p>MODEL 5</p> <p>Multiple functions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource extraction; and/or • Clientelism (electoral support); and/or • Policy control (in a negative sense). <p>Practiced easily/with high intensity/frequency.</p> <p>Practices across a wider public sector (beyond the core executive)</p> <p>Provisional utility: -10</p>	<p>MODEL 6</p> <p>Multiple functions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource extraction; and/or • Clientelism (electoral support), and/or negative policy control). <p>Practiced, but not with high intensity.</p> <p>Practices across a wider public sector (beyond the core executive)</p> <p>Provisional utility: -5</p>	<p>MODEL 7</p> <p>Policy control (seen through positive functions, i. e. improved coordination, monitoring etc.).</p> <p>Practiced across a wider public sector (not limited to the core executive only)</p> <p>Provisional utility: +10</p>

Note: Possible models of patronage, as approximated through the overall damage and benefit that they produce in a given country. The functions are taken from prior literature, negative

functions including resource extraction, abuse of public resources for election/campaigning purposes, and policy control. The model in the bottom left cell (denoted as "Model 5" is the most pernicious one, followed by Models 1 and 2; the most "benevolent" models are Model 7 and Model 8, followed by Model 5. Those are ideal types and in reality, patronage models can oscillate between two adjacent ideal types).

Source: authors' own, 2023

2.3 Weberian standards and patronage: always a trajectory of progress?

As mentioned, in the last decade or so, most countries in Central and Southeastern Europe have adopted Weberian legislation (OECD, 2020a, pp. 65–66), mandating that public sector appointments should be based on the standard of “neutral competence” and that partisan loyalties should not override competence. However, it is debatable how effective these standards have been in practice. While they have led to some sophistication of patronage, to a certain extent bringing it under control, this legislation has also proven susceptible to various coping strategies by political parties. Studies have shown that politicians can resort to various mechanisms, such as organisational restructuring (Zankina, 2017), creating legal loopholes, producing procedural delays, or suspending or even ignoring the new legal framework (Verheijen, 1999; Meyer-Sahling et al., 2015, p. 7; Sedlačko & Staroňová, 2018), to circumvent or undermine Weberian standards in ministries and civil service. Panizza et al. summarise such undermining mechanisms as circumventing, evading, distorting, or even openly violating legally adopted Weberian standards (2018a, p. 7). Today, there is a widespread consensus in the literature positing that the adoption of Weberian standards alone will not lead to the eradication of patronage (Meyer-Sahling, 2006; Meyer-Sahling & Jager, 2012, p. 7; Gajduschek, 2013; Schuster, 2017).

“Sophistication of patronage” means that patronage has become less permissible and is performed in a less overt manner as political parties seek to avoid admitting it. It is distinct from direct party control, where the appointee regularly receives and carries out orders from the party and reports to it. Patronage politics has “receded” mainly to the government bureaucracy and civil service, where studies still observe its presence (see, e. g., Meyer-Sahling, 2017; Zankina, 2017; Rybář & Podmanik, 2020; Staronova & Rybář, 2021). The focus of patronage politics also tends to shift to middle and lower positions and jobs in local governments and public enterprises, as observed in Romania (see, e. g., Volintiru, 2015). Even where politicisation persists in parts of the public sector outside the “core” of the public sector, i. e. beyond the ministerial bureaucracy and civil service, it has generally become more discreet and exercised through softer forms of politicisation that are not unseen even in developed Western democracies (van Thiel, 2009; Ennsner-Jedenastik, 2016; Bach & Veit, 2018).

2.4 Weberian legislation and trajectories of patronage sophistication

In the context of the sweeping legal “Weberisation” of public administration in post-communist Europe, one might expect to observe the prevalence of models wherein patronage focuses on the core of the executive apparatus, which attracts the most patronage effort by incumbents and has attracted the most interest in empirical studies in post-communist Europe. Such models would probably tend towards the more benevolent forms of Model 2, such as Model 2.1 or even Model 4 or Model 3. This expectation is based on the observations of previous studies, including data on the prevalence of patronage in the core executive (Kopecký et al., 2016), and recurring remarks that observed patterns of patronage usually serve one or two, but not three, negative functions. Due to Weberisation, where patronage is still present, it is softened in the sense that it is practised less overtly, and this also means less intensively than usual in the cases where patronage is not prohibited or monitored. For the worst-performing outliers from Central and Southeastern Europe (CEE and SEE) in the fight against patronage, one might exceptionally expect models from the lower part of the matrix, such as Model 6 in its softer variant, perhaps with two negatives but not all negative functions to be prominently pursued in the country of observation.

However, our forthcoming empirical analysis will provide empirical indications that the “Serbian model” is to be classified as Model 1 introduced above – the most pernicious model of patronage. It is a much more malign form of patronage than those observed so far across post-communist Europe, let alone the cases where patronage plays a positive role (e. g. through improved policy implementation – Panizza et al., 2022; Toral, 2022) and as such belong in the right half of the above matrix/table.

3. Methods: case selection and data selection methods

Our empirical analysis is based on a qualitative case study analysis in which we examine how the selected appointments unfolded and whether the appointees showed signs of patronage abuse during their subsequent tenure. The selected cases involve institutions and policy sectors that are among the most likely cases for professionalisation, i. e. patronage-free functioning.

For national central banks, professionalisation has been a norm since the 1990s’ wave of de-politicisation of monetary policy (Goodman, 1992). This norm has been embraced in Serbia since the early 2000s when legislation mandated that the National Bank of Serbia’s Governor – elected by a majority in Parliament – must not be a party member (Law on National Bank of Serbia, 2003). Anticorruption agencies, by design, should not be subject to political control and abuse. This was a key rationale for the creation of the Serbian ACA in the early 2010s (Tomić, 2019), as part of the ongoing “agencification” in Serbia (Tomić & Jovančić, 2012). Finally, the Electro Industry of

Serbia (EPS) – a monopolistic public enterprise in the electricity sector – was expected to professionalise in line with the wider agenda of Serbian public enterprises professionalisation, as demanded by the EU and other international reform assisters (see e.g. European Commission 2018, p. 3; OECD, 2020b), and as set out in domestic legislation. . The sectors of monetary policy and electricity, which are highly technical, belong to the group of policy areas that have been found to be less prone to patronage empirically (Peters, 1988; Meyer-Sahling & Jager, 2012, p. 2; Bach et al., 2020a, 2020b).

Overall, the three selected institutions offer strong falsification potential (Flyvbjerg, 2011). If patronage is observed in those cases, then it indicates that patronage has likely remained pervasive across the wider public sector in Serbia, even where the expectation or pressure for professionalisation is lower, thus going beyond the core executive and civil service which are traditionally subject to continuous political interest for patronage and susceptible to various mechanisms of backdoor politicisation (Zankina, 2017; Gajduscek & Staronova, 2021) and creative compliance mechanisms (Panizza et al., 2018b). In other words, signs of patronage in the three selected cases would indicate that the expected professionalisation of the public sector has failed to materialise in Serbia on a large scale following the adoption of Weberian standards in the 2010s.

To analyse whether there was patronage involved in the cases mentioned, we combined data from press reports, public officials’ statements, and parliamentary debates. We looked first for indicators of whether appointments were based on party patronage or meritocracy. We checked if appointed candidates were party members or affiliates, and, thereafter, we checked if they met the expected criteria of competence, based on their professional and educational backgrounds. All three cases provided clear indicators that both criteria were not met.

Second, we looked for indicators of committed patronage functions, such as partisan control over policy, abuse of institutional resources for electoral campaigning, and extractive use of institutional resources, during the appointees’ tenure. Proving that a certain patronage function actually happened can be difficult, as such actions are usually agreed upon behind closed doors, often “covered” as legally permissible, defended by politicians through alternate justifications, and publicly denied by those involved. However, even without “bullet-proof” evidence of patronage functions, there are still indicators widely seen as indicating patronage abuse. Conveniently, the cases we have selected produce multiple strong indicators of this kind. Those involve appointees’ statements that their measures are driven by political authorities or evidence that their actions target ruling parties differently from opposition members. Additionally, there is evidence of appointees’ involvement in electoral campaigns or the employment of party members for political campaigning. Finally, there is data showing that companies whose owners were affiliated with the main ruling party (SNS) won the majority of tenders called by some of the observed public organisations. These indicators do not refer to institutional adjustment to politicisation pressures (Tomic &

Radeljic, 2022), but involve appointees' active pursuit of patronage functions. Overall, the data obtained has yielded multiple strong indicators for every patronage function, leaving little doubt that such abuse occurred in reality.

4. Empirical analysis

4.1 The National Bank of Serbia

Maintaining the independence of the National Bank of Serbia (NBS) from political interference has been seen as crucial for ensuring macroeconomic stability, particularly after the hyperinflation that devastated Serbia in the mid-1990s due to the Milošević regime's excessive money printing (Dinkić, 1995). In the early 2000s, legislation was passed granting the NBS autonomy from the government and prohibiting the appointment of party officials as NBS governors (Law on National Bank of Serbia 2003, Article 20). Although this legislation could not completely prevent the appointment of governors with close ties to certain parties, it did establish a clear boundary between party officials and those eligible to lead the NBS.

Between 2000 and 2012, no NBS governor was appointed from within party ranks, in accordance with the law. However, this changed shortly after the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) took office in 2012 when the newly-formed parliamentary majority appointed one of the vice-presidents of the SNS, Ms Jorgovanka Tabaković, as NBS governor. At the time of her appointment, Ms Tabaković was the third most powerful person in the party.

Critics raised concerns about the legality of Tabaković's appointment, especially after she announced that her party position would be frozen but not relinquished (Trivić, 2012). This meant that she would not be actively involved in party life but would remain a member of SNS. As the law does not specify whether an appointee can hold a frozen party function prior to their appointment or during their term as governor, it was widely believed that Tabaković may have circumvented the law through a "grey zone". In addition to questions about the legality of the appointment, concerns were also raised about Tabaković's qualifications for the post. Tabaković's experience in the banking sector consisted of working as a clerk in a local branch of a state-owned bank in the 1980s and 1990s (Istinomer, 2021). She also claimed to hold a PhD in management and economics, which she obtained in 2012 from a private Serbian university, which is widely seen as one of several suspect diploma mills that flourished in Serbia after 2000, occasionally accused of awarding "gift degrees" to local politicians (Jelovac, 2022). An investigative journalist from the Centre for Investigative Journalism (CINS) published an analysis that revealed dozens of examples of plagiarised text in Tabaković's doctoral thesis (Milivojević, 2016). To date, Tabaković has not commented on the allegations, and the university has refused to investigate the claims of plagiarism.

Throughout her tenure (2012–), Tabaković repeatedly demonstrated that her work was subject to the will of the political establishment and its leader (see e. g. Miladinović, 2021). This was evident in her statements as well as in some unorthodox measures taken by the NBS after 2012. Tabaković openly acknowledged that she owed her position as NBS governor to President Vučić, and she consistently praised Vučić’s economic policies, using her position to support his narrative of economic progress. In all election campaigns after 2012, she promoted the ruling party and its leader, Vučić, with statements suggesting that economically Serbia was on the right track, attributing this supposed success to Vučić’s “responsible and skilful governance” (e. g. Bulajić, 2020). For critics, such appearances constituted evidence that the NBS was engaging in “electioneering”, a practice that contradicted the principle of non-politicisation.

In addition to the alleged “electioneering”, there were certain measures taken by Tabaković (i. e. NBS under her leadership) that were seen as signs of extractive and politicised management. For example, in 2020, NBS purchased €100 million worth of corporate bonds from Telekom, a state-owned mobile phone operator that has long held a dominant position in the market with the help of state support and under the control of the ruling party. Despite being a “cash cow” for every political establishment in the last few decades, Telekom had accumulated an unprecedented debt under the current political establishment, which was eventually resolved by NBS’s intervention in financial markets. NBS did not disclose the purchase of Telekom bonds until journalists leaked the details (Obradović, 2020). Later, in mid-2021, NBS began purchasing corporate bonds from struggling companies in defence production and construction, which were either state-owned and controlled by the ruling party or privately owned by donors of the ruling party (Obradović, 2021).

During the last few years, NBS was also accused of “forcibly” keeping an unrealistic interest rate of the Serbian currency (“dinar”) in order to suit the political establishment’s interest by allowing it to present its macroeconomic results better than they actually are, a practice criticised as politically opportune but substantively harmful beyond the current political moment (see e.g. Nova, 2022). NBS was also accused of taking a few other measures that were allegedly driven by the intention to suit the political establishment’s interests, rather than act in accordance with its mission’s spirit and law.⁵ There were also occasional reports that, during Tabaković’s governorship, NBS employed party cadre (e.g. RAS, 2014), although these were rarer and less prominent than the reports about partisan employment in other public organisations including the EPS, discussed below.

5 One such occasion was the NBS’ failure to protect the customers who had taken out loans from commercial banks in Swiss Francs prior to the unprecedented strengthening of this currency, and who were, according to a later legal ruling, illegally overcharged by the commercial banks in their loan repayments, many of whom went bankrupt and lost their property (see e.g. Beta, 2015).

4.2 The Anticorruption Agency (ACA)

The Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA) was established in 2010 to regulate, investigate, and sanction conflicts of interest among public officials and the misuse of public funds by political parties. Two of the main tasks of the ACA are to investigate the concealment of personal assets by public officials, who are required by law to declare them every year, and to monitor whether political parties exploit public resources or spend undeclared campaign funds (Law on Anticorruption Agency, 2008).

During its first seven years of operation from 2010 to 2017, the ACA had several directors, none of whom were politically affiliated. In 2017, the newly appointed director, Mrs. Kršikapa, unexpectedly resigned from her position after only two months. While she did not disclose her reasons for resignation, media reports alleged that she had received threats after initiating an investigation into claims that the Finance Minister at the time, a close confidant of the regime's leader, had undeclared properties in a neighbouring country (Bulgaria), purchased through an offshore company from the British Virgin Islands, in which, it was revealed later, he served as director for years (Trivić, 2017).

Following Mrs. Kršikapa's unexpected resignation from the ACA in 2017, the ACA Board, which in the meantime was filled with new members appointed by the ruling majority in Parliament, appointed Mr. Dragan Sikimić as the new director. Unlike his predecessors, Mr. Sikimić lacked relevant experience related to the rule of law and had a background in local politics, having been engaged in local elections back in 2012 on behalf of the ruling party (SNS) (Radivojević, 2018). Furthermore, it was later discovered that he was one of the thousands of individuals who donated €340 to the SNS during the 2017 presidential election campaign, which was suspected to be a scheme to legalise "black party funds" as small donations from members (*ibid.*).

The appointment of Mr. Sikimić was criticised for conflicting with the legal requirement of political neutrality for ACA staff, particularly its leadership. Transparency Serbia called on the ACA Board and the court to investigate the alleged links between Mr. Sikimić and the ruling party and, if confirmed in a formal procedure, to annul his appointment (Transparency, 2018). Yet, despite calls from watchdog organisations, the appointment was not formally challenged by any relevant institution in Serbia). Mr. Sikimić eventually denied briefly that he was presently a member of the ruling party but refused to comment on his previous political involvement (B92, 2018).

Under Sikimić's leadership, ACA kept a low profile, reducing its public appearances to a minimum. Mr. Sikimić only appeared in the media to present ACA's annual reports, which usually referred to cases of petty corruption and misdemeanour. This lowering of the ACA's profile led critics to accuse him of "quietly" marginalising the ACA, thus suppressing the main watchdog function over conflicts of interest and partisan abuse of public resources.

Also, under Sikimić's leadership, ACA was accused of displaying political

selectivity and an uneven approach towards controlling integrity breaches of ruling officials compared to opposition members. The ACA was slow to react on several occasions when ruling officials were discovered to possess undeclared assets, such as property, showing little initiative or resolve to investigate the allegations. In some cases, such as with the former mayor of Belgrade, the ACA altered his declared asset form post-hoc after an investigative journalist discovered that he owned an undeclared house; ACA's explanation was that the originally declared data were erroneously typed into the electronic system which was later available on the ACA's website (Pećo, 2018). This move led some journalists and critics to accuse the ACA of tampering with the data to protect prominent public officials and let them go with impunity. Similarly, the ACA repeatedly rejected to fine high-ranking officials for alleged abuse of public resources for the purposes political campaigning (see e. g. Beta, 2019). At the same time, on several occasions where opposition members were publicly accused of breaching some of the set integrity standards, the ACA swiftly reacted, at least rhetorically, indicating that those might have committed integrity breaches.

The ACA failed to adequately perform its duties during and after the 2020 election campaign, particularly in the area of checking party funding reports, which is one of its main functions (Nikolić, 2020). The failure to provide timely party funding reports for the electoral campaign was seen as beneficial to the ruling party, as it had access to public funds, which could have provided a significant competitive advantage over the opposition.

4.3 EPS

The Electro Industry of Serbia (EPS) is the largest state-owned company in Serbia, which enjoys a monopoly position in the electricity sector. In 2020, its annual turnover was 2.1 billion euros, its annual profit was almost 100 million euros, and the number of employees was around 30,000 (Fiscal Council, 2022). EPS has traditionally figured as a major party spoil in Serbian politics, and almost all of its directors over the last 30 years were close to the government. However, until 2012, few of them were party members, and those who were had experience in management in the context of large organisational systems or in the electricity sector.

Between 2012 and 2016, EPS was led by Mr. Aleksandar Obradović, a professional manager who was also a member of SNS. Obradović publicly acknowledged the existence of party patronage in EPS but pledged to put an end to it in 2015 (Janković, 2015). However, in 2016, the government replaced him with Milorad Grčić as the new CEO of EPS. Grčić was a member and local functionary of SNS, but lacked relevant professional and educational experience (Istinomer, 2023). Prior to 2012, Grčić had been running a café-bar and a barbecue shop called "Phantasy". Before being appointed as the CEO of EPS, he had briefly served as a manager of one of the "subsidiaries" of EPS.

Mr. Grčić not only lacked relevant professional experience but also had

questionable educational qualifications. Despite claiming to have a university degree from Educon (*ibid.*), the same private university from which the NBS Governor allegedly graduated, this degree was not mentioned in his earlier biographies. Mr. Grčić never provided further details about when and where he studied or obtained this degree, nor did he clarify the master's degree he later declared in his biography submissions.

During Grčić's tenure (2016–2022), EPS remained Serbia's largest state-owned company but began to decline financially. EPS suffered business losses (of €11 million in 2018 and €50 million in 2019) for the first time in its history. The Fiscal Council, the state's watchdog for public spending, attributed EPS's poor performance to low investments, losses in electricity distribution, excess workforce, inflated salaries, as well as organisational and financial mismanagement (Fiscal Council, 2019, 2022). In a major incident in December 2021, one of EPS's power plants went out of service due to the company using sludge instead of "proper" coal to generate electricity. EPS was forced to buy electricity from international markets and incurred significant losses. The government had to offset the losses incurred in the winter of 2022–2023 with a large financial package (Georgievski, 2022).

The State Audit Office discovered that EPS had spent €250 million on public tenders in 2018 and 2019 in which procedures were violated (State Audit Institution, 2021). Meanwhile, the Serbian Fiscal Council conducted an analysis that showed EPS had a staff surplus of 10 percent (Fiscal Council, 2019, 2022). EPS union leaders have also repeatedly reported party patronage within the company, with many stating that EPS employed a large number of members from the ruling party who were then obligated to attend party rallies, participate in campaign canvassing, and collect "sure votes" for the party during electoral campaigns (Vlaović, 2022).

EPS was found to have regularly awarded public tenders to two private companies, Južna Bačka and Elektomontaža, both owned by a donor of the ruling party, SNS. Južna Bačka was the sole bidder in 302 out of 317 tenders in 2019, and Elektomontaža the only bidder in 549 out of the 564 tenders it won (Đorđević & Marković, 2021). Recently, a Serbian deputy prosecutor launched an investigation against members of the EPS leadership for embezzling millions of euros by paying for the construction of a fictitious 7 km long local railway that was never built (Savić, 2023). This is yet another instance of resource extraction within the company.

5. Discussion

5.1 Patronage present – despite Weberian standards

The developments in the three presented case studies point to several findings. First, patronage politics is still present in Serbia, even in leadership positions that should be

“islands of professionalisation”, devoid of party patronage and politicisation. NBS and ACA had the status of professionalised institutions for a long time, and EPS was supposed to become professionalised in the meantime. However, as the empirical analysis shows, during the observed period, all were led by party apparatchiks (Panizza et al., 2018b) who took over the respective institutions through politicised appointments. In two cases (NBS and ACA), such appointments were in the grey zone of violating the legal prohibition on the appointment of party cadre, as one appointee, the Governor of NBS, just froze her party function, and the other, the ACA Director, had a history of partisan engagement in local elections without a clear demonstration that the party affiliation had stopped at the time of his appointment. Additionally, in all three cases, the appointees had questionable qualifications relating to both their educational background and professional experience.

Table 2:

Summary of the nature of breaches of Weberian standards in the three observed cases, the mechanisms through which those breaches were made, and the resultant patronage functions

	National Bank of Serbia (NBS)	Anticorruption Agency (ACA)	Electro Power Industry of Serbia (EPS)
Breaches of the Weberian standards			
	<p>Competence criterion Questionable qualifications:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Governor lacks relevant work experience. ▪ Questionable degree. <p>Non-partisan criterion:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Governor (2012-) appointed as a vice-president of the ruling party. 	<p>Competence criterion Questionable qualifications:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Director (2018-) lacks relevant work experience. <p>Non-partisan criterion:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A history of party membership & electoral campaign engagement. 	<p>Competence criterion Questionable qualifications:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ CEO (2016-2022) lacks relevant work experience. ▪ Questionable degree. <p>Non-partisan criterion:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ CEO appointed from party ranks, remaining a party functionary throughout his mandate.
Mechanisms			
	Circumventing the legal ban on appointment of party members to the position of NBS Governor through the freezing of a party function.	Circumventing the spirit of the law through post-hoc statements of non-membership in the ruling at the time of appointment.	Direct appointment of party cadre.
Patronage functions			
Policy control	Alignment of measures in monetary policy or regulation of the banking sector with government's preferences.	Indirect – dismantling of anticorruption checks. Blunted the anticorruption policy through a lowered public profile and non-engagement with reported cases of conflict of interest.	The ability to impose, through the party-delegated CEO, direct control over the social and economic aspects of electricity policy (e. g., price-setting; electricity import and export decisions – as admitted by President during the winter crisis in December 2021/January 2022); investment decisions etc.)
Resource extraction	NBS' investment of its (public) cash, through the purchase of corporate bonds, into mismanaged public enterprises (e. g. Telekom).	Failure to use its powers, as per statutory mandate, to investigate cases featuring indications of extraction of public resources.	Numerous contracts and jobs awarded to companies close to donors of the ruling party, with large values. An unprecedented financial deficit.
Clientelism & "electioneering"	Campaigning for the regime in electoral campaigns. Employment of excess workforce, allegedly from the ruling party membership base.	Failure to investigate multiple reports of massive clientelist employment across the public sector, which constitutes an instance of abuse of public resources, subject to Agency's statutory investigation.	Campaigning for the regime (largest ruling party) in electoral campaigns. Employment of excess workforce, admittedly of members of the ruling party.

Source: authors' own, 2023

5.2 The “Serbian model”

The empirical analysis shows that patronage has not only persisted but has become even more blatant in its form than what is usually seen throughout the post-communist space in Eastern and Central Europe. This tendency towards the “blatantisation” of patronage in Serbia has been evident in at least two respects. First, the appointments in the three observed institutions involved members, even high officials, of the ruling party. Whether politicised appointments involve non-member party loyalists or party members is not a trivial difference. The difference could have implications for the nature and extent of party control over the work of institutions. Overt patronage politics, relying on appointed party members, enables easier pursuit of several patronage functions simultaneously⁶, as set out in the theoretical section of this paper, and as will be elaborated below, in section 5.3.

The second aspect that makes the observed patronage even more outstanding is the lack of qualifications of the appointees. In all three observed cases, the political appointees had questionable qualifications. They lacked relevant professional experience in each case, and in two out of the three cases, they had questionable degrees, which raises the question of whether they met the educational background criterion for appointment. This means that not only was the autonomy of their institutions subjected to political interests, but these institutions’ capacity was reduced as well. In comparative practice, even when appointing loyalists, political principals seek to appoint competent loyalists (Dahlström et al., 2012; Lewis & Waterman, 2013; Kopecký et al., 2016; Bach & Veit, 2018) in order to preserve the capacity of the institution, not least out of self-interest in preventing policy failures that may cause electoral damage. However, the patronage observed in the sample studied in Serbia is more pernicious. It brings about a combination of low autonomy and low capacity, which has far more negative effects on the governance process than when, despite lowered autonomy, some capacity is still preserved (Fukuyama, 2013; Bersch et al., 2017).

Patronage is typically driven by one primary function, with previous studies highlighting policy control (Page & Wright, 1999; Christensen & Læg Reid, 2006; Bearfield, 2009; Jalali & Lisi, 2015; Kopecký & Spirova, 2011; Kopecký et al., 2012, 2016, p. 420), resource extraction (Van Biezen & Kopecký, 2007), or clientelism aimed at achieving electoral advantage (Sorauf, 1959, p. 29; Laver & Schofield, 1998, p. 166; Blondel, 1995; Katz & Mair, 1995; Piattoni, 2001; O’Dwyer, 2006, p. 521; Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007, p. 7; Kopecký & Spirova, 2011; Meyer-Sahling & Jager, 2012, p. 23; Meyer-Sahling & Veen, 2012, p. 911–914; Stokes et al., 2013; Gherghina & Volintiru, 2017, 2021) as the predominant driving force. Although it cannot be ruled out that, in certain cases, other functions may coexist alongside a primary driver of patronage, it is typically assumed that one function is dominant, and the other functions are either

6 Resource extraction and/or political campaigning in exchange for clientelism (i. e. rewarding loyalists) and/or policy/institutional control.

absent or not extensively pursued. However, the patronage observed in the case studies in Serbia appears to be more all-encompassing than usual.

It has enabled the institutions under study to pursue multiple patronage-based functions. The first function was to increase policy control over the three institutions, as implicitly or explicitly demonstrated and confirmed by their leaders at various points in their work. The second function was to extract public funds, including siphoning off public funds through tenders where large contracts are awarded to party loyalists or donors. The third function, which is related to the extraction of public resources but also constitutes a separate function in itself, was the employment of party members in public enterprises and, as in the case of EPS, in other areas of public administration and the public sector (Pavlović, 2022b). The ruling party thus uses posts in the public sector to secure jobs for its members, who, in return, remain available for the party's promotional activities, including electoral campaigning.

The "Serbian model" of patronage corresponds to Model 1 of patronage set out in the theory chapter (Section 2, Table 1). This model involves performing multiple functions without significant constraints on patronage intensity and frequency. Despite belonging to the "outer perimeter" of the public sector, the three institutions observed in Serbia were still affected by patronage. This suggests that Serbia has not seen a reduction in the scope of patronage, as observed in other countries (Di Mascio et al., 2010, p. 5; Panizza et al., 2018b, 2022), and that patronage encompasses the entire breadth of the public sector, rather than being concentrated on the executive government or civil service, which are typically regarded as key partisan "battlegrounds" for perpetuating patronage (Meyer-Sahling, 2017; Zankina, 2017; Rybář & Podmaník, 2020; Staronova & Rybář, 2021; Kohoutek & Nekola, 2021).

Although repeated surveys indicate that patronage is still far from eradicated across post-communist Europe (Kopecký et al., 2012, 2016), states in this space have generally made progress in adopting Weberian standards, with some possible periods of stagnation and very few instances of "reform reversal". Such reform reversals were observed in Hungary and, to some extent, in the Baltic States in the late 2000s (Meyer-Sahling, 2006; Nakrošis & Gudžinskas, 2012, p. 108). However, it is uncommon for patronage to remain extensive in the public sector following the "Weberisation" of the public administration, in terms of breadth (i. e. spread across the entire public sector, including non-majoritarian institutions) and depth (i. e. permeating from senior management to frontline positions). Even if, in a particular state, patronage retains a significant presence, its scope typically diminishes over time (Hagemann, 2019) after the adoption of Weberian standards, and it often transforms from overt, intrusive party interference to more subtle forms of political influence in some areas of the public sector. While this does not necessarily indicate significant progress towards eradicating patronage, it could be a step towards weakening it. However, the developments in Serbia suggest a pattern of reform reversal that contrasts with the usual pattern of reform progress or stagnation observed in previous studies on Central

and Eastern Europe and elsewhere.

5.3 “Conduits” or “agents of patronage”? zooming in on party cadres and their autonomy

The experience of Serbia suggests that Weberian standards can be helpful not only as patronage preventers but also as patronage mitigators. In previous literature, a key concern related to breaches of Weberian standards has been to explore whether, in public sector appointments, partisan loyalty overrides merit (Zakharov, 2016; Hollibaugh, 2018). However, as discussed in the theoretical section, violations of Weberian standards may not only result from “partisation” but also from “de-competencisation” of appointments, which occurs when the appointed individual does not meet the set qualification criteria. Our study highlights a function of Weberian standards that has not received enough attention in the literature thus far. Namely, in public sector appointments, the “competence threshold” plays a “gatekeeping” role by preventing the appointment of individuals who lack qualifications, thus indirectly reducing the risk of having institutional leaders who face fewer constraints on abusing institutional resources when in power.

In other words, the way Weberian standards are breached can indirectly influence the way in which subsequent patronage is exercised. The case studies from Serbia demonstrate that when an unqualified cadre is appointed, the extent and intensity of negative patronage functions performed tends to be greater. In Section 2, we provide theoretical explanations for this mechanism, which involves personal autonomy and societal constraints on appointees’ choices in fulfilling the patron’s extractive needs. These constraints are influenced by reputational costs and alternative career costs, which are significantly lower for unqualified cadre, putting them in a position of greater dependency on the patron party and its interests in executing negative patronage functions, such as resource extraction (Grzymala-Busse, 2007, 2008), policy control (Christensen & Lagreid, 2006; Jalali & Lisi, 2015; Kopecký et al., 2012), and political campaigning.

6. Conclusion

The paper has demonstrated that despite the adoption of Weberian principles of meritocracy and professionalisation – a process encouraged by EU accession – patronage politics remains prevalent in Serbia, even in top-level appointments in institutions that are regarded as “must” cases of depoliticisation and prime candidates for professionalisation. Patronage politics took the form of appointments of party cadres with questionable qualifications, resulting in reduced institutional capacity and autonomy (Fukuyama, 2013; Bersch et al., 2017). This lends empirical support to the argument that the introduction of Weberian standards does not necessarily curb

patronage in practice (Meyer-Sahling et al., 2015; Gajduschek, 2013; Schuster, 2017). The form of patronage observed in Serbia involved multiple patronage functions, including policy control, resource extraction, and political and electoral mobilisation. This is a more pernicious form of patronage than in comparable post-communist transitions (Kopecký et al., 2016), where fewer of the mentioned patronage functions are typically observed, usually without being exercised extensively in an unbridled manner.

The case of Serbia highlights that (a) to better understand patronage, it is useful to deploy frameworks capable of comparing patronage models based on their perniciousness, rather than mere presence/absence indicators of patronage; (b) the trajectory of anti-patronage policy, in the context of transitional reforms in the EU neighbourhood, can lead to regression rather than progress or stagnation, as is commonly observed across the CEE and SEE space (Meyer-Sahling & Toth, 2020, p. 110); and (c) Weberian standards are relevant not only for preventing patronage – which has proven to be a difficult challenge – but also for mitigating patronage by filtering out party cadres who, due to their low reputational and career costs, would have no constraints in abusing institutional resources for partisan purposes.

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