# CIVIL SERVANTS' RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION PRACTICES IN EUROPEAN UNION MEMBER STATES

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**Abstract**
The purpose of our study is to provide a up-to-date comparative analysis of the practices used in civil servants recruitment and selection in European Union countries and to identify recent reform tendencies in this area. Our study has drawn upon extensive documentation regarding recent evolution of the practices used in civil servants recruitment and selection in the group of countries inclued in our study. Civil service recruitment systems have been analysed in terms of competency delegation, methods used in civil servants selection and openness of the recruitment process towards candidates coming from outside the civil service system. A distinct section of our comparative study deals with senior civil servants recruitment and analyses the recruitment procedures applied to this category of civil servants with regard to recruitment procedures and openness towards occupying senior management positions from outside the system. Our study shows that traditional civil service systems undergo a series of reforms and changes determined by the need to answer current requirements of the population and governments.
**Keywords**: civil service, recruitment, selection, comparative study

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the current context of the knowledge based economy and of a more and more competitive environment, public institutions face the challenge to attract and maintain high performing employees (Profiroiu & Profiroiu, 2006; Huerta Melchor, 2013). The quality and efficiency of the staffing process and the organizational capacity to retain high performing and productive workforce are influenced by numerous factors, especially in public sector, where modern and innovative recruitment and selection techniques need to comply with the rigour of legal provisions and of European administrative principles.

The experience of other EU member states in implementing human resource management activities can represent a lesson and an important step in documenting reform measures in this area. The aim of this paper is to perform an comparative study among EU member states in order to analyse recent reformative measures and to identify successful and innovative practices in the area of civil servants recruitment and selection.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Rodriguez et al. (2002) consider that in order to improve organizational efficiency and productivity and to provide high quality services, two extremely important human resources elements need to be combined: select competent and well prepared personnel able to contribute to reaching organizational mission and create the right environment to support their development. The quality of recruitment and selection activities is essential for the human resources management system as these two activities influence the type of training programmes employees need to attend as well as their competency management (Lepak & Gowan, 2010).

Specialists appreciate that public institutions face real difficulties in personnel recruitment, especially in the critical areas. The constant pressure to do more with less resources results in assuming more responsibilities by existing employees and exceeding their main attributions. In this context, HR specialists need to answer the requirement to identify and attract within the institution the right persons in the shortest periods (Davidson et al., 2007). However, public sector recruitment needs to follow lengthy procedures that will prove the correctness and transparency of the entire process. Given the current challenges, public institutions will have to establish an equilibrium in the area of personnel recruitment and selection between these competing values: the need to perform a time efficient process and, at the same time, to cover all necessary procedures (Berman et al., 2013).

In organizations where top management does not appreciate the value of the human resources, the HR department does not play an important role either, but fulfil mainly administrative tasks that are necessary for the institution to continue functioning. The lack of strategic HR planning suggests that human resources management is treated in a fragmented reactive manner which has proved to be more costly and less efficient than long term planned activity (Davidson et al., 2007).

Huerta Melchor (2013) considers that despite the job crisis in the private sector, which will increase the number of candidates in the public sector, public institutions will have to offer more than a safe workplace to attract qualified workforce. Sometimes, public institutions' negative image represents an obstacle in attracting well prepared personnel.

Maintaining high qualified workforce and reaching the intended results depend on employees satisfaction which is obtained through an adequate human resources management, a challenging work environment that offers career development opportunities, where employees benefit from constructive

feedback from their line managers, they are respected and their merits are recognised (Raşcă and Deaconu, 2008).

## 3. ENTERING THE CIVIL SERVICE IN THE EU MEMBER STATES

Civil servants recruitment and selection procedures differ from one EU member state to another. In order to enter *career based civil service*, a person is appointed on a beginner position, at the lowest career level, they need to fulfil a series of specific requirements and to prove the necessary knowledge and preparation to occupy the position. Within this system, a civil servant will successively occupy different positions within the administrative hierarchy of the civil service, while the job holder benefits from stability. This type of system is implemented in Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Ireland, Luxembourg, Portugal and Spain. Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden generally use the *position based system*, excepting the external affairs domain and the judicial system. The main characteristic of this system is that civil servants recruitment and selection is performed in the same way as in the private sector. Civil servants are recruited for a certain civil service position but they can apply for any other vacant position within the public sector if they meet the requirements imposed by position structure or vacant civil service position and assumes fulfilling its specific attributions (Androniceanu, 2004).

Civil servants recruitment and selection is based on formalised procedures mainly in the EU states which implement career based civil service or are performed without using formalised procedure and implement similar methods to the private sector organizations, in which case public authorities and institutions are searching for persons who possess the necessary aptitudes and professional experience required to occupy the vacant positions (Androniceanu, 2004).

The methods used to asses candidates do not depend on the civil service category used in each country. Most EU member states use case studies, written tests, competency based interviews and online forms. Other methods used, but to a lesser extent, are oral presentations, foreign language knowledge tests, personality tests, knowledge assessment interviews, selections based on CV or application, group exercises or online tests (EUPAN, 2014).

EU member states usually appraise candidates competencies, knowledge, behaviour and reasoning. The main competencies appraised are numerical and verbal abilities, team work and social abilities, leadership, planning and analytical competences, position specific competencies, foreign languages knowledge, technical abilities, communication, creativity and proactive behaviour (EUPAN, 2014).

After 2008, EU member states introduced a series of changes in the recruitment and selection process (EUPAN, 2014):

- Austria, Belgium, France, Ireland, Portugal changed the means used to select and/or test the candidates;

- Croatia, Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Malta, Poland and Romania introduced legal provisions in the area of recruitment and selection;

- Iceland, Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands improved the IT systems; Iceland, Denmark and the Netherlands have invested efforts into standardizing decentralised recruitment and selection processes using civil service data base, online application and testing, which results into a more efficient, cost effective and transparent recruitment process;

- Italy and Lithuania have introduced new recruitment/selection systems.

There are also EU member states, Cyprus, Germany, Spain, Sweden and Slovenia, which have not introduced any changes in personnel recruitment and selection during this period.

The main changes of the recruitment and selection process aim for a common strategy regarding the communication channels used in the recruitment area, increased use of IT means, professionalization of the members of the recruitment committee and use of new means to appraise candidates competencies, knowledge, behaviour and reasoning (EUPAN, 2014).

We can conclude that the tendency to transform the recruitment and career development system into a more flexible one in present in all EU member states and is a continuous process. Most countries open their civil service career system, introduce flexible recruitment procedures, allow recruitment of personnel from the private sector and access into the civil service of mid-career persons, allow fast promotion on high level positions, consolidate mobility policies, make possible the recruitment of persons who did not pass through specific recruitment positions who, consequently, do not meet the necessary requirements to occupy a civil service position.

The main improvement measures undertaken by EU member states in the area of recruitment and selection are (EUPAN, 2014):

- candidates assessment based on a competency framework;

- increase mobility in the private sector in order to improve personnel motivation: increased personnel mobility in the public sector involve transparent public services management and civil servants professional development as well as an improved human resources distribution;

- establish collaborations with recruitment agencies in publishing vacant positions so that the information would reach as many persons qualified for a certain position as possible;

- provide professional training for selection committee members;

- use of standards and methodologies in personnel recruitment and selection;

- use of psychometric tests which are accessible in terms of costs and increase the efficiency of the testing process.

EU member states consider that the key success factors in personnel recruitment and selection are process digitization, pooling of human and financial resources and introduction of new selection methods that will transform the process into a faster, more efficient and transparent one (EUPAN, 2014).

Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania and Slovenia use different methods in senior civil servants recruitment and selection, while Croatia, Finland, France, Iceland, Latvia, Luxembourg, Slovakia, Spain and Sweden apply the same methods they use for other civil servants categories. There are mainly tested managerial and leadership abilities, teamwork, communication and technical abilities. The most frequently used selection methods are case study, interview, written tests and personality tests (EUPAN, 2014).

The main changes introduced in senior civil servants recruitment and selection are (EUPAN, 2013b):

- in France have been revised the requirements regarding the knowledge and professional experience needed to enter senior civil servants category;

- in Malta increased attention is paid to basic competences needed to occupy a senior civil servant position; applications are made through electronic means; candidates take a psychometric test followed by an interview with a consultative committee for senior civil servants appointment;

- in Lithuania have been established new recruitment requirements for senior civil servants positions and a more focused appraisal procedure of the candidates for these positions.

## 4. EU MEMBER STATES COMPARATIVE STUDIES

In the current section of our paper, the comparativ study regarding the practices implemented in the area of civil servants recruitment and selection in twenty European Union member states is presented. The aim of our study is to analyse the differences and similarities among the practices implemented in the staffing process in the twenty EU member states, as well as recent reformative measures and to identify successful and innovative practices in this area.

## 4.1. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to perform this type of analysis unitary data regarding the main features of the recruitment and selection activities has been obtained from the OECD Human Resources Management Country Profiles database, accessible to http://www.oecd.org/gov/pem/hrpractices.htm.

Recruitment and selection practices have been analysed with respect to competency delegation, methods used in civil servants selection and openness of the recruitment process towards candidates coming from outside the civil service system.

The EU countries included in our study are: Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom.

In order to perform a comprehensive analysis of this human resources management area, the data provided by OECD has been complemented by information and relevant examples regarding recruitment and selection practices in the twenty EU member states included in our study provided by other specialised institutions such as The Ministry of the Presidency Spain (2010) and EUPAN (2013, 2014).

## 4.2. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

As mentioned in the previous section, EU member states apply either a career based recruitment system or a position based one. The choice of the recruitment and selection system type depends on the political, cultural or legal context and on the type of administrative system in each state. However, there are countries which combine features of the two recruitment systems and implement a hybrid one in order to be able to provide an adequate answer to organizational needs. Table 1 shows the classification of recruitment systems used in the public sector of the countries included in our study.

TABLE 1. CATEGORIES OF CIVIL SERVANTS RECRUITMENT SYSTEMS

| Career based system | Hybrid system | mainly based on career | mainly based on position | Position based system |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Austria | **Belgium** | ✓ | | **Denmark**<br>more position based compared to other countries included in the study |
| France<br>the most career based system compared to other countries included in the study | **Czech Republic** | | | **Estonia** |
| Germany | **Poland** | | ✓ | **Finland**<br>highly based on position system |
| Greece<br>highly based on career system | **Slovenia** | | ✓ | **Hungary**<br>more position based compared to other countries included in the study |
| Italy<br>highly based on career system | **Slovak Republic*** | | | **The Netherlands**<br>the most position based system compared to other states included in the study |
| Portugal<br>more career based compared to other countries included in the study | | | | **Sweden**<br>one of the most position systems included in the study |
| Spain<br>highly based on career system | | | | **United Kingdom**<br>one of the most position systems included in the study |
| Ireland* | | | | |

Source: OECD, http://www.oecd.org/gov/pem/hrpractices.htm

*OECD does not provide information regarding civil service recruitment system in Ireland and The Slovak Republic. The information presented in the table above has been complemented with information regarding these two states provided in the study performed by The Ministry of the Presidency Spain (2010).

In terms of recruitment and selection competency delegation, EU member state use either centralised, decentralised or mixed systems; however, the decentralised and mixed types of systems are the most frequently used ones (EUPAN, 2014):

- Austria, France, Hungary, Ireland, Portugal, Slovenia and Spain use mixed recruitment and selection systems.

- Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, the Slovak Republic and Sweden use decentralised recruitment and selection systems.

- Belgium uses a centralised recruitment and selection system.

- Italy uses a mixed recruitment and selection system for central public administration and a decentralised systems for local authorities.

In Estonia, the Netherlands and Sweden, countries that use decentralised recruitment and selection systems, the HR department prepares a shortlist of candidates and selection panels and external experts or recruitment agencies/firms/centres are used in candidates' recruitment and selection process.

In Belgium, which uses a centralised recruitment and selection system, civil servants recruitment is performed through SELOR agency which applies recruitment profiles specific to competency based recruitment.

The EU member states included in our study use various methods to evaluate the candidates for a civil service position, in countries such as Austria, Belgium or Sweden, the recruitment procedure varies depending on the position that is going to be filled in. The selection methods most frequently used are competitive examination, direct application and interviews.

The methods used in civil servants recruitment and selection as well as other specificities of these processes identified in the systems of the EU member states included in our study are presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2. CIVIL SERVANTS RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION METHODS AND PROCEDURE

| | |
|---|---|
| **Austria** | Examination or direct application and interviews |
| **Belgium** | Civil servants recruitment is performed through SELOR agency and the competitions organised differ depending on educational level. There are also cases when recruitment is made through direct application or interview. |
| **Czech Republic** | Competitive examination |
| **Denmark** | Direct application and interview for a specific post |
| **Estonia** | Direct application and interview for a specific post, with entry possible at all levels, including the highest. |
| **Finland** | Direct application and interview for a specific post |
| **France** | Centrally administered competitive examination, which is differentiated by seniority but not professional group. |
| **Germany** | Competitive examination for a specific post |
| **Greece** | Competitive examination |
| **Hungary** | Direct application and interview for a specific post, although an entry examination (Assessment and Development Centre) may be used in the application process. |
| **Ireland** | A centrally administered competitive examination at a relatively low grade level. The Commission for Public Service Appointments regulates public service recruitment and appointment. It sets standards for recruitment and selection, published as codes of practice. |
| **Italy** | Competitive examination |
| **The Netherlands** | Direct application and interview organized for a specific post. |
| **Poland** | Direct application and interview |
| **Portugal** | A knowledge-based examination and psychological assessment; however, complementary interviews are also used. |
| **Slovak Republic** | Examination - candidates apply for specific posts |
| **Slovenia** | Every government body administers their own employment procedure. |
| **Spain** | Competitive examination; a period of practical work also forms part of the entry process to the civil service. |
| **Sweden** | Recruitment is highly based on merit and skills. Applicants are generally taken from the labour market as a whole. |
| **United Kingdom** | Open competition for a position is organized and is subject to audits to ensure recruitment adheres to the established guidelines. Some departments, and the Fast Stream graduate programme, use assessment centres. |

Source: OECD, http://www.oecd.org/gov/pem/hrpractices.htm

In the United Kingdom, a specific career scheme known as the "fast stream" is dedicated to university graduates. In this case, selection is coordinated by the civil service office and is performed by the recruitment and selection agency. Through "the fast stream", competent university graduates attend a training programme, after their access into the civil service, in order to acquire as fast as possible the necessary knowledge to fulfil their duties (Bossaert et al., 2001).

In some EU countries, certain educational diplomas are required in order to occupy a civil service position. In Belgium, there have been recent attempts to replace meeting education requirements, certified by a diploma, with meeting competency requirements. It implies that the person can sign up for the selection procedure and can be appointed on a certain position if they prove they own the necessary competences (gained in another workplace) even if they do not own a diploma to certify it. Putting in place this procedure has faced resistance, in Belgium, as owning a diploma has been considered a more objective criteria. The competency based procedure has been rarely applied so far and only in situations of severe lack of specific competences on the labour market, for example the case of IT specialists (OECD, 2011a).

The common feature of recruitment and selection systems in EU member state is that these processes are based on the principles of openness, impartiality, fairness and transparency (EUPAN, 2014). In this regard, Estonia introduced a new public service legislation which imposes open competition, increased transparency of the recruitment process, guaranties equal access and puts in place a new recruitment system for the public sector (EUPAN, 2013b).

The EU member states included in our study occupy vacant positions with people coming both from external and internal source, the situation for each country is presented in Table 3.

Some EU member states where recruitment from outside civil service system was performed in more restrictive conditions have been undertaking measures in order to increase the use of external recruitment for professionals (for example Belgium and Germany), for technical support personnel (Belgium), for management (Finland) or for top management (France, the Netherlands and Sweden); in Ireland, action has been taken to increase the use of external recruitment for all grades, in particular all assistant secretary level positions and above are open to external recruitment.

There are however EU member states where measures have been taken in order to decrease the use of external recruitment, for example, for secretarial and technical positions in France and Finland; for professionals, secretarial and technical support staff in Greece and Portugal; for management and professionals in Italy.

TABLE 3. STAFFING PROCEDURE OPENNESS: INTERNAL AND/OR EXTERNAL SOURCE

| | |
|---|---|
| **Austria** | All posts are open for direct application by internal and external applicants |
| **Belgium** | Some posts are open to direct application by external candidates. |
| **Czech Republic** | All vacancies are published externally and all posts are open to internal and external recruitment through direct application. |
| **Denmark** | All vacancies are published externally and open to external recruitment. |
| **Estonia** | All vacancies are published and open to internal and external recruitment. |
| **Finland** | All posts being published and open to internal and external recruitment. |
| **France** | Most posts are open to internal and external recruitment, with applicants applying directly to the post. |
| **Germany** | No posts are open to external recruitment and external applicants first have to apply for entry into the public service. |
| **Greece** | No posts are open to external recruitment and all applicants first have to enter the public service. |
| **Hungary** | There is no requirement for openings to be published, but all posts are open to external applicants. |
| **Ireland** | Some posts are open to internal and external recruitment with direct application to the post. |
| **Italy** | All posts are open to internal and external recruitment. |
| **The Netherlands** | All vacancies are published internally. Most posts are open to external recruitment. |
| **Poland** | All vacancies are open to internal and external applicants |
| **Portugal** | Some posts are open to external recruitment. |
| **Slovak Republic** | Most posts are open to external recruitment. |
| **Slovenia** | All posts are open to external applicants but employers are required to first check for candidates from within the civil service. |
| **Spain** | Most posts are filled internally and some are open to external recruitment through direct application. |
| **Sweden** | Almost all vacancies are published externally. |
| **United Kingdom** | Given the economic crisis, all vacancies have been considered in the context of departmental plans to reduce expenditure, so that some vacancies are filled internally from surplus staff pools before being opened up to other government departments. |

Sursa: OECD, http://www.oecd.org/gov/pem/hrpractices.htm

There are also states where no recent action has been taken to increase or decrease the use of external recruitment such as Spain.

Recruitment of senior civil servants in EU member states is usually performed applying different procedures to the ones used for other civil servants categories.

Of the countries included in our study, Austria, Belgium, Estonia, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and Slovenia recruit their senior civil servants in a more centralised manner.

Using the data provided by OECD, the countries included in our study have been divided into four categories based on their recruitment procedure openness towards occupying senior management positions from outside the system, as follows:

- states where all senior management positions are published externally: Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Slovak republic, Slovenia;

- states where a good proportion of senior management positions are open to external recruitment: Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Portugal;

- states where senior managers can only be recruited from within the public service: Greece, the Netherlands;

- states where some positions are open to external recruitment: Spain.

In Sweden, senior managers are politically appointed employees on a shorter-term contract who can be professionals recruited externally, or even former politicians.

In the United Kingdom, potential leadership is systematically identified through performance assessment.

A series of particularities of senior civil servants recruitment procedures implemented in EU member states are presented Table 4 below.

TABLE 4. SENIOR CIVIL SERVANTS RECRUITMENT PROCEDURES

| | |
|---|---|
| **Austria** | All recruitment of senior civil servants goes through a selection panel and/or an assessment centre whose final decision is binding. |
| **Belgium** | Selection panels are systematically used. |
| **Denmark** | Recruitment is managed at the ministerial/agency level. |
| **Estonia** | Appointments are made through open competitions and assessment centers are regularly used. |
| **Finland** | Assessment of candidates includes interviews and tests, if necessary. The selection criteria for senior management posts in central government were revised in 2011. |
| **France** | Senior civil servants are recruited as such upon entry to the public service. |
| **Germany** | Senior managers are selected through competitive examination and managed as a group throughout their careers. |
| **Greece** | All positions in all management levels are selected by the Supreme Council for the Selection of Personnel, an independent HRM body. |
| **Italy** | Senior civil servants are selected by examination. |
| **The Netherlands** | Recruitment goes through a selection panel or assessment centre whose final decision is binding. |
| **Poland** | All recruitment goes through a selection panel, whose final decision is binding. |
| **Spain** | Senior management are mostly recruited through career progression in the public service. |

Source: OECD, http://www.oecd.org/gov/pem/hrpractices.htm

EU member states tend to recruit senior civil servants in a centralised manner, using a profile designed especially for this civil servants category. However, only France and the United Kingdom have put in place mechanisms to identify potential senior servants in the first stages of their careers (OECD, 2011b).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Traditional civil service systems undergo a series of reforms and changes determined by the need for a more flexible civil service considering recent demographic evolutions, the competition posed by private sector organizations as well as public institutions' need for personnel in different moments and circumstances. In addition, civil servants need to improve their ability to implement policies and to answer government and citizens requirements.

The main tendencies in this area are less use of competition based assessment, increased number of persons who occupy a civil service position coming from outside the system or from a lateral position, recruitment of executive personnel who prove managerial and leadership competencies, previous managerial experience tends to become an important recruitment criteria.

Numerous EU member states tend to employ external recruitment rather than an internal career system where recruitment is used only during the first stages of the career and to increase personnel mobility to the private sector which also produces higher personnel motivation, career development and improved human resources distribution.

In order to improve public institutions capacity to perform a high quality recruitment procedures, EU member states have also invested resources into providing appropriate professional training for selection committee members, have diversified the selection methods used in the recruitment process or have used specialised external bodies and agency to recruit the necessary personnel.

Through our paper, we have performed an updated analysis of the main features of the recruitment process in which have been included twenty European Union member states. However, we consider that civil servants recruitment and selection process can be further analysed using a more extensive number of EU member states and that features specific to different categories of states can be identified in this area of the human resources management.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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