

# THE FIFTH TRANS-EUROPEAN DIALOGUE IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION BUDAPEST, 1-3 FEBRUARY, 2012

The Trans-European Dialogue in Public Administration (TED) is an academic event co-organized each year by the two key professional associations of Public Administration in Europe, the European Group on Public Administration (EGPA) and the Network of Institutes and Schools of Public Administration in Central and Eastern Europe (NISPAcee). Each TED focuses on a selected key theme of contemporary public administration, and invites, or accepts contributions of, the leading scholars of the field.

The venue of TEDs alternates between Central/Eastern and Western Europe. This year's TED – the fifth one (hence 'TED5') – was hosted by the Department of Public Policy and Management, Corvinus University of Budapest. The choice of location in a way reflects the international esteem of the Department's academic quality by the leading European academic organizations of Public Administration and Public Management.

In the following we give a brief account of this important event. Our motivation for doing so is twofold. The contributions to TED5 (most of which will soon be, and some of which already are, available in print format) offer a distinctive opportunity for students and scholars studying central government structures and their politicization in a truly comparative and European perspective. In addition to this the papers may serve as a sort of exemplar, or 'international best practice' possibly benefiting other social science disciplines as well.

Two important events preceded the conference, and to some extent helped participants to prepare for, TED5. Firstly, the *Transylvanian Review of Administrative Sciences* issued a special edition related to the topic of TED5 under the title: 'Agencies in Central and Eastern Europe'. In the first place, this issue has contributed to the existing knowledge in the field, for example, in studying the impact of the European Union and of the economic crisis on the (de)agencification process in countries of Central and Eastern Europe. On the other hand, the special issue provided an important milestone in the preparation for TED5 discussions. Secondly, TED5 had a special introduction on 1 February with a discussion entitled 'A Case for Trans-European Dialogue in Public Administration: The Twenty Years of The Leuven-Corvinus Cooperation (1992-2012)'.

## **TED5: The politics of agency governance**

This year's TED focused on a key topic of contemporary government reforms, the 'Politics of agency governance'. TED5 hosted many of the most renowned European researchers of the field, the former and current leaders of the European (EGPA) and global (IIAS) academic organizations of Public Administration, as well as prominent



American, Chinese, and Turkish scholars. Hungarian researchers active in the field also participated at this event.

Why questions of agencification – and, within that, its political aspects – were chosen as the key theme of TED5? Over the past three decades agencification – that is, increasing creation of, and reliance on, semi-autonomous agencies operating at arms' length of the government and carrying out all kinds of executive and regulatory tasks – has become an important element of the government machinery all around the world.

An important motive for agencification is the so-called logic of political credibility (Majone, 2001). By creating an agency at arms' length, politicians show their willingness to refrain from interference; the agency can thus carry out its tasks in an impartial and expert manner. In practice, however, we see that politicians keep on interfering and meddling with agencies (Pollitt *et al.*, 2004). Moreover, many agency tasks are inherently political because they involve the implementation of policies, decisions about allocation or distribution of scarce resources, and delivery of goods/services to citizens/voters.

There are many other ways in which politics and/or politicians (still) play a role in and around agencies. For example, agencies experience, at street-level, which policies work well and which do not. This information is necessary input for policy makers inside the government. However, this input is not always heard, processed or even appreciated by, for example, ministries. Therefore, some agencies have developed new ways to influence policy debates and development themselves; they become active participants in the political or policy debate (Verschuere, 2009). See for example the transnational networks of regulatory agencies, in which regulatory policies are shaped, outside of the influence sphere of national governments and politicians.

A third way in which politicians can exert influence on agencies is through their role in the design of agencies. In many countries, the decision to establish an agency requires a political decision, for instance legislation. Politicians can thus decide whether an agency is born, what its task will be, its legal form, governance structure, funding, and so on. Politicians may also decide who is appointed as CEO and/or member(s) of the board; political appointments are of course the ultimate way to influence agency functioning on a daily basis. The latter aspect of the topic has been shown to be especially relevant for new or transitional states where the level of politicization of public administrations tends to be higher than in countries with long-established democracies (see OECD, 2009).

TED5 focused on aspects of politics in and around agencies in CEE, CIS and Western European countries, whereby 'politicians' include both ministers as members of executive cabinets, as well as the role of parliament and parliamentarians, as political parties. Contributions focused on issues such as: the appointment of agency CEOs and board members (including issues of patronage and politicization); the influence of agencies on the political and/or policy debate; the role of politics and politicians in the decision to create agencies; the role of politics and politicians in the governance (steering, control) of agencies; the merits of agencification for politicians and political parties (including shifting of blame and risks, direct influence through appointments,

assets in political bargains etc.); and the effects of interference by politicians in agency matters for the functioning of agencies.

TEDs are intended to induce dialogue not only in the 'East-West' dimension – the relevance of which has been constantly diminishing anyway by giving room to other geographical clusterings – but also between related disciplines (such as 'core' Public Administration, Political Science, Organization Studies and Constitutional/Public Law), between various research traditions, and between generations of academics. Therefore it is particularly indicative of TED5's success that the event was able to attract not only many of Europe's most prominent researchers of the field but also a significant number of young scholars – some of them still working on their Ph.D. degrees or even being Master's students – both from Western and Eastern/South Eastern Europe.

### **Follow-up and dissemination activities**

It is the tradition of TEDs that one of the co-organizers, NISPAcee, through its 'NISPAcee Journal of Public Administration and Policy' (NJPAP) publishes a Special Issue containing a selected set of research papers underlying/summarizing the contributions of TED5 participants. In the case of TED5 this Special Issue – which will be also available as a separate book – can be expected to appear in fall 2012. In the case of TED5, given the impressive quality and quantity of contributions (both oral and written) the organizers are also contemplating the initiation of an additional Symposium or Special Issue in an internationally renowned, blind peer reviewed academic journal other than NJPAP. Decision on this second publication project will be made later this year.

### **References:**

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