



THE PUBLIC SECTOR SHOULD BE NON-POLITICIZEDⁱ

Stefan Mitikjⁱⁱ

Department of Politics and International Studies (POLIS),
University of Cambridge,
Cambridge, United Kingdom

Abstract:

This policy brief examines the pervasive problem of political influence in North Macedonia's public administration, focusing on how partisan appointments undermine institutional effectiveness, accountability, and public trust. Despite existing legal frameworks, the absence of a robust system for merit-based recruitment enables the persistence of nepotism and political favouritism across senior management positions. Drawing on empirical evidence and recent cases, the paper identifies key procedural weaknesses in selection and evaluation processes that compromise administrative performance. It argues for the adoption of a comprehensive Law on Senior Management Service to establish transparent, competence-based criteria for appointments and performance assessments. The proposed reforms—rooted in meritocracy, transparency, and accountability—aim to strengthen institutional capacity, improve service delivery, and restore citizens' confidence in democratic governance.

Keywords: public administration; merit-based recruitment; political appointments; governance reform; institutional trust; North Macedonia; accountability; civil service professionalism

1. Introduction

The quality, integrity, and independence of public administration are foundational to democratic governance. A professional and politically neutral civil service ensures that public institutions function effectively, deliver services equitably, and maintain public confidence in the state. Conversely, when political interests capture administrative positions, institutions risk becoming extensions of party structures rather than instruments of public service. Such politicisation erodes the principles of meritocracy and accountability, distorts decision-making, and diminishes citizens' trust in governance.

ⁱ ЈАВНИОТ СЕКТОР ТРЕБА ДА БИДЕ НЕПОЛИТИЗИРАН

ⁱⁱ Correspondence: email stefan.mitikj@nyu.edu

In many transitional democracies, including North Macedonia, the persistence of political influence over administrative appointments reflects the incomplete institutionalisation of public sector reform. Despite government commitments to depoliticise the civil service—particularly in the context of European Union accession—the gap between legislation and implementation remains substantial. Partisan appointments, nepotism, and clientelism continue to shape recruitment and promotion practices, especially in senior management positions. These patterns reinforce a cycle of weak performance, low morale, and limited institutional autonomy, undermining both state capacity and democratic legitimacy.

North Macedonia's experience is not unique. Across the Western Balkans, public administration reform has been a central but elusive objective of post-socialist transformation. International frameworks, including the European Commission's Principles of Public Administration (OECD, 1999; 2023) and SIGMA assessments, emphasise the importance of a merit-based senior civil service as a prerequisite for effective governance. However, local political dynamics—such as patronage networks and coalition politics—often impede reform efforts. Understanding why these patterns persist, despite formal commitments to change, requires examining not only the legal framework but also the informal norms, incentives, and institutional weaknesses that enable political appointments to flourish.

This policy brief focuses on the structural and procedural deficiencies that perpetuate politicisation in North Macedonia's public administration. It explores how the absence of a dedicated Law on Senior Management Service leaves space for arbitrary decision-making and political interference. Drawing on empirical evidence, documented cases, and comparative insights, the brief highlights the consequences of partisan appointments for governance quality, service delivery, and public trust.

The paper proceeds in five parts. Following this introduction, the Executive Summary outlines the key issues and proposed reforms. Section 3 examines the nature and prevalence of partisan appointments and their impact on governance performance. Section 4 assesses the shortcomings of current selection processes, while Section 5 discusses the broader importance of merit-based systems for administrative integrity. Section 6 outlines practical recommendations for reform, and Section 7 considers the expected outcomes of implementing a transparent and professional senior management framework.

Ultimately, the brief argues that establishing a merit-based and accountable public administration is not only a technical reform but also a political and societal imperative. Restoring professionalism in the civil service is essential for rebuilding citizen trust, enhancing institutional performance, and consolidating democracy in North Macedonia.

2. Executive Summary

In democratic states, the independence of public administration from political influence is essential for good governance, institutional effectiveness, and citizen trust. In North Macedonia, the persistence of partisan appointments and nepotism in senior

management positions undermines these principles. These practices compromise the quality of public services, weaken institutional accountability, and erode public confidence.

This policy brief examines the structural and procedural weaknesses that enable political appointments, highlights their consequences for governance, and outlines practical reforms. Central to these reforms is the adoption of a Law on Senior Management Service, which would ensure that appointments to senior public administration positions are based on merit, transparent procedures, and accountability mechanisms.

3. Partisan Appointments and Governance Challenges

Political influence in the public sector remains a significant problem in North Macedonia, despite formal regulations and legal frameworks. A recent case illustrates the issue vividly: on July 12, 2022, the Minister of Education appointed Driton Ganiu, the brother of a municipal mayor, as principal of the “26 July” Primary School in Shuto Orizari, even though he did not hold the required director’s certificate. This appointment bypassed the normal procedures for recruitment, which are designed to ensure fairness and competence.

Such interventions are not isolated incidents. Across the public sector, similar cases of political favouritism have been documented in state-owned enterprises, municipal administrations, and educational institutions. Appointments based on political affiliation rather than merit lead to several negative outcomes. Firstly, they compromise the quality of management and decision-making, as individuals often lack the experience, education, or technical knowledge required for their roles. Secondly, partisan appointments reduce accountability, since employees who owe their positions to political figures are less likely to act independently or challenge poor practices. Finally, these practices erode public trust in institutions, creating a perception that the government serves political interests rather than public needs.

The absence of a clear legal framework, such as a Law on Senior Management Service, allows political favouritism to persist. Without formalised criteria for senior appointments, recruitment and promotion decisions are often inconsistent, non-transparent, and vulnerable to influence by ruling parties. This lack of structure reinforces a cycle in which underqualified leaders perpetuate inefficiency, poor performance, and low morale among public sector employees.

4. Selection Processes and Their Shortcomings

The weaknesses in appointment processes are closely tied to the lack of defined selection criteria. Draft legislation calls for public announcements and competitive procedures for senior positions, but these guidelines remain vague and incomplete. The result is that political considerations often outweigh merit in the selection of candidates. Job advertisements are sometimes posted prematurely or inconsistently, interviews are

poorly structured, and rankings are rarely transparent. Appeals processes for rejected candidates are underdeveloped, leaving the public with little confidence in the fairness of these procedures.

Empirical evidence highlights the scope of the problem. Research by Popović and Panovski (2020) found that over half of senior management appointees lacked relevant experience in the positions they were tasked to lead. This lack of expertise limits their ability to manage resources effectively, supervise staff, and implement policies, ultimately reducing institutional performance and impeding public service delivery. In addition, poorly qualified leaders set a permissive standard for underperformance, which demotivates competent staff and lowers overall institutional productivity.

The consequences of political appointments extend beyond operational inefficiency. They undermine the hierarchical balance within institutions, disrupt the flow of administrative processes, and weaken accountability mechanisms. In the absence of standardised recruitment and performance evaluation procedures, institutions risk becoming vehicles for political patronage rather than instruments of public service.

5. The Importance of Merit-Based Systems

A robust public administration relies on a merit-based approach to recruitment and promotion. Merit systems prioritise experience, education, technical competence, and professional integrity, rather than political connections. When implemented effectively, these systems create institutional stability, encourage professionalism, and enhance service delivery. Employees who are selected based on merit are more likely to remain in their positions, develop expertise, and contribute to long-term organisational improvement.

Merit-based systems also promote transparency and accountability. Clear criteria for recruitment and promotion, coupled with structured performance evaluations, create predictable and fair procedures that are resistant to manipulation. Public confidence in the civil service grows when citizens perceive that appointments are based on competence rather than political allegiance. In turn, this strengthens democratic governance and fosters trust in state institutions.

Beyond institutional performance, meritocracy contributes to broader social and developmental outcomes. When citizens perceive the state as fair and impartial, they are more likely to engage constructively with public institutions, comply with regulations, and invest their effort and aspirations domestically. Conversely, when opportunities for advancement are determined by political loyalty rather than competence, social mobility stagnates, and citizens—particularly the educated youth—become disillusioned with the prospects for professional and civic fulfilment at home.

In the context of North Macedonia, building a merit-based public administration is therefore not only a technical reform but a societal imperative. It can help address widespread perceptions of inequality and favouritism that have long undermined public trust. Over time, the consistent application of meritocratic principles can foster a civic culture that values expertise and fairness, reduces incentives for corruption, and restores

faith in state institutions as credible guarantors of opportunity. Such a transformation would have far-reaching implications for governance quality, economic competitiveness, and even migration patterns, as citizens regain confidence that success within their own country depends on ability and integrity rather than connections or political patronage.

6. Recommended Reforms

Addressing the problem of partisan appointments requires a comprehensive and sustained reform package. First, North Macedonia must adopt a Law on Senior Management Service that clearly defines eligibility criteria, professional qualifications, and competency standards for senior management positions. This law should also codify transparent procedures for appointment, dismissal, and accountability, including mechanisms for independent monitoring and review. Establishing such a legal framework would close the current regulatory gaps that allow discretionary and politically motivated appointments to persist.

Second, recruitment processes must be fully transparent. All stages—from candidate screening to interviews and final selection—should be documented and subject to public scrutiny. Decision-making bodies should be required to publish justifications for their choices, and clear opportunities for appeal or feedback should be available to rejected candidates. Broader forms of public oversight, such as citizen monitoring platforms or civil society participation, can further enhance the legitimacy and perceived fairness of these procedures.

Third, performance evaluation systems should be institutionalised. Senior managers must be assessed regularly against measurable benchmarks related to efficiency, leadership, and public service outcomes. Evaluation results should be reviewed by independent bodies and made accessible to relevant oversight institutions, ensuring that accountability extends beyond formal compliance. Linking career advancement to verified performance, rather than political affiliation, would reinforce professionalism and create incentives for excellence across the public sector.

Finally, a culture of meritocracy must be cultivated throughout public institutions. This requires not only legislative reform but also a transformation of administrative norms and professional expectations. Regular training programmes, career development pathways based on measurable achievement, and recognition mechanisms for high-performing staff are essential for embedding meritocratic values in everyday practice.

Beyond improving governance, these reforms could also yield important social and demographic benefits, particularly in curbing the outward migration of skilled and educated citizens. Many young professionals in North Macedonia cite the lack of meritocracy, fairness, and institutional predictability as key reasons for considering emigration. When advancement depends more on political loyalty than on competence, the domestic opportunity structure becomes demotivating and exclusionary. Implementing transparent and merit-based systems would therefore signal a credible commitment to fairness and equality of opportunity—factors that shape citizens' perceptions of belonging and future prospects.

In this way, public administration reform becomes not only a question of efficiency, but also a strategy for retaining human capital and rebuilding trust between citizens and the state. By aligning administrative practices with meritocratic norms, North Macedonia can strengthen governance, enhance civic confidence, and reduce one of the structural drivers of emigration: the belief that professional success is unattainable without political connections.

7. Expected Outcomes

The adoption of these reforms is likely to produce substantial benefits. Merit-based recruitment and promotion will improve institutional capacity and the quality of leadership, while transparent processes and independent monitoring will enhance accountability and public trust. Citizens will be more confident in the ability of state institutions to serve their interests effectively and fairly. Over time, the establishment of meritocratic norms will reduce corruption, improve efficiency, and create a more professional civil service capable of implementing policies and delivering public services effectively.

Importantly, these improvements are also likely to influence broader social dynamics, particularly migration intentions among young and skilled citizens. In North Macedonia, as in many societies marked by persistent governance deficits, emigration often functions as a response to perceived institutional injustice, favouritism, and lack of opportunity. When citizens see advancement determined by political connections rather than competence, the incentive to seek fairer and more predictable systems abroad increases. By contrast, a credible commitment to meritocracy can gradually rebuild confidence in the domestic opportunity structure. As citizens begin to trust that their effort, education, and integrity are rewarded, the perceived benefits of remaining and investing in the national context rise.

In this sense, public administration reform is not only an institutional matter but also a social and developmental one. Strengthening fairness, professionalism, and transparency within the state can help reverse the erosion of belonging and civic faith that underlies high emigration rates. While legislative change alone cannot fully eradicate the influence of politics on public administration, it represents a critical first step. Consistent implementation, coupled with cultural and procedural shifts within institutions, is essential for restoring trust, improving governance, and ensuring that public administration serves the public rather than partisan interests. Ultimately, a more meritocratic and accountable public sector can contribute to both state resilience and the social conditions necessary to reduce the long-term drivers of emigration.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

Stefan Mitikj is a researcher in political sociology and public policy whose work explores the intersections of governance, institutional trust, and migration in Southeast Europe. He holds an MPhil in Politics and International Studies from the University of Cambridge and a BA in Political Science and Social Research and Public Policy from New York University Abu Dhabi. His research is grounded in comparative and mixed-method approaches, combining survey analysis, qualitative inquiry, and institutional analysis to examine how perceptions of fairness, legitimacy, and opportunity shape civic behaviour and migration decisions. His current research focuses on the sociology of emigration and the institutional determinants of youth mobility in post-socialist contexts, with a particular emphasis on North Macedonia and the Western Balkans. His broader academic interests include political sociology, state–society relations, and the comparative study of governance in small states.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-9894-0989>

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