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From advice to policy formulation and decision-making? Investigating the role of ministerial advisers across politico-administrative systems

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Introduction

Ministerial advisors have become been a prominent research object in public administration. Research has been focusing inter alia on the causes of their establishment and the implication of this new 'third element' in bureaucratic interactions. Further research on ministerial advisers has focussed on the role and functions of ministerial advisors in policy-making processes. However, most research has been conducted as empirical single-case studies, within the context of Westminister systems. Some contributions have been of a theorizing nature conceptualising different roles (Connaughton 2010; 2015), different arenas (Maley 2000; 2015), as well as different degrees of involvement in policy-making (Eichbaum & Shaw 2011). However, much room still remains for further theorizing ministerial advisers. As noted by Maley, the work of ministerial advisers is difficult to generalize (2015), and hence bring the process of theorizing one step further in the direction of generating and testing hypotheses in order to begin to provide explanations e.g. in differences on roles etc. This is partly due to the fact that all existing research on ministerial advisers points to what seems generic across the countries investigated, namely that advisers roles are often multiple (LSE group 2012) as well as highly variable depending upon a number of factors. So far research has pointed to the portfolio and needs of the minister (Maley 2015: 47), e.g. 'inject contestability into the policy process' (Shaw & Eichbaum 2014), the competencies the ministerial advisors bring with them when they enter the bureaucracies, as well as their educational background and political experience.

In a recent contribution, Maley suggests that ministerial advisors work in three arenas, all with a different character and purpose (2015). This paper continues along these lines, and suggests that ministerial advisors have different roles in the different phases of the policy process. Models depicting public policy making as cycles consisting of distinct stages or phases have been established in political science for several decades (Lasswell 1956; Mintzberg et al. 1976). More recent contributions have illustrated policy making as streams (Kingdon 1984), multiple streams (Zahariadas 2014), and even consisting of phases, streams and rounds (Teisman 2000). Scholarly attention and public debates suggest that ministerial advisors have become central actors in government and policy-making. However, through the lenses of the policy cycle (Howlett et al. 2009), ministerial advisors have been a 'blind spot' and so far not caught a lot of academic attention (but see Gouglas 2015).

Within the policy literature, ministerial advisers have been somewhat ignored as a distinct type of actor bringing different types of competencies etc. to the policy-process. Here, the policy process is predominantly viewed as affected by policy-specific governmental and non-governmental actor constellations, the particular interests represented therein and the associated lines of conflict. To some extent a distinction is made between governmental actors, civil servants, prime ministers, finance ministers and ministers that might be highlighted. However, given that ministerial advisors often hold a key position between the political and bureaucratic layers in central government ministries, it appears plausible that their particular contribution consequently affects several phases of the policy process.

The ambition of this paper is to bring the two strands of literature together in order to take a further step in the direction of theorizing the policy-making roles of ministerial advisers in the context of 'broader theories of policy-making' (Maley 2015: 46). The paper argues that the role of ministerial advisors depend on their formal position in the ministerial bureaucracy. We would expect that ministerial advisors with a formal position at the apex of the ministerial bureaucracies, with executive power over the line bureaucracy would be involved in both formulating policy alternatives as well as taking part in ministerial decision-making; i.e. in tasks that traditionally have been reserved for civil servants and ministers respectively.

Although recognizing the explanations offered on the individual level, this paper takes a comparative point of departure in order to investigate explanations on the institutional level of politico-administrative systems. And while recognizing the dynamic aspects of policy-making processes (Connaughton 2015: 39) and thereby recognizing the critique posed to a phase model of policy-making, this paper investigates how formal institutional features impact the roles ministerial advisers have within the specific phases of the policy process.

Thus, this paper investigates the policy role of ministerial advisors in the specific phases of the policy-process (agenda-setting, policy formulation, decision-making, implementation and evaluation) in a comparative perspective including the ministerial bureaucracies of Germany, Norway and Denmark. The main research questions posed are:

What are the core contributions of ministerial advisors to the different phases of the policy process?

And do we find differences across politico-administrative systems due to differences in the degree and type of formal politicization?

Situated in the Northern part of Europe, the countries included have experienced similar levels of external pressure to supplement ministers with ministerial advisors, such as growing media attention and internationalisation. They vary substantially, however, with regards to the number of ministerial advisors and politically appointed civil servants, and hence differ with respect to the level and type of formal politicisation. The comparative design thus enables us to investigate how such elements affect the advisors role in the policy process.

Drawing on both survey data and interviews, the paper finds that formal position affects how ministerial advisors are involved in policy formulation and decision-making phases in all three cases. However, there are case-specific configurations of the policy roles of the ministerial advisors. In Norway, the political appointees interfere in the administrative process of formulating policy alternatives, and actively participate in ministerial decision-making. Their German counterparts, on the other hand, are predominantly involved in strategic policy planning. The particular policy role of the Danish special advisors oscillates between being deeply involved in single policy formulation processes and exclusively focussing on 'selling policies', i.e. media advice.

The empirical findings of the paper show that public policy in 'media societies' is not anymore exclusively built on civil servants' expertise and political preferences of ministers, but from the very beginning is penetrated by considerations from ministerial advisers on how and when policy initiatives are to be communicated to the 'outside world'. This development on the one hand blurs the possibility to see policy-making within ministries as cycles consisting of distinct phases, and on the other hand underlines the policy relevance of ministerial advisors.

The paper first elaborates on how models of public policy have been used in the literature as analytical frameworks, before looking into recent writings on ministerial advisors. Concrete expectations are then formulated before the three cases are scrutinized in more detail.

Theoretical starting point

What exactly decides the role and importance of ministerial advisors seems opaque. Some scholars claim that the numbers of political appointees grow because the public sector has become more fragmented and specialised. This development has increased the need of actors to exercise coordination and control (Christensen et al. 2007; Dahlström 2009; Peters 2004). There has been a wish to enhance steering capacity in a decentralised apparatus (Peters 2004: 134). Other scholars see the growth of political appointees in relation with the increased media pressure (Erlandsson 2008; Ullström 2008).

The emergence of ministerial advisers across a range of Western democracies in recent decades has already attracted considerable academic attention. The main writings on ministerial advisers primarily focus on their actual work and offer important conceptualizations of their various roles (e.g. Maley 2000; Connaughton 2010; Eichbaum and Shaw 2010b), However, scholars have recently acknowledged the need to take a 'theoretical turn' (Shaw & Eichbaum 2014: 66; 2015), and to further conceptualize and theorize the research on ministerial advisers.

Models of public policy offer a theoretical framework in which ministerial advisors might be studied. Often used in the field of policy analysis, these conceptualisations first illustrated public policy making as cycles consisting of distinct stages or phases (Lasswell 1956; Mintzberg et al. 1976), from agenda-setting, formulation, and decision-making, to implementation and evaluation. Such differentiating makes it possible to investigate the impact of certain actors at certain times, and to compare across the various stages (Howlett et al. 2009: 3).

Agenda-setting refers to how problems come to the attention of political decision-makers, policy formulation is how various options are formulated within government, decision-making refers to the process of selecting from the available options, implementation is how policies are put into action, and evaluation is the interpretation of the effects of the chosen polices (Howlett et al. 2009: 12).

Howlett et al. (2009) uses a picture of an hourglass to illustrate the number of actors involved in the five stages of the policy cycle. The agenda-setting phase is multifaceted and characterized by a multitude of involved actors. Here, practically all actors in the policy universe might try to get a problem on the government agenda. Regarding the agenda-setting phase, ministerial advisors share a role with ministers, political parties, civil servants and more importantly the wider political or public debates

(Baumgartner et al. 2009). For example, new or revised policies might get on the agenda in light of new technological developments, new standards in the policy realm or growing demands by organized.

As policy options are being formulated and discussed, the number of policy actors with sufficient knowledge and resources to participate, decreases. In the policy formulation stage, civil servants most often play a crucial role – at least in parliamentary democracies. Civil servants in the ministries would typically prepare a first draft before it climbs up the hierarchical ladder. Here, civil servants draw upon their policy and technical expertise as well as upon their policy networks in the respective sector. In ministerial bureaucracies, policy proposals are refined in inter- and intra-ministerial coordination processes. Civil servants negotiate with other units in their 'home departments', counterparts in other ministries, as well as the prime ministers' office (Mayntz & Scharpf 1975; Dogan 1975; Aberbach, Putnam & Rockman 1981; Page 1992, 2012; Goetz 2007). While the general role of the civil service in policy processes has enjoyed considerable academic attention since the mid-1970s with the discovery of the "mandarins of Western Europe" (Dogan 1975), research on the particular role of political appointees is less prominent and systematic. In contrast, research on political appointees typically focuses on recruitment and appointment of political appointees, and on their socio-demographic and socio-economic backgrounds. Their concrete roles in the policy processes are seldom scrutinized. Ministerial advisors might be all from bag carriers and personal assistants to trusted advisors. The task of advising ministers is one of the most central for political appointees in several countries. There will always be limits to the advice ministers can get from civil servants. Ideally, advice from civil servants should seldom be of pure party political character. Ministerial advisors, on the other hand, can contribute where the civil servants either fail or are reluctant to give such advice (Page & Wright 2006). But the type of advice might depend on their background. While ministerial advisors with media-background might give advice on how to sell policy proposals, ministerial advisors with political background might be better equipped to contribute on how policy proposals might get to get through in cabinet and in parliament.

As formally politicised positions are typically established at the top echelons of central government ministries, ministerial advisors might in fact also be involved in policy formulation inside ministries together with the non-politicised civil servants (Page 1992; 2012). However, it's not always clear when political considerations are

brought into the policy formulation process. How civil servants share roles with politicians in the policy formulation process varies across countries and might also vary across issues and over time (Page 2012).

The number of actors is reduced even further when a decision is made (Howlett et al. 2009). In parliamentary democracies, line ministers and prime ministers are traditionally seen as the most central actors. However, it is not a simple task to determine the concrete contribution of single actors. Cabinets normally operate with little openness, and cabinet decisions can be said to be cloaked in a veil of secrecy. Ministerial advisors might play a role in ministerial and cabinet decision-making, although they traditionally have been most important as the minister's aide, and more seldom have had own decision-making competencies. However, ministerial advisors with a formal position at the apex of the ministerial bureaucracies, with executive power over the line bureaucracy, might also take part in ministerial decision-making

As the hourglass expands, the number of participants involved in implementing and evaluating the chosen policies increases (Howlett et al. 2009). However, political actors play a minor role, as implementation is often led by civil servants in the lower echelons of hierarchy or by what is called "street level bureaucrats" (Lipsky & Hill 1993). It varies exactly how and where policy implementation is carried out. In some political systems, policy implementation is partly done by central government. In other jurisdictions, it is delegated to state, regional or local levels. Since the New Public Management reforms in the 1990s, implementation is typically delegated to non-ministerial bodies, i.e. agencies and other bodies 'at arm's length' (Bach, Fleischer & Hustedt 2010).

Evaluation is also often carried out by external actors. Civil servants might participate in such activities, but share this role with external evaluation institutes, academic experts or audit offices. Political actors would typically not be involved in evaluation as this is carried out either at the working level or by external experts.

To sum up, the above findings allow us to formulate the following expectation with regard to how ministerial advisors are involved in policy processes:

Expectation 1: Ministerial advisors with no formal position in the ministerial bureaucracy will mostly advise ministers, as they have no formal competence to participate in the policy formulation and the decision-making phase.

We do anticipate, however, that their type of advice depends on their background, as elaborated above.

Expectation 2: Ministerial advisors with a formal position in the ministerial bureaucracy will not only advise ministers, but also participating in policy formulation and decision-making.

Also here we anticipate that their background will affect their role. For instance, advisors with policy expertise might participate in the process of policy formulation, which traditionally has been the prerogative of the civil servants.

Expectation 3: In general, ministerial advisors are not expected to be strongly involved in implementation and evaluation of policy.

Research design, case selection and data collection

This study is based on a comparative case design including the ministerial bureaucracies in Norway, Germany and Denmark. The case selection is based on the following considerations. Firstly, all three cases do represent European, industrialised democracies that share OECD membership. As established industrialised democracies, they are assumed to be confronted with a similar degree of mediatisation, i.e. an increasing social and political relevance of the media. Moreover, all three cases do represent established welfare states – though of different types (Esping-Andersen 1990). But with established social security systems in areas such as health, unemployment, and pensions and as industrialised countries whose economies are embedded in the global market economy, it is fair enough to assume that all three cases are confronted with similar policy problems, which the respective governments need to address. To put it differently: It is reasonable to assume that the governments in those three cases are exposed to similar levels of political, policy and media pressure in their day-to-day work.

However, the three cases differ in key respects regarding the political appointees in the executive systems. Firstly, the three cases differ regarding the degree of formal politicisation. Norway and Denmark belong to the Scandinavian group of countries, which traditionally have had few political appointees (Dahlström 2009). In Norway, however, the number of political appointees has grown steadily in recent decades

(Askim et. al 2014). Germany, on the other hand, has had a higher number of political appointees, compared to both Denmark and Norway (Dahlström 2009). Secondly, the countries differ regarding the type of political appointees and hence regarding the positions recruited on political grounds. Among the cases represented in this study, the German ministerial bureaucracy represents the oldest case with rules for formal politicisation, referring to the two top layers of the ministerial hierarchy ever since the mid 1800s. The Danish ministerial bureaucracy is called a typical "merit bureaucracy" featured by neutral recruitment also at the top and resembles a Westminster system in that respect. However, with the introduction of the special advisor in around 2000 a formally politicised position has been established (see below), although these actors still do have formal authority in the ministerial hierarchy. The Norwegian case is somewhere in-between with the introduction of formally politicised positions at the top of the ministerial hierarchies in 1947 (see below).

As table 1 shows, the differences in formal position and authority in the ministerial hierarchy, allows various comparisons across the three cases.

Table 1: Formal competence of ministerial advisors in Norway, Germany and Denmark

	Denmark	**Germany**	**Norway**
Formal position and authority in ministerial hierarchy		Administrative state secretaries and heads of divisions	State secretaries
No formal position or authority in ministerial hierarchy	Special advisors	Ministerial staff positions	Political advisors

The German administrative state secretaries might be compared to the state secretaries in Norway, while Denmark has no such position. On the other hand, the Danish special advisors might be compared to the ministerial staff in Germany, as well as the political advisors in Norway. Investigating the role of ministerial advisors across such institutional settings allows for a more nuanced understanding of their importance in the various stages of the policy process. Linking the three cases under study with the above expectations, we expect to find ministerial advisors substantially involved in policy formulation and decision-making in the Norwegian and German case, and much less involved in Denmark.

Data on the German staff units and state secretaries as well as on the Danish special advisors is based on interviews with former and current ministers, state secretar-

ies and ministerial staffers and special advisors. The interviews were conducted between June 2006 and October 2008 and between March 2013 and May 2015. The interview partners are from all federal ministries except the Ministry of Defence and the Federal Chancellery.

The Norwegian case has primarily been scrutinized through a survey to former political advisors and state secretaries. Electronic questionnaires were sent out to 283 former political appointees from the Bondevik II cabinet (2001–2005) and the Stoltenberg II cabinet (2005–2013) After two remainders the total response rate for the survey was 71 per cent.

Acknowledging the challenges having to rely on different data sources, the analysis rests on the common empirical question of what role the political appointees play in the various phases of the policy process. Their roles in the five phases (agenda-setting, policy formulation, decision-making, implementation and evaluation) have been investigated both direct by questions about the certain phases, and indirect by scrutinizing their actual roles.

Empirical analysis

Denmark: Between policy formulation and 'selling policies'?

Special advisers were introduced for real in the Danish central administration around the 00s as a result of a general legitimization of the appointment of such advisers in 1998. In the 1990s, the opposition occasionally accused the government of patronage appointments in the Prime Minister's Office resulting in an expert committee established by parliament. In 1998, this committee published a White Paper, which legitimates the minister's employment of a special adviser based upon political criteria if their appointment is tied to the ministers' term in office (Ministry of Finance 1998: 221–223). Special advisers 'are subject to the same requirements as legality, obligation to speak the truth and professional standards' (Ministry of Finance 2004: 283–284) as the civil service, but are, contrary to the permanent civil service, not restricted with respect to provide party-political advice (Ministry of Finance 2004: 287). Today, ministers that are members of the key coordination committee in government may recruit two and up to three (Ministry of Finance 2013). The number of special advisors had been rather stable until 2011, with the most – but not all – ministers having appointed one special advisor (The National Audit Office 2009: 19). For example, in 2010, 17 out of 20 ministers had a special adviser. After a shift in government in Oc-

tober 2011, the number of special advisors rose because some ministers, including the Prime Minister, employed two special advisers. In 2015, all ministers had special advisors with the prime minister and the minister for justice each employing two special advisors (Moderniseringsstyrelsen; Statsministeriet).

As in Germany and Norway the constitution prescribes a departmental principle granting responsibility for all decisions taken within the realm of his or hers ministerial portfolio. It is the Prime Minister who nominates (and can fire) ministers in the government. Together with the responsibility for distributing portfolios, calling elections and hiring top officials this gives the Prime Minister a relative strong formal position (Jensen 2011: 220). However in practice portfolios are negotiated with government coalition partners and the right to hire and fire top civil servants does not expand to the privileged for recruit persons into the permanent bureaucracy on political grounds.

The Danish permanent civil service is described as a typical "merit bureaucracy" (Christensen 2004) featured by politically neutral recruitment and promotion principles based on merit. Hence, it is not formally politicised. However, the Danish civil service is said to be highly functionally politicised (Salomonsen 2003).

Formally, Danish ministers are able to select and recruit the civil servants in their ministries, including the permanent secretaries, who are the administrative heads of the ministries. Furthermore, and importantly, ministers have the formal right to dismiss permanent secretaries on discretionary grounds. This means that ministers can justify the dismissal of permanent secretaries with reference to a lack of trust, bad chemistry or problems with cooperation (Christensen 2004: 24). However, the Danish civil service rests on '…a long and unbroken tradition of merit bureaucracy' (Christensen 2006: 1001), in which civil servants are recruited on a principle of merits. Hence, neither a change in minister nor in government '…legitimates a purge within the civil service. So even if political appointments are not expressly forbidden, they violate a distinct civil service tradition' (Christensen 2006: 1001). This tradition has thus far meant that politically motivated appointments in the permanent civil service have been extremely rare (Ministry of Finance 1998: 30; Christensen 2004: 19; Christensen 2012; Knudsen 2006: 208). However, this does not represent a guarantee for an indefinite position as permanent secretary, as there are indications that ministers take an increasing interest in the appointment of permanent secretaries. This is reflected in the drop in the average length of appointment of permanent secretaries, which has

decreased since around the 1970s (Christensen 2004: 28). However, these developments do not justify a conceptualisation of the Danish civil service as formally politicised. In the literature, the conclusion has so far been somewhat mixed regarding whether special advisers represent a formal politicisation (Christensen 2006; 2012).

Empirical studies show that Danish civil servants have been met by increasing demands from their ministers for political advice, to which they responded at least since the 1980s by integrating their fachkompetenz skills and professional advice with advice on policy and political tactics (Christensen 1979; Salomonsen 2003; Ministry of Finance 1998; 2004). This is more the case for the permanent secretaries than other civil servants, although other parts of the departmental and ministerial hierarchy are also involved in the provision of political advice (Salomonsen 2003). Even though the functional politicisation is accepted and considered appropriate in every-day practice, political neutrality is still relevant when it comes to party-political matters, from which the ministerial bureaucracy is supposed to refrain.

Previous studies regarding the functions of the special advisers provide a two-fold picture showing that there are generally two groups of special advisors. While one is mainly involved in assisting and advising the minister in media and communication affairs – the so-called 'spin doctors', the other – but smaller – group is also involved in political advice (Ministry of Finance 2004: 83; National Audit Office 2009: 24; Hustedt & Salomonsen 2013). It is argued that there is s "functional differentiation" (Hustedt & Salomonsen 2013) of the division of labour between the (merit) permanent secretaries and the special advisers in which the special advisers provide either primarily media- or party-related advice. Whereas the former represents a professional competence not traditionally held by the permanent civil service – although some ministries have now established media services exclusively staffed by permanent civil servants – the latter represents a function that the permanent civil service has generally refrained from providing. This functional differentiation further implies that special advisers are not deeply integrated in the provision of policy advice.

However, more recently, there are indications that special advisors are indeed involved in policy formulation activities as those over time have become closely entangled with media- or communication related issues. By now, from when they are firstly initiated and thought of, policy formulation processes in Danish ministries are closely connected to with the question of how to communicate those policies or reforms to the ministry`s environment. Thus, aspects of how to sell policies – once a typical do-

main of special advisors or communication experts – have become integrated into the policy formulation process that previously used to be exclusively based on the expertise of the civil service.

As policy implementation in the Danish political system is either delegated to central government agencies or to the local government level, special advisors are not involved in this stage of the policy process.

Germany: Driving the strategic policy planning?

In the German federal executive, formal equivalents to the position of the special adviser in Denmark have not been established. However, ministerial staff positions at the top of the ministries with direct access to the minister emerged and have at least since the 1980s been increasingly appointed by German ministries (Hustedt 2013). Today they are typically organized in staff units (*Leitungsstäbe*) and it is the head of the staff unit (or the head of the minister`s private office) that represents the functional equivalent to the special advisor in the Danish sense. However, he shares this role partly with the press spokesperson – particularly regarding media advice (Hustedt 2013, Hustedt & Salomonsen 2013). Staff units normally include the personal office to the minister, a unit responsible for parliamentary and cabinet affairs, a press unit, a planning unit and occasionally a unit for special tasks (Hustedt 2013). In their day-to-day work staff units work vis-à-vis the ministerial bureaucracy that is formally politicized in its two top hierarchical ladders. Formal politicisation in the German case refers to formal right to send civil servants of the two top hierarchical ladders (*Beamtete Staatssekretäre* and *Ministerialdirektoren*) to temporary retirement at any point in time. Historically, temporary dismissal of high-ranking civil servants was established as an instrument to get rid of liberalism that was quite prominent among high-ranking bureaucrats in Prussia of the time (Echtler 1973: 43–46). In contrast, civil servants affiliated to the staff units are not formally politicised but appointed under ordinary civil service rules. No special employment conditions and rules apply, hence, they do not represent political appointees or civil servants. Although there is a lack of systematic data concerning the recruitment and background of the appointees in the staff units, most of them are supposed to be recruited from the line bureaucracy; however, it is widely acknowledged that the minister recruits his personal secretary, the head of his private office and his press speaker from outside the ministry. Whereas it was common earlier to also recruit press speakers from within the ministry, today they

typically have a journalistic background. This changed recruitment practice indicates the increasing relevance of media expert knowledge in the ministries (Hustedt 2013: 182–188).

Whereas the German constitution prescribes a tripartite rule regarding the organization and working mechanism of the federal government endowing the Federal Chancellor with the right to decide upon the general outline of all government policies (*Richtlinienkompetenz*), requiring that government decisions are taken by the cabinet (Chancellor plus all ministers) as a collegiate body and the departmental principle, it is the latter that empirically turns out to be the most important principle affecting decision-making within government (Mayntz 1987: 4). Hence, the constitution paves the way for strong single ministerial departments resulting in considerable departmental egoism (Döhler, Fleischer & Hustedt 2007: 14). Whereas the constitution in general imposes its requirements in a very strong manner on all government actors, the Joint Rules of Procedures of the Federal Ministries (*GGO*) is formally an internal executive regulation which serves as departmental rule-book but is not litigable. However, the GGO provides precise rules for formal procedures in federal government, most importantly, the instrument of the "lead ministry" and the correct hierarchically structured ladder (*Dienstweg*) always to be followed in internal communication. Even though those formal rules are not explicitly referred to on an every-day basis they unfold their effectiveness in a rather general view that "form is not empty nonsense" (Page 2012: 68), describing the general procedural orientation based on law-based thinking and reasoning characteristic for the German federal government. Some observers understand this procedural legal orientation as the essential idea of the *Rechtsstaat*.

Formal rules particularly applied to staff units do not exist. It is up to the single ministries or ministers to establish internal rules, e.g. to fix the position of the staff units in formal internal communication procedures. In that respect, the staff units relevance becomes visible as their heads (*Leiter Leitungsstab*) is typically the last organizational position checking all files before they enter the minister's desk (Hustedt 2013).

Studies on the role of the federal ministerial bureaucracy suggest the policy formulation is the traditional and foremost task of the ordinary line bureaucracy in the German federal government (Mayntz & Scharpf 1975; Page 2013). Federal top bureaucrats perceive themselves constantly and overwhelmingly as experts in their particular

policy domain, as executors of political goals and representatives of the state (Schwanke & Ebinger 2006: 242), which – at least recently – also concede some overlaps with activities typically for politicians (Mayntz & Derlien 1989; Schwanke & Ebinger 2006: 242–243). However, they have always been portrayed as functionally politicised. In general, German federal bureaucrats recognise and appreciate the political and power aspects of their day-to-day activities. Even though a slight decline in the positive assessment of this part of their job is reported in recent surveys, it remains at a rather high level of 90.9 per cent (Ebinger & Jochheim 2009: 339). However, this classic picture has become under pressure by scholarship arguing that the federal ministerial bureaucracy lost its primacy in policy formulation to the benefit of party political headquarters, external policy advisors such as advisory commissions and – most relevant here – staff units from inside the ministries (Goetz 1997; 2007).

Our interview data shows that traditional policy advice based on policy expertise remains the most important asset of the line bureaucracy delivered by the administrative state secretary as well as civil servants from lower echelons of the hierarchy (interviews D-6, D-8, D-10). However, staff units become involved in policy formulation and decision-making in a variety of different ways. More often than not, they are responsible for long-term policy planning (interviews D-1, D-4), occasionally developing their own policy ideas, which are subsequently co-produced with the line bureaucracy (interviews D-2, D-9), and they interfere in highly salient issues (interview D-12). Moreover, regarding decision-making staff units are involved in the party-political and tactic elements of making decisions. Here, the line bureaucracy is involved as well, (interviews D-4, D-9, D-10, D-12), but this predominantly provided by staff units (interviews D-1, D-2, D-4, D-6, D-9, D-10, D-11, D-12). When it comes to explicitly party-political affairs, both permanent secretaries and staff units appear more careful (interviews D-1, D-6). Both staff units and administrative state secretaries can become involved in coalition coordination. Whereas a regular meeting between the administrative state secretaries of all of the ministries shortly before cabinet meetings is one of the most important bureaucratic coordination mechanisms (Hustedt & Tiessen 2006), staff units are particularly active in coordination with the 'same-coloured' ministries (interviews D-10, D-11). Staff units are predominantly involved in communication matters and our interview data suggests that communication aspects are intensely incorporated in any policy formulation endeavor. Media advice is first and foremost the responsibility of the speaker and specialized press unit, typical-

ly part of the staff unit. However, the heads are particularly involved in connecting media and communication matters with policy development (interviews D-8, D-10, D-12).

However, those roles are often blurred, for example when staff units are involved in policy advice in highly salient issues or when long-term policy development is intentionally bound to a communication strategy. Moreover, the distinct roles of ministerial bureaucrats and staff units do not always co-exist peacefully. There is a built-in competition between administrative state secretaries and staff units (interviews D-4, D-5, D-8, D-10, D-12, D-13). Whereas the staff units typically conceive themselves as the 'sharpest lenses of the minister' and are pre-occupied by holistically wondering 'what is good for our minister' (interview D-10), administrative state secretaries also pursue the interests of 'the house'. These conflicts occur frequently across a range of tasks or situations such as when ministerial staffers report conflicts with the bureaucracy on how to communicate policies (interviews D-8, D-12).

As the German federal ministerial bureaucracy is hardly involved in any implementation doe to the organization of federalism in Germany, staff units are not involved in policy implementation. Policy implementation is either carried out by delegated federal administration (in the few instances the federal level has implementation competences) or by the *Länder* governments.

Norway: Strong involvement in decision-making?

In Norway, state secretaries were first introduced in 1947 in order to relieve the work burden of the ministers. From a modest starting point, the numbers have grown steadily over the last decades, reaching a high with the Solberg cabinet in 2013, when there was almost two and a half state secretary for each minister (Askim et al. 2014). In the mid-1950s the political leadership in the ministries was strengthened further, when some ministers were given personal secretaries. These actors were later named political advisors, and became widely used across ministries. The numbers grew in the 1970s and 1980s, and reached a peak in the 1990 when there was about one and a half political advisor for each minister (Askim et al. 2014).

Little scholarly attention has been directed towards the actual role of the different political appointees in Norwegian ministries. As reported in table X, the political appointees are especially important to help keeping contact with the parliamentary group and the party organisation. Almost as important, is the traditional role known

from the literature on political advisors, to advise the minister on various issues in the ministry. Norwegian political appointees also play an important role across ministries through their participation in coordination processes in the government apparatus. Regarding the communicative part of policy making, the political appointees report that they are important in both coordinating towards the communication department in the ministry, and by preparing speeches and drafting newspaper articles for the minister. More seldom, however, the political appointees are used to front issues in the media themselves.

Table 2: Tasks and assignments of political appointees in Norway

Tasks and assignments	**All political appointees mean (SE)**	**State secretaries mean (SE)**	**Political advisors mean (SE)**
Keep contact with parliamentary group and party organization	4.34 (0.83)	4.23 (0.85)	4.58 (0.73)
Advise the minister on various issues in the ministry	4.19 (1.00)	4.24 (0.90)	3.86 (1.10)
Participate in coordination processes in the government apparatus	3.94 (1.09)	4.20 (0.93)	3.38 (1.20)
Coordinate towards the communications department in the ministry	3.85 (1.18)	3.60 (1.23)	4.39 (0.83)
Contribute to or prepare the minister's speaks and newspaper articles	3.62 (1.21)	3.27 (1.20)	4.39 (0.83)
Relieve the minister by having responsibility for parts of the ministry	3.49 (1.53)	4.04 (1.41)	2.30 (0.99)
Front issues in the media	2.84 (1.18)	3.19 (1.19)	2.08 (0.74)
	N=202	N= 138	N= 64

Question: To what extent did you have the following tasks and assignments? Five-point scale (not at all, to a small extent, to some extent, to a large extent, to a very large extent)

As seen in table 3, however, the group of political appointees in Norway is not homogenous. Differentiating between the two types of actors shows that state secretaries and political advisors have different roles in government. The task of relieving the minister by having responsibility for parts of the ministry is the one where the difference is best seen. To a large extent, this is an important task for Norwegian state secretaries, while the political advisors only to some extent has such tasks. This difference can probably be explained by the fact that the state secretaries were introduced in 1947 exactly to relieve the work burden on the ministers (Askim et. al 2014). Political advisors, on the other hand, are more important in the media-related work in the ministries.

The survey also contain direct question about the political appointees' contribution within the various phases in the policy process. As table 3 suggests, the centre of gravity is to develop and formulate policy alternatives, and to clarify disagreements

and participate in decision-making process. The political appointees also believe they play an important role in getting important issues on the agenda. Understanding public policy as consisting of different phases, the Norwegian political appointees are least engaged in investigating how different policy measures work in practice. Perhaps not very surprisingly, given that such endeavours often take place at other parts of the government apparatus.

Table 3: Political appointees perceived importance in the policy process

Role in various phases of the policy process	**All pol. appointees mean (SE)**	**State secretaries mean (SE)**	**Political advisors mean (SE)**
Create proposals to get important issues on the agenda	3.75 (1.06)	3.67 (1.04)	3.92 (1.09)
Formulate policy, develop alternatives	4.11 (0.89)	4.23 (0.84)	3.86 (0.96)
Clarify disagreements, participate in decision-making	4.09 (1.08)	4.38 (0,86)	3.45 (1.22)
Assist in the implementation of concrete proposals	3.22 (1.23)	3.49 (1,20)	2.64 (1.10)
Investigate and consider how measures work in practice	2.96 (1.09)	3.23 (1.05)	2.38 (0.93)
	N=202	N=138	N=64

Question: If you think of public policy as consisting of different phases, how important was your role in the various phases? Five-point scale from 1 (not important at all) to 5 (very important).

Although not directly comparable, the numbers from the Norwegian case shows a slightly different picture than what was seen in Gouglas (2015), where Greek advisers were asked to locate the stage where they thought their activities were most important. Gouglas found that 74.9 per cent of the advisors considered their role in recognition of problems and agenda setting important and very important, followed by 71.4 per cent for proposing solutions and formulating policies.

In the Norwegian case, there are important differences between state secretaries and political advisors. State secretaries play the most important role in the decision-making process, while political advisors are most important in the process of trying to important issues on the agenda. The different involvement in the policy cycle as seen in table 3 thus harmonize well with the different tasks reported in table 2.

Concluding remarks

The aim of this paper has been to investigate the core contributions of ministerial advisors to the different phases of the policy process. Taking a comparative point of

departure the paper has investigated explanations on the institutional level of politico-administrative systems. The ministerial advisors' formal position in the ministerial bureaucracy indeed seems to explain some variation. In Germany and Norway, the administrative state secretaries and state secretaries respectively, are involved in both policy formulation and decision-making processes. However, the picture is not fully as expected. For instance, the Norwegian political advisors are also involved in such activities, although to a lesser degree. In the same vein, the German staff units are responsible for long-term policy planning, and are involved in the party-political and tactic elements of making decisions. In Denmark, the special advisors have traditionally mainly been involved in assisting and advising the minister in media and communication affairs. However, special advisors are increasingly drawn into the policy formulation process in ministries as policy formulation over time has become closely entangled with media- or communication related issues.

Scholars have emphasized the need to further theorize the research on ministerial advisors, in a second wave of research (Shaw and Eichbaum 2015). Scrutinizing ministerial advisors' role in the various phases of the policy process, might be seen as a further step in the direction of theorizing the policy-making roles of ministerial advisers in the context of 'broader theories of policy-making' (Maley 2015: 46).

The empirical findings of the paper underline the dynamic nature of policy-making processes. The paper shows that public policy in 'media societies' is not anymore exclusively built on civil servants' expertise and political preferences of ministers. From the very beginning, policy formulation is now affected by considerations from ministerial advisers on how and when policy initiatives are to be communicated to the 'outside world'. Ministerial decision-making, traditionally the prerogative of the minister, is increasingly also done by advisors with formal positions in the ministries. In general, these developments on the one hand blurs the possibility to see policy-making within ministries as cycles consisting of distinct phases, and on the other hand underlines the relevance of ministerial advisors in policy-making processes.

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