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The Study of Politicization: the Case of the UN

Politicization is like a corruption. Everyone knows it is up there but no one wants to admit any involvement. This explains one of the reasons why it is so problematic to study the phenomena of politicization. Therefore, a "thinness" of the analysis of politicization relates to an overall difficulty in conducting investigative research that asks international officials not only to admit the existence of political pressure but also to point out from where this political pressure comes from. Despite the problems of carrying out in-depth studies on the issue of politicization of international institutions[1] there is a growing need to address this subject. The necessity to conduct this research is connected with the influence of the politicization processes on the effective work of international institutions. In this context, it comes as a surprise that in the discussion about the effectiveness and failures of international institutions[2] there is a visible research gap in relation to the problems of politicization. Neither regime theories nor the literature on international organizations seem to address this topic adequately[3].

In order to fill this gap I will present the study of the politicization processes within the United Nations (UN), which attempts to address the following questions: What are the patterns of politicization of the UN? Does the design (procedures and rules) of the UN matters and how does it effect the politicization of the organization? And finally why is it important to study politicization of the UN and international organizations in general?

The hypotheses of this article can be summarized in three parts. 1. **One can observes a changing patterns of politicization of the UN system:** After the end of the ideological war between the East and the West, politicization of the UN has not ended. Politicization processes, however, have changed and become more sophisticated in their forms and more difficult to discover, study and fight with. 2. **Institutional design of the UN system matters and often makes politicization easier:** UN rules and procedures have an impact on the extent of politicization process. The states use these rules and procedures to exercise their control over the UN administration. 3. **Politicization undermines the effectiveness of the international organization:** Politicization effects the impartiality of the international officials and weakens legitimacy of actions undertaken by the United Nations. Thus, the effectiveness of the organization is effected by politicization and eventually undermined.

This study will focus on the politicization of the UN system as a whole and will encompass the UN Secretariat and specialized agencies. First I will provide a definition of politicization. Then I will show the politicization processes of the UN prior to the end of the Cold War and after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Subsequently I will proceed with a description of particular rules and procedures of the UN and I will evaluate their impact on making the

organization less or more susceptible to political pressure. Finally, politicization will be linked to the issue of the effectiveness of international institutions. The paper will conclude that in order to understand the issue of effectiveness of international institutions one needs to study politicization processes that harm and cripple the efficiency of international institutions and undermine their authority.

1. Definition of politicization in relation to international institutions

Politicization of international institutions is understood in this paper as the attempts to force national-oriented point of views and beliefs upon the administration of international organization, upon its procedures, debates as well as its member-states. Thus, politicization effects: structure and personnel of international institutions, their programs and other member-states that want to secure their national-interests within the international institutions. This definition of politicization resembles Kaufmann's approach to this problem. He has distinguished three areas of politicization in the UN. The first two were connected with politicization of the debates in the UN itself and specialized agencies and the last one with politicization of the UN institutions, including international civil service positions[4].

2. Politicization of the UN during the Cold War

2.1. Politicized UN personnel

The politicization of the UN was particularly evident in the political pressure exercised by United States and Soviet Union (including its allies) on the administration of the UN and its personnel during the Cold War. Famous "witch-hunts" during the McCarthy era at the beginning of 1950s had a tremendous effect on the work of the American nationals serving in the United Nations. Many of them were accused of having "red inclinations" and openly favoring communism. In connection with these accusations President Harry Truman issued in 1953 the Executive Order 10422. Its provisions required from the International Organizations Employees Loyalty Board, which was established in the President's administration, to submit on a regular basis information about all the Americans seeking employment at the UN or working already for the organization. The conclusions of these "informational" reports were to be advisory but "there (was) no evidence that any Secretary-General … appointed US nationals about whom the Loyalty Board … made a negative recommendation"[5]. The Executive Order of 1953 was replaced by the Executive Order 11890 signed by the President Gerald Ford in 1977. This law eased the procedures of "enforcing" the loyalty of the US citizens who were seeking employment at the UN. Nevertheless, the law is still in place and "the investigations are still routinely conducted, an anachronism and an invasion of privacy that survived the McCarthy period"[6].

The Soviet Union and its Communist allies were also interested in maintaining a tight control over the UN administration and treated the UN as an arena for exercising political influence and defending national interests. Shevchenko, a former Soviet Under Secretary-General for Political and Security Affairs in the UN Secretariat described his work as follows:

I set about establishing in my [UN] department order and discipline according to the inflexible Soviet model I was accustomed to. I insisted that all documents, even insignificant ones, be submitted for my clearance and approval, creating bottlenecks at every turn. I

demanded that all contacts of my senior staff with other departments of the Secretariat be approved by me. Nothing was too minuscule for my attention. I even attempted to encroach upon the responsibilities and functions of other departments[7].

Additionally, the international personnel that came from the Soviet Union was required to pay back to the Soviet government the difference between its salary in the UN and the wages he/she would receive in the Soviet public administration[8].

In another controversial case, the Polish military authorities arrested, imprisoned and sentenced Alicja Wesołowska, a Polish national working for the UN Secretariat. Wesołowska had obtained her position independently, without prior approval and without the blessing of the Polish communist government. The arrest of the UN staff member based on such vague accusations constituted a violation of the UN Charter and its provision: art. 100 (2) which imposes an obligation on the member-states to "respect exclusive international character … of the staff"[9]. Not only was the Polish communist government criticized for its policy, but also the Secretary-General was blamed for not providing enough legal and "organizational" (political) protection for his employees. Only after five years imprisonment and the direct appeal of Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar did the Polish government release Wesołowska[10].

2.2. Politicized debates and a growing membership of the UN agencies

Politicization was one of the reasons for the US withdrawal from the International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNESCO. In its notice of withdrawal from the ILO in 1975, the US stated that the organization got involved in "political issues which (were) quite beyond the competence and mandate of the organization"[11]. This statement referred to the earlier ILO's condemnation of Israel "for practising racial discrimination and for violating trade union rights in the Occupied Territories"[12]. The ILO was also a subject of criticism from the communist bloc that argued that the unchanged ILO structure, which was politicized and dominated by "Western capitalists", hindered the admission of socialist and developing countries[13]. Thus, the issue of politicization was also related to the growth in the membership of the UN, since wider states' representation in the UN organs made the latter more vulnerable to the criticism of new-comers, demanding their shares in the UN administration and its work.

3. Politicization after the Cold War

3.1. Politicization of the UN personnel

The examples of politicization of the UN personnel in the 1990s can be found in the case of the UN inspectors (UNSCOM) working in Iraq between 1996 and 1998. The inspectors were responsible for supervising Iraqis' compliance with the UN resolution that ordered the destruction of biological and chemical weapons. At the same time, the inspectors were also allegedly working for the US Central Intelligence Agency, aided by its British counterpart MI6. These allegations have never been fully clarified. However, the journalists Mangold and Hersh, backed up by one of the UNSCOM weapons inspectors, Scott Ritter, claimed that the UNSCOM and its impartial team of experts on chemical and biological weapons had been working closely with the American and British intelligence services since 1996. Regardless of

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where the truth is, the accusations cast a shadow on the neutrality of the UN personnel, particularly in the light of the UN resolution on Iraq that promulgated an establishment of an *independent* UN team of experts to supervise Iraqi compliance.[14]

3.2. Politicization of the UN Programs

Politicization of the UN is not only connected with the governments parachuting their own people into the organization's structures but it is also related to exercising political pressure on what the UN staff works, reports and publish.

In 1998, scientists working for the World Health Organization (WHO) failed to include in their report data which indicated that cannabis is a less harmful drug than alcohol or tobacco. Apparently, they were under strong pressure from the US government to withhold publication. The US authorities have considered the findings on cannabis to be highly unfortunate. This data would simply have given additional arguments for pressure groups demanding legalization of some narcotics, like cannabis[15].

Another case is also connected with a scientist who worked for the WHO. He was forced to uphold publication of the results of his research, which showed that cancer rates were more than 100 times higher in some areas of Ukraine and Belarus after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster than the cancer-morbidity level before the explosion. This stood in clear contradiction to the American government's own studies on public health dangers of the nuclear tests in Nevada in 1950s. Since the US authorities had underestimated the public health effects of nuclear tests and accidents, the UN publication (and others which would likely follow), if it had been published, could have triggered a public debate on the issue. In this way, the US government could have easily "face[d] new lawsuits on everything from the Nevada tests to the Three Mile Island nuclear accident in 1979"[16].

In this part of the paper I have shown that certain patterns of politicization connected with states' pressure on the UN personnel are common for both periods: before and after the end of the Cold War. However, there are also differences. The politicization of the UN during the Cold War is generally perceived as being more aggressive and open, whereas after the end of the Cold War, one encounters much more hidden and less discernable forms of politicizing the work of the UN officials and the programs they implement.

4. Politicization of the UN and its rules and procedures

The work of the UN staff and the UN administration are politicized due to various factors that can be classified into 3 groups: a) *written rules* that regulate temporary appointments and geographical distribution of seats in the UN system, b) *informal rules* or gentlemen-like agreements that include generally accepted state policies towards the UN recruitment procedures, and c) *system of reelections*.

a) Written rules

Temporary appointments

Temporary appointments in the UN are based on fixed-term periods of work and are filled

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mostly by people who are seconded by governments to the UN for a specific time. The governments support temporary appointments since this policy increases the states' influence over the organization. In 1950s and 1960s the number of short fixed-term appointments did not exceed the threshold of 25% of the Professional Staff[17]. Nowadays this figure has reached 40% of the Professional Staff that works on short-term contracts, usually not exceeding 5 years[18]. A proliferation of limited term contracts in the UN hinders independent initiatives of the UN administration. The people employed on short-term contracts in the UN tend to look over "their shoulders all the time because they expect to return to their governmental service when their secondment to the UN is over"[19]. For fixed term officials, failing to please their national governments while working for the UN means later difficulties in finding a job in their own national administration.

Geographical distribution of seats

A policy of geographical distribution of seats is based on article 101 (3) of the UN Charter[20], where it is guaranteed that the nations and regions should be represented proportionally in the UN administration. The levels of geographically distributed posts and the positions obtained after passing required exams (merit-based system) is set respectively at 25% and 75% of all Professional positions and there is a growing pressure to enlarge the 25% threshold and undermine the merit-based system[21].

b) Informal rules

The UN is governed not only by written norms included in the UN Charter and documents such as the GA and SC resolutions or administrative rules and regulations. The organization also works based on customary, informal rules, which are accepted quietly by the Secretary-General and the states. For example, in the UN, there is a general (unwritten) rule that the senior posts in the UN administration that covers the Under-Secretaries General and Assistant Secretaries General are "distributed in accordance with an understanding which is of a primary political character"[22]. These positions are mainly assigned to the nationals of the permanent-members of the Security Council[23].

c) System of reelections

A constant political campaign for reelection of the executive heads of the UN agencies contributes further to the politicization of the work of international institutions. "Within a year of being elected most directors-general start to think about their re-election"[24]. The decisions of heads of agencies about particular programs and policies are many times determined more by what other governments' representatives think and feel, rather than on the most-needed criteria basis, which would be justified in terms of particular agency's goals. For example, most of the FAO projects in connection with the good-security program, introduced in 1994, were directed to Africa. Since the most represented regional group in FAO, which elects its director-general, comes from the African countries, there was a suspicion that the program was launched more to help the current director-general in his future reelection. This is even more suspicious, in the light of accusation that "the FAO (did) not (say) how recipient countries are chosen or by what criteria money is allocated"[25].

As has been shown the design of the UN that is based on specific procedures, matters. The

procedural designs leave the UN door opened for considerable political pressure and politically motivated actions by the states. Thus, the rules and procedures of the UN make politicization process possible and the UN administration more susceptible to the political influence of its member-states.

5. Politicization of the UN: necessary bad or good?

The United Nations does not function in a political vacuum. The organization is a fully-fledged "political animal" and has to reconcile various national interests and states' preferences. There is even a question if the political organization should waste its energy on opposing politicization. Claude claims that politicization does not diminish but rather enhances legitimization of international organizations. He further asks where would the UN be, or what would it do, if it had really professional and highly qualified administration but faced a total lack of political and financial support from the member-states, which would probably be no longer the members?[26]. Therefore, Claude suggests that a kind of "international spoil system"[27] in the UN is needed, even though its national version (e.g. American spoil system) is many times regarded as obsolete.

However, the support of the member-states for the international institution can actually decline if they see that the organization changes from a public international one, to becoming a private forum belonging only to a few states. Therefore, politicization is generally regarded as a factor that undermines both the effectiveness and the authority of international organizations[28] that are mutually determined. More effectiveness increases the authority of institutions and in turn, the authority of organizations enables these institutions to rally the support for their policies and deal with certain problems more successfully.

Politicization that weakens the authority of international institutions in the eyes of its member-states undermines one of the mechanisms[29] that determine the effectiveness of the international regimes and international organizations. Institutions are no longer perceived as "bestowers of authority" but rather as de-legitimized institutions that try to impose the will of particular countries. Many developing states perceive the International Monetary Fund that employs American and Western European economists and that is strongly influenced by the US Treasury Department[30] as an organization representing and promoting the interest of the developed states, particularly the US, using policy of conditionality[31].

Conclusion

What are the patterns of politicization of the UN? This question that was put forward in the introduction required a comparison between the politicization processes in the UN before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The findings indicated that during the Cold War a deep ideological rivalry between the communist and capitalist blocs was quickly transferred onto the forum of the UN. Each bloc aimed at securing the control over the organization and its policies. Decolonization and the subsequent growth in the UN membership increased further the demands for equal geographic distribution of positions within the UN administration. Politicization of the UN system has not ceased or even eased after the end of the Cold War. Some patterns of politicization remain the same, some, however, have changed. The attempts to "nationalized" the UN personnel and political pressure exercised by the governments in the appointment process to the UN posts have not been abandoned with the end of ideological

confrontation. What has, however, changed, is the emphasis. Nowadays, the post-cold-war UN faces increasing political pressure on the outcomes of its work and the danger that its policies will be used to the advantage of certain states or group of states. Such politicization is more difficult to identify and much more clandestine and hidden in the tensions inside and outside the UN bureaucracy. The style of work of Arkady Shevchenko and the case of Wesołowska would not be acceptable today. Such open politicization is no longer tolerated and a country would risk international ostracism. Thus, the violations of the autonomy of UN administration and its officials are still permissible but the pattern of politicization has changed towards the use of much more sophisticated, concealed and deceptive forms.

Does the design (procedures and rules) of the UN matters and how does it effect politicization of the organization? The paper noted that certain procedures and rules increase the chance for states to exercise their political influence on the UN organization. I have shown that the politicization is frequently determined by the regulations, rules and procedures embedded in the UN structure. Therefore I have concluded that the internal design of the UN matters and plays a significant role in the analysis of the politicization processes in this organization.

Why is it important to study politicization of the UN and international organizations in general? This paper underlined the fact that politicization of international institutions is an important subject for the studies of effectiveness of international institutions. Politicization weakens the authority of institutions and effects their overall efficiency. Therefore, if one wants to fully understand the performance of international institutions, one needs to investigate the issue of politicization.

The scope of this paper brought about necessary limits to the number of examples related to the politicization and forced to restrict the studies to one international organization; the United Nations (even thought the UN was treated broadly). Therefore, one needs to be careful before making any further generalizations about the politicization of the international institutions based on the above findings. There is certainly a need to conduct more studies on that subject.

FOOTNOTES

[1] In this article a term international institutions will be used interchangeably with international organizations.

[2] Michael N. Barnett and Martha Finnemore, "The Politics, Power, and Pathologies of International Organizations," *International Organization* 53, no.4 (Autumn 1999). Guilio Gallaroti, "The Limits of International Organization," *International Organization* 45, no.2 (1991), Kenneth N. Waltz, "Structuralism Realism after the Cold War," *International Security* 25, no.1 (Summer 2000). John J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security* 19, no.3, (Winter 1994). George B.N. Ayittey, "How the multilateral institutions compounded Africa's economic crisis," *Law and Policy in International Business* 30, no.4 (Summer 1999). Oran R. Young, *Governance in World Affairs*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), Young, O., R., *The Effectiveness of International Environmental Regimes*, (USA: MIT Press 1999).

[3]There is a literature on politicization of the international organizations, however it is not updated and notably small, especially in comparison with the voluminous studies on the effectiveness and impacts of international institutions. In the context of politicization of international institutions two works are particularly valuable: Victor-Yves Ghebali, "The Politicisation of UN Specialized Agencies: A Preliminary Analysis," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 14, no.3 (1985): 317-334 and more legalistic approach to the issue of politicization presented by Bartram S. Brown, *The United States and the Politicization of the World Bank*, (New York: Kegan Paul International 1992).

[4] According to Kaufmann, politicization of the UN flourishes because of:

a)   "the predominance of political debate in an organization, combined with the presumed use by certain governments of such debates for their own political advantage,

b)   the rise in the technical specialized agencies of debate on political issues and the consequent introduction and eventual adoption of resolutions on such political issues,

c)   the exaggerate emphasis on certain particular objectives or activities by the executive head of an organization, (…) combined with arbitrary or nepotistic rule (…) in staff appointment matters and mismanagement generally".

John Kaufmann, Developments in Decision Making in the United Nations, in: Richard A. Falk, Samuel S. Kim, Saul H. Mendlovitz, *The United Nations and a Just World Order*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), p. 131-132.

[5] Jordan, Truly International Bureaucracy: Real or Imagined, in: Finkelstein (1988): 425.

[6] Franck (1985): 102.

[7] Arkady Shevchenko, Breaking with Moscow, in Finkelstein (1988): 429.

[8] Franck (1985): 109.

[9] Security, Safety and Independence of the International Civil Service, Secretary-General's Bulletin to Members of the Staff, in Franck (1985): 107.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Brown (1992):18.

[12] Ghebali (1985):326.

[13] Jeffrey Harrod and Nico Schrijever, *The UN Under Attack*, (Aldershot: Gower 1997):25.

[14] UNSCOM Infiltrated by Spies, 23 March 1999. Also: Primakov Bribed by Iraq, 29 March 1999.

BBC: www.news.bbc.co.uk.

[15] Smokescreens, *The Economist*, 14 March 1998, www.economist.com.

[16] Ibid., www.economist.com.

[17] The UN personnel is divided into two categories: *Professional Staff* and *General Staff*. The former deals with "analytical, evaluative, conceptual, interpretive and/or creative" work, whereas the latter's job is "procedural, operational or technical in nature and supports the execution of the programmes of the organization". Job Classification, Definitions of Professional Level and General Service Work, *International Civil Service Commission*, Section 8.1.10, 1995. Professional service constitutes a core of the organization, doing the "substantive work of analyzing … global and regional trends in political, security, disarmament, economic and social and environmental and human rights fields". General Staff is responsible for much more mundane tasks of administrative support (e.g. various secretaries, interpreters or drivers) for the Professional Staff. Erskine Childers and Brian Urquhart, *Renewing the United Nations System*, (Uppsala, Sweden: Dag Hammarskjold Foundation 1994):28.

[18] Thomas M. Franck, *Nation Against Nation : What Happened To the U.N. Dream and What the U.S. Can Do About It*, (New York: Oxford University Press 1985): 106-107. Sydney D. Bailey, *The United Nations: A Short Political Guide*, 2nd ed., (London: Macmillan Press 1989): 85. John P. Renninger, *Can the Common System Be Maintained. The Role of the International Civil Service Commission*, (New York: UNITAR 1986): 13 and 15.

[19] Bailey (1989): 84.

[20] "The paramount consideration in the employment of the staff and in the determination of the conditions of service shall be the necessity of securing the highest standards of efficiency, competence, and integrity. Due regard shall be paid to the importance of recruiting the staff on as wide a geographical basis as possible". Art. 101 (3) UN Charter.

[21] During the session of the Fifth Committee, the Russian delegation suggested that "Transition to a system of non-career service should be studies" and supported "expansion of secondment, as it had proven efficient and was compatible with an independent civil service". Fifth Committee (Administrative and Budgetary Committee), 13 November 1998, GA/AB/3263. Russian statement was reaffirmed by the GA resolution that states: "secondment from government service is consistent with Articles 100 and 1001 of the Charter and is beneficial to both the Organization and Member States", A/RES/53/221, 23 April 1999.

[22] D. W. Bowett, *The Law of International Institutions*, 4th ed., (London: Stevens & Sons 1982): 100.

[23] Harold K. Jacobson, *Networks of Interdependence. International Organizations and the Global Political System*, 2nd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1984): 90.

[24] Juan Carlos Vignaud, a former employee at the Food Agriculture Organization. See: FAO. Harvesting votes, The Economist, May 15, 1999, p.49.

"…DG [Director General], especially one interested in the possibility of reelection to the post, would find it difficult to avoid thinking it advantageous as a rule to be identified with the preponderance of votes, rather than offended the majority by asserting the presumed neutrality of his office or, even more hazardous to his political health, siding with the minority. M'Bow's (the Director General of UNESCO from 1974-1986) views have in any event tended to coincide with those of the Third World countries, which comprise the majority in UNESCO", Finkelstein, The Political Role of the Director General of UNESCO, in: Lawrence S. Finkelstein, *Politics in the United Nations System*, (London: Duke University Press 1988): 393.

[25] FAO. Harvesting votes, The Economist, May 15, 1999, p.49.

[26] Inis L. Claude, *Swords into Plowshares. The Problems and Progress of International Organization*, 4th ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill 1971):196-197.

[27] International spoil system is set on a rule of filling administrative posts in the international organization by the state appointees, chosen not through a competitive examination system, but on the nationality and loyalty bases.

[28] "The politicization phenomena is a serious threat to the effectiveness of the UN specialized agencies. If (the activities of the UN agencies) cannot be insulated from political controversy, the specialized agencies may not be able to function at all" Brown (1992): 8. See also: Harrod and Schrijver (1997), Ghebali (1985), Werner J. Feld and Robert S. *Jordan, International Organizations. A Comparative Approach*, 2nd ed., (New York: Praeger 1988), Childers and Urquhart (1994).

[29] Levy et al. distinguish five mechanisms "through which regimes succeed or fail" in carrying out their functions: regimes as utility modifiers, enhancers of cooperation, bestowers of authority, learning facilitators and role definers. Marc A. Levy, Oran R. Young and Michael Zürn, "The Study of International Regimes", *European Journal of International Relations* 1, no.3 (1995): 304-307.

[30] Joseph Stiglitz, What I Learned at the World Economic Crisis. The Insider, *The New Republic*, April 14-24, 2000.

[31] The IMF "allows debtor countries to draw upon its financial resources only if they comply with IMF conditionality", meaning the criteria set by the bank itself. Brown (1992):3.

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