

The Parliamentary Administration of Hungary: the Országgyűlés¹

1. Introduction

The Office of the Hungarian National Assembly (*Országgyűlés Hivatala*, hereinafter: Office) is a single, independent administrative body, supervised by the President of the National Assembly (*Országgyűlés Elnöke* or *házelnök*, hereinafter: Speaker). It provides administrative, legal, communication, security and technical support for the unicameral Assembly. On the other hand, it is also responsible for the maintenance and public accessibility of its seat, the Parliament Building (*Országház*), which is, together with its recently opened historical museum, a major cultural and touristic attraction of the country.

2. The evolution of the Office of the National Assembly of Hungary (1990-2020)

The first major step in the evolution of three decades ago was characterized by the gradual transition of the political system from socialist dictatorship to democracy. Before the regime change, there was no need for a professional parliamentary organisation with well trained staff to assist the legislation, as the National Assembly had no weight in policy-making, and its sessions were few and far between. Careful political reforms in the 1980s, like the introduction of the obligation to have at least two candidates in each constituency in 1983, providing for opposition MPs in the 1985-1990 term, resulted in a more active and partisan parliamentary life, requiring professional organisation and assistance.

In May 1989, already one year before the convocation of the first free elected, multiparty parliament, a new organisation of parliamentary administration was introduced. It consisted of three internal organs on equal footing replacing the formerly rather small and centralized structure:

- the General Secretariat assisted in law-making, preparing plenary and committee session (with the General Secretary participating on the plenary, assisting the Speaker or his deputies in conducting the sessions and interpreting the rules of procedure),
- the Office of the National Assembly was responsible for the financial, maintenance and administrative tasks.
- the Secretariat of the Speaker assisted the elected office holders (deputy speakers, notaries), and managed the international and press relations.

The three managers of these branches were fully independent from each other, standing on an equal footing. All three of them were assigned by the Speaker directly (Soltész, 2017). In May 1990, after the first free parliamentary elections, as new institutions, the offices of the political groups – at the beginning, with very few and mostly administrative-technical staff – were also established.

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During the 1990s and 2000s, both the number of experienced professionals and the yearly budget gradually grew to reach the current number. Since 2012, Chapter XII of the Act on the National Assembly² sets forth the essential duties of the parliamentary administration, while the provisions of the Rules of Procedure³ lay down those duties in detail. The Act declares that the Office is „a central budgetary organ in charge of performing organisational, operational, administrative and decision-preparing functions for the National Assembly”.

Since 2012, also the Parliamentary Guard (*Országgyűlési Őrség*) belongs to the organisation of the Office, commanded by its own chief commander, supervised by the Speaker. Previously, the guard was part of the internal armed forces under the auspices of the Ministry of Interior. With the 2012 reform, the original situation of 1912 returned, when the parliamentary guard was originally established.

In the current organizational structure, introduced in 2013, a single person, the General Director is the leader of the parliamentary administration, supervising legislative tasks as well as financial management and operations. The formally centralized structure in practice preserved the far reaching autonomy of the directors (*igazgató*) of the - already six – directorates (*igazgatóság*). The branches correspond to the parliaments tasks:

- Office of the Speaker,
- Directorate for Legislation (the former General Secretariat),
- Directorate for Financial Management and Operations,
- Directorate for Foreign Affairs,
- Media Office,
- Directorate for Public Collections and Public Education, (established in 2013, consisting of the Library, the Parliamentary Museum, the Public Relations Office and the Information Service for MPs).

In 2014, the number of MPs was reduced from 386 to 199, but this did not result in a reduction of positions in the administration. The contrary happened: the same legislative tasks with less MPs need more administrative assistance. Also the volume of activities (plenaries, committee meetings) remained the same (Erdős, 2016).

The Office adopted a 4-year medium-term institutional development strategy in 2017. The overarching goal was the efficient performance of the basic tasks (law-making, strengthening the IT-assistance of the administrative activities), sustainment of professionalism, institutional and HR-development, acclimatizing the strategic approach, and efficient communication. However, these visions are not clearly translated into activities in everyday practice.

The parliamentary administration enjoys plenty of resources. Both the budget and the number of employees raised almost constantly in the past decade, with a big jump in terms of budget in 2018, caused by the status reform of the parliamentary staff.

year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
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² Act XXXVI. of 2012 on the National Assembly, Articles 123-124/A

³ Resolution 10/2014 (II. 24.) of the National Assembly on certain standing orders

budget ⁴	16900	17139	18903	21000	21345	21420	22560	21872	20343	28066	37478	41304
staff	855	847	847	892	912	943	947	947	950	1005	1005	994

source: *parlament.hu*

3. *The legal status of the Office and its relation to the Speaker*

The Office enjoys full institutional independence within the Hungarian public administration. The Speaker supervises its activities, external bodies, like the Government, have no influence on its operation. The Speaker also performs employers' rights above the leading positions, and appoints the General Director, therefore he has a relatively major influence on the personnel of the Office.

The Speaker may issue formal rulings (*házelnöki rendelkezés*), which are sources of internal parliamentary law, but some of them also effect external persons. One of them regulates the organisation and functions of the Office,⁵ another important one governs the access to the Parliament building for the press and the general public⁶. Being internal rules by legal nature, they might affect external persons nevertheless, yet no judicial remedy is available against them: neither the general courts, nor the Constitutional Court has the jurisdiction to control these norms.

It needs to be added that the Speaker in Hungary is traditionally not a neutral moderator, but an active political actor of his party – Speakers sometimes tend to make political statements even during chairing the plenary sessions. Within the Office, the Speaker has a Secretariat at his disposal, which is not only responsible for coordinating the duties and programmes, but also for answering petitions, queries from the general public, related to the Assembly or to the Speaker.

The budget of the Office is prepared independently and separate from other bodies' budget, after discussions with the Ministry of Finance, by the Director General under the direction of the Speaker. The proposal is then sent to the Government, with the consent of the House Committee (consisting of the Speaker, his deputies and the leaders of the political groups), after obtaining the opinion of the budgetary committee. The Government is then required to submit it in unchanged form to the National Assembly, as a part of the legislative proposal on the central budget.⁷

4. *The current organisational structure and functions*

The primary functions of the Office are centralized in the largest unit, the Directorate for Legislation and its five departments. The largest of them, the Department of Committees

⁴ In million HUF

⁵ Available in Hungarian: <https://www.parlament.hu/hivatal/szmsz>

⁶ Speaker's ruling 9/2013

⁷ Article 124 (1) Law on the National Assembly

provides all committees' secretariats, which are responsible for scheduling, formally preparing the meetings (e.g. preparing scripts for committee chairs) and the committees' decisions, meeting protocols and statistics. One administrative and one or two professional staff is deployed at the secretariat of each committee. This is only sufficient for running the committees' workflow, but does not allow for supporting in-depth committee activities, since there is no political need from the committees for such performing hearings, commissioning reports. The main, almost exclusive item on committees' agenda is the second reading of bills, therefore the foremost committee activity at the meetings is the selection of amendments submitted to bills, frequently without substantial debate, by quick votes. Therefore, the main task of the Department is to support the smooth committee proceedings by organizational means.

The Codification Department (composed of lawyers) provides occasionally on-demand assistance for MPs and committees on legislative drafting, but in the past few years, as secretariats of the political groups develop their professional legislative staff, this is rather exceptional. The main activity of the Department therefore is to analyse and give opinion on all bills and amendments on the Assembly's agenda, in terms of legislative drafting rules. General legal or constitutional problems may also be addressed, but this rarely happens in practice. The proponents themselves also rely on the Department not as normative, but legislative drafting control body. As a rule, this task is performed not by compiling official opinions, but rather by reporting back to the drafter, in most cases, the line ministry, on an informal basis. The overwhelmingly technical correction suggestions appear than at a later stage of the legislative process as amendments, submitted by one of the parliamentary committees. Rarely, the Department also submits reports about constitutional-legal problems, the correction also here is responsibility of the submitter, which rarely results in changes after the political decision (the formal submission) on the bill.

It needs to be added that within the Office, none of the units perform any ex ante or ex post assessments of bills, the focus in this phase is on formal and drafting requirements towards bills. In case of governmental bills, ex ante assessments are part of the preparatory phase done by the responsible line ministries (Szabó, 2020). On rare occasions, committees organize hearings on implementation of certain laws, but this activity decreased in the last decade. Therefore, the main activity of the parliamentary administration in terms of legislation is checking bills against legislative drafting rules.

The Codification Department further prepares the consolidated versions of a bill during the legislative procedure, after the approval of the amendments by the committees. It also runs the secretariat of the two parliamentary committees closely related to legal matters, the Committee on Legislation and the Committee on Privileges. Preparing in-depth legal and constitutional analysis of each bills is not a requirement. Furthermore, the Department gives legal opinions on parliamentary law and rules of procedure on request of other departments or committees.

The Department of Organisation is responsible for the preparation of the plenary sessions (coordination of the agenda, scheduling presiding officers), and for running the secretariat of the House Committee (the coordinative body of the political groups and the Speaker). The other tasks cover the coordination of secret ballot votes of the MPs and the supervision of the Room

Service of the plenary hall, which is also responsible for maintaining the order on the public gallery.

Within the Directorate for Legislation, there are further two smaller units. Units of more than 15 people are called department (*főosztály*), smaller ones are simply offices (*iroda*). The Office of information and documentation keeps and provides information, statistics on legislation and MPs and makes them available for the general public. It also supervises the register of parliamentary documents (bills, amendments, questions). The Office of the Notaries coordinates the work notaries of the National Assembly, who are elected from among the MPs, two of them have to be present during the plenary sessions. This unit prepares the detailed script to be read out by the chair of the plenary, it also edits the minutes of the plenary prepared by the stenographers, and provides Hungarian linguistic assistance for parliamentary documents. Coordinating questions and interpellations to be discussed on the plenary is also within its domain.

The Directorate for Maintenance and Finances provides back-office services for the Office: among others, it is responsible for the budgetary tasks, the preparation of internal financial and public procurement regulations, the maintenance of estates (Parliament building and three office buildings around it), the room management, the IT-networks, the access control system, the internal and external televising network, the electronic voting system in the plenary hall, the HR-tasks (performance assessment, internal training), and the public procurement tasks (planning, implementing). The activities of the branches of the Directorate for Public Collections and Public Education are to be discussed further below in chapter 6 (museum, library, participatory instruments).

5. *Human resources*

The Office puts a continuous effort on skilled, flexible and permanent (loyal) staff. The workload is generally not overwhelming, but sometimes overtime work is required, especially if the House sits in late hours or works with busy agenda. To serve within the parliamentary administration is traditionally a long term occupation, with good financial conditions. Many staff members serve decades long, the majority of the current top leaders, the directors have been serving for more than 20 years.

In order to provide competitive wages on the long run, a significant personnel reform took place in 2018, consisting of a 45% wage rise in average, and a change in status of the parliamentary officials. Parliamentary officials are now among the best paid civil officials in the Hungarian public administration, enjoying a special status ‘parliamentary public official’ (*országgyűlési közigazgatás*), regulated by the Act on the National Assembly, Chapter XII/A, instead of the general act on public service officials. Parliamentary public officials now have their own selection procedure, classification, advancement, remuneration, performance assessment, annual leave and promotion systems.

Classification categories with higher education degree range between “parliamentary counsellor” and “special senior lead parliamentary counsellor”, and without secondary

education from “parliamentary assistant” to “special senior lead parliamentary administrative officer”. The amount of the remuneration basis is equal to the amount of the average monthly gross earnings in the national economy relating to the previous year, officially published by the Hungarian Central Statistical Office. This results in a stable, rather yearly increasing wage level. The starting salary for secondary degree holders at entering the career is 1,5 times of the basis at secondary level educations employees, raising up to a multiplier of 2,6 after 36 years. The starting multiplier is 0,9 at officers with high school graduation, and may reach 1,7 after 36 years. Lead positions are eligible for a multiplier of 3 to 3,7. Just to compare: MPs’ remuneration is set at 3 times of the average gross earnings, which can be increased by committee membership supplement.

The employer may increase the above salary level in case of good performance by not more than 50% or reduce by not more than 20% the basic remuneration. If a parliamentary public official (except from the lead positions) serves in a position where the use of a foreign language is necessary, a language supplement is eligible. The employer may also award a parliamentary public official fulfilling the conditions the title of ‘parliamentary expert advisor’ or ‘senior parliamentary expert advisor’. The total number of the holders of these titles shall not exceed 20% of the staff.

In 2018, about half of the employees on the Office’s payroll had secondary degree, 30% of them are lawyers, almost 20% are economists. The other half of personnel are employed by work contracts, they are mostly dealing with secondary functions of the Office. Other common professions are administrative managers, foreign relation experts, public relations, event management and media professionals, financial and IT specialists. The Office staff also includes architects to plan and coordinate the jobs relating to maintaining and renovating the particularly valuable Parliament Building, including skilled joiners, upholsterers and tinsmiths who have acquired the fine skills of old-time craftsmen. The Office also employs parliamentary stenographers, who regularly win world championships in shorthand speech capturing⁸. The protocols are stenographed (short hand writing on the meeting, typing in text afterwards) at all plenary and committee meetings.

6. *Special functions*

6.1. Staff of political groups

The size of the offices of the political groups corresponds to the size of the political group in the Assembly. Governing parties traditionally have larger staff, since they play a more active role in legislation. Opposition factions submit many bills, yet those are hardly ever discussed on the plenary. The number of public officials and employees with secondary or higher education assigned to parliamentary groups is set by law: it shall be five for groups with fewer than ten members, seven for groups with 11 to 20 members, ten for groups with 21 to 34 members, twelve for groups with 35 to 50 members, and fifteen for groups with over 50

⁸ Look for the category ‘speech capturing’ here: <https://www.intersteno.org/competitions-classification-lists/>

members.⁹ Moreover, parliamentary groups may be assisted by a staff of public officials and employees, whose number corresponds with that of the parliamentary group members.

The personnel decisions on staff rely primarily on the leader of the political group. Since he/she is not a civil officer, formally the General Director appoints and dismisses faction staff, upon recommendation of the leader of the political group, and also the exercise of employer rights requires his/her consent. Faction employees are contracted with work contracts, not as parliamentary public officers. This allows flexibility in staff management, to be able adjust to the changes in the size of the political group after elections.

The Office provides parliamentary groups with the following supply free of charge: suitable office space in the Parliament building or in a block nearby; basic supplies (office furniture, equipment etc.) as required for the operation of the parliamentary groups and the work of the Members; and web access that allows Members to perform their work (up to the limit of the related budget appropriation). Persons employed by parliamentary groups are entitled to be paid up to the limit of the funds allocated for employee wages. Parliamentary groups are entitled to an amount corresponding to 10% of the funds allocated for wages to cover other benefits at the discretion of the party authorised to act as employer and to cover bonuses.

6.2. External relations

External relations play an important role both on the Assembly's agenda and within the Office. Most tasks result from EU-, foreign and national affairs. The National Assembly has three standing committees dealing – at least partly - with foreign affairs: the Committees on European Affairs, the Committee on Foreign Affairs, and the Committee on National Cohesion. The Assembly also hosts the Forum of Hungarian Representatives from the Carpathian Basin, a consultative forum of deputies of Hungarian nationality in parliaments of the neighbouring countries (Romania, Slovakia, Ukraine, Serbia, Croatia).

Within the Office, the Directorate for Foreign Affairs coordinates the international relations and international programme planning of the Assembly and its members by organization and preparing incoming and outgoing parliamentary delegations' programmes, background papers. It also coordinates relations with international organizations, the European Parliament and its members. It further coordinates technical assistance (twinning) projects implemented by the Office with non EU-member countries. Furthermore, the Directorate supports the national policy activities of the National Assembly and its members (relations with Hungarian organizations, MPs in countries with Hungarian minority or diaspora).

There are three departments within the Directorate: Department on EU-affairs (directing also the Brussels offices of the Assembly, one within the European Parliament and one protecting Hungarian national minorities' rights), Department on National Integration and Protocol Department, to assist foreign delegations and international events. There also three Secretariats

⁹ Article 115 Law on the National Assembly

within the Directorate: one for the Hungarian National Group of the Inter-parliamentary Union, one for the parliamentary relations, and one for Security Policy and Defence.

6.3. Research Department

As a branch of the Directorate for Public Collections and Public Education, the Information Service (Infoservice) provides the MPs and their staff, the committees, and other departments of the Office with information and research services on an impartial and confidential basis. In addition to answering individual requests, it supports MPs' legislative activities also with proactive background materials, related to legislative agenda items, like briefings on policy issues, which include references of the legal background, international treaties, EU legislation, national professional, political and civil opinions as well as statistical data. Analyses are longer papers, prepared on demand of the MPs, focussing on the international comparative analysis of the related issue.

6.4. Library

The Library of the National Assembly (*Országgyűlési Könyvtár*) fulfils three different functions: is a legislative library, a public library and a special collection library as well. Law and public administration, political science, 20th century and contemporary history are its main interests. The library acts as a non-lending library, open for the general public, and an information centre of national scope for law and political sciences, modern age Hungarian and universal history and the documents of the National Assembly. As a national scientific special library, one of its primary functions is to collect and process the full scale of domestic professional publications and the selection of foreign publications in this realm, as well as to collect and process the publications of the United Nations and its specialised organisations, and the publications of the European Union's organisations. The library is be entitled to have one copy of the nationally provided legal deposits in its scope of collection.

The size of the library's holdings is close to 700.000 volumes, the number of subscriptions to periodicals in law, history, political science and social sciences is close to 1000, the annual acquisitions are close to 6000 pieces. In the reading room approximately 45.000 documents are available in 12 different subject areas. The staff of the Library are also on the Office payroll, which provides for high salaries compared to other libraries.

6.5. ICT development

The beginnings of e-legislation at the late 2000s were marked by the internal amendment management system of the regular laws on the annual national budget. In order to secure accurate legislative drafting and smart correction of drafting errors, the Office later developed its own web-based document editing and workflow management application, the ParLex. Decided in 2013 and launched in practice 2017, ParLex meets the highest requirements of data security. Covering the entire legislative procedure, it is possible to draft, submit, share and track

parliamentary documents (laws, amendments) within the transparent and paperless system.¹⁰ ParLex enables not only MPs and their staff to create, edit, propose bills, amendments and other legislative documents in XML, but supports also the work of the parliamentary officers in charge. The legislative tasks within the Office – e.g. framing legal opinions, creating background materials for committee sittings – are covered by the system from the formulation of a legislative proposal to the automatic publication on the website.

From the onset of the running parliamentary cycle (May 2018) more than 2480 legislative proposals (bills, resolutions etc.) and over 3370 subsidiary motions were introduced via the system. In 2019, ParLex was awarded with Best Practice Certificate of the European Institute of Public Administration. Since 2020, ParLex is part of the Integrated Legislation System, operated by the Ministry of Justice.

3.5 Participative Instruments

The Office puts increasing efforts on public relations, an evident signal of this is the establishment of the Directorate on Public Collections and Public Education in 2013. As part of the Directorate, the Public Relations Office deals with parliamentary model programmes designed for the youth since the early 2000s. The two programmes offered target different age groups: the ‘Game of Democracy’ is tailored for high school students with a bill and several amendments prepared by the staff, which they have to discuss and select during committee and plenary phases, and finally, adopt as a whole at the end. The ‘Model Parliament’ attracts students above 18, who have to prepare and submit the bill on the agenda of their own. Mostly student groups of various universities register to the programme, which results in a kind of competition between faculties and other secondary education institutions.

These programmes, based on active participation and the method of learning-by-doing, present a model of parliamentary practice by role playing. During these programmes, students follow the process of law-making in rooms of the real parliament in a shortened, one-day form, while they get acquainted with key players, key skills such as rhetoric and argumentation and discuss their peers’ opinions. As part of these programmes, participants take part in plenary sessions, meetings of committees and political groups. Besides, they make a decision and cast a vote about previously discussed proposals and amendments. The day closes with a press conference based on the work achieved (Kerekes-Andrási, 2020).

In 2015, another initiative of the Directorate, the Parliamentary Museum opened. It is a national museum in charge of collecting, safeguarding, processing and presenting the cultural values connected to the history of the National Assembly. A permanent, interactive exhibition on the 1000-years history of Hungarian parliamentarism attracts visitors mostly, but lectures, pre-booked school programmes and other events are also available.

¹⁰ ParLex users manual, available: <https://www.parlament.hu/documents/10181/773675/Parlex+k%C3%A9zik%C3%B6nyv+I.+r%C3%A9sz/f72a4bae-ce41-4dda-9d84-f228d277181e> (downloaded: 13.01.2021)

The Directorate is also responsible for running the new, modern visitor centre, opened in 2014. Since the Parliament building is a top touristic magnet, the country's number one sight, the indoor tours, available in several languages, are highly overbooked. The Directorate employs many tour guides, contracted as freelancers on seasonal demand (they are not included in the Office's payroll). The income of touristic activities is nonetheless almost negligible in the annual budget (ca. 2,5%).

3.6. Press relations

The Press Office, previously part of the Secretariat of the Speaker, became a separate unit in 2012. Its primary task is to inform the press on the activities of the plenary, committees, elected officers of the National Assembly. It also coordinates the access of journalists to the building by temporary (sessional or daily) licences. The answer to public information requests belongs also to its domain.

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