

**DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION: FROM CONCEPT TO REALITY OF THE  
GEORGIAN CIVIL SERVICE POLICY**

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**Abstract**

Civil service policy constitutes a central component of public policy and administrative science and gained renewed importance in Georgia after 2014, when civil service reform was closely linked to Europeanisation and democratic governance following the signing of the Association Agreement with the European Union. This article aims to examine the key features of policy design and implementation related to civil servants, with a focus on understanding the underlying factors shaping these policies. The study employed qualitative methods, combining expert interviews with document analysis. The results highlight a gap between design and its implementation, hampered by limited institutional and political readiness, and the enduring influence of the Soviet administrative legacy

**Keywords:** “Public administration reform, Policy design, Policy implementation, Civil service, Policy failure.”

## **Introduction**

Civil service policy is a vital component of public policy and administration. The latter encompasses a set of policies and actions that the state declares and enforces within the civil service system. This topic remains significant in international academia and is the focus of empirical research (Demmke, 2005; Dowding, 2005; Ilic, 2011; Verhey, 2013; Sundell, 2014; Biland & Gally, 2018; Neo, Grimmelikhuijsen & Tummers, 2023; Rotmans & Verheijden, 2023; Aboelazm et al., 2025). Moreover, it remains relevant in practice-particularly in most Eastern European countries, where the dichotomy between politics and administration continues to pose a challenge (Khuroshvili, 2023; Callahan & Mau, 2024).

In Georgia, issues related to civil service policy gained particular importance after 2014, when the government launched the Public Administration Reform programme (PAR), which included civil service reform. Following this reform, Georgian academia also increased its interest in the subject (Charkviani, 2014; Abashidze, 2016; Dolidze et al., 2017; Lomsadze, 2018; Khuroshvili, 2021), although political-administrative sciences in the country still face developmental challenges. Nonetheless, various organisations such as “IDFI,” “GYLA,” and “Transparency International - Georgia” periodically prepare reports-mostly of normative content. Correspondingly, there is a renewed demand for empirical research to generate new academic insights and address practical issues.

This study directly responds to these academic and practical gaps by examining core aspects of policy design and implementation relating to civil servants, with particular focus on understanding the underlying political, institutional, and contextual factors shaping these policies. The primary research question guiding this study is: What are the key features of the policy and its causes, concerning civil servants?

To answer this, the article explores several interconnected themes. It begins with an overview of key academic debates and contributions that define contemporary civil service systems. It then assesses the conceptual foundations of public servant policy in Georgia and evaluates how well these ideals are realised in practice. Special attention is given to challenges in policy design and implementation, especially within Georgia's changing political landscape. The paper also examines significant shifts in government approaches to the civil service over recent years, including reforms in evaluation procedures, recruitment systems, and career development mechanisms.

Furthermore, the study considers critical issues such as politicisation, neutrality, and institutional integrity. These are analysed from both historical and current perspectives, providing a comprehensive overview of the evolution of public servants' policy in Georgia and highlighting ongoing tensions between normative frameworks and operational realities.

### **Research design and methodology**

This research aims to examine the key features of policy design and implementation related to civil servants, focusing on understanding the underlying factors that shape these policies.

Based on the purpose of the study, the tasks are defined as follows:

1. Systematic study, analysis, and evaluation of declared and implemented policies.
2. Examination of state policy documents, concepts, action plans, and government resolutions concerning the issue.
3. Study and assessment of the challenges in the official policy-making process.
4. Conducting in-depth interviews with current and former civil servants for empirical insights, as well as with academic experts in public policy, public administration, and policy science.

This study's research question is formulated as follows is:

What are the key features of the policy and its causes, concerning civil servants?

In terms of research design, qualitative social science research methods are employed, specifically in-depth interviews and document analysis. A total of 13 in-depth interviews were conducted, some remotely and some face-to-face. Each interview lasted between 40 and 110 minutes. A pre-structured interview questionnaire was used, with three versions prepared for experts, current civil servants, and former civil servants. The study adhered to the three basic principles of research ethics as outlined by the American Psychological Association (Smith, 2003), including obtaining informed consent from each respondent. Information collected was used to ensure anonymity. All sources cited comply with Georgian legislation and principles of intellectual property rights.

Document analysis was based on thematic and content analysis methods, focusing on state policy action plans, government resolutions, laws, reports, and statistics. Additionally, relevant research and reports related to the topic were examined. Units of analysis ranged from individual words to entire phrases or provisions. Coding was applied to identify themes such as "official," "neutrality," "bias," "recruitment," "transparency," and "failure," alongside categories including "systemic challenges," "design," "implementation," and "policy failure."

Non-probability sampling was used to select legal and political documents, reports, and community studies from 2014 to 2025, related to policy design and implementation. The sampling for interviews was purposive and targeted. Participants were sectoral experts whose qualifications were confirmed by academic degrees and professional experience. Seven experts participated, along with three current and three former civil servants, who had been dismissed. Audio recordings allowed for transcription, coding, and categorisation. Units of analysis ranged from words to phrases, with relevant codes such as "official," "failing," and "problem," and categories including "career management," "policy design," and "policy implementation."

The main limitation of this study was the inability to conduct interviews with decision-makers. While including them could have enriched the study, the abolition of the Civil Service Bureau and the increase in authoritarian and politicised tendencies over the past two years rendered this impossible.

### **Literature review: major academic issues**

The scholarly examination of Georgia's public servants' policy has attracted considerable attention in both domestic and international academic literature (Kvashilava, 2017; Charkviani, 2013; Khuroshvili, 2021; Baimenov & Liverakos, 2022; Dolidze et al., 2017). This interest stems from the political, historical, and administrative evolution of Georgia's public service system and its ongoing challenges in establishing a professional, impartial, and effective bureaucracy (Abashidze, 2016). The literature covers a wide range of issues, such as policy design and implementation, political neutrality, recruitment and training, institutional reform, and the broader post-Soviet transformation.

The post-Soviet legacy and the complex political context of the 1990s and early 2000s have shaped Georgia's civil service development. The state faced civil war, separatist conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and external pressure from Russia aimed at maintaining Georgia within its post-Soviet orbit (Moldogaziev, Brewer & Kellough, 2021). In this historical context, establishing an impartial and modern bureaucracy was particularly challenging. Abashidze (2016) argues that Georgia, in some ways, was "lucky" because many of its institutions had to be built from scratch rather than reformed—a process that sometimes allows for more radical change.

Following the Rose Revolution in 2003, the focus of public administration reforms was on eradicating entrenched corruption rather than institutionalising a stable civil service system. As Charkviani and Chelidze (2012) and The World Bank (2012) observe, the emphasis was on

improving service delivery rather than building robust institutional foundations. Nonetheless, the anti-corruption efforts of the ruling party at the time laid some groundwork for later reforms.

After the 2008 Russia–Georgia war, momentum in civil service reform slowed. Public administration performance suffered from systemic issues, which were documented in various studies. Ghonghadze and Dolidze (2014) categorised the problems into three major areas: (1) inadequate remuneration, biased decision-making, and ethical violations; (2) communication issues, poor strategic planning, and decision-making gaps; and (3) shortcomings in human resource management. Selimashvili's 2014 study further revealed critical flaws in recruitment, such as vague legal provisions, unrealistic qualification requirements, and manipulated hiring outcomes (Abashidze & Selimashvili, 2014).

A significant turning point occurred in 2013 with the formulation of a new civil service concept, followed by a bill submitted to Parliament in 2015. The transitional period from 2015 to 2017 was particularly crucial. As Khuroshvili (2021) notes, the Civil Service Bureau submitted draft legislation, and in 2017, the outdated 1997 law on public service was finally repealed. These changes stemmed from a 2012 government plan and were further supported by the 2015 government programme. This consistency indicates that the Georgian Dream coalition, which came to power in 2012, prioritised reforming the civil service system for several consecutive years (Khuroshvili, 2021).

This period marks what Khuroshvili (2021) describes as a shift from policy inaction to policy action. The 2014 reform initiative aimed to establish a non-corrupt, citizen-centred system. Although this vision faced scepticism, the reform was an attempt to institutionalise meritocratic principles and professional standards within the civil service. According to several scholars, such transformation was previously considered unthinkable, given the legacy of a corrupt bureaucratic culture.

Several studies during this period analysed the administrative and institutional challenges associated with policy design and implementation. In her 2015 paper, Dolidze emphasised that civil service reform models in Georgia must account for political, legislative, and administrative dynamics. She highlighted the influence of political, social, economic, and institutional factors on training systems and professional development, arguing that “the selection of the model depends heavily on the form of public administration and the strength of administrative institutions” (Dolidze, 2015).

International organisations and local think tanks also played a role in monitoring reform progress. An analysis by the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI, 2016) credited the EU–Georgia Association Agreement with advancing reform objectives such as political neutrality, career development, and integrity. However, it also noted systemic risks: excessive governmental control, lack of competitiveness, and limited openness in the system.

In 2024, the civil service framework underwent significant legal amendments. These changes have sparked criticism among civil society organisations and experts. The IDFI (2024) published an analysis criticising the amendments passed on December 13, 2024, in the third reading. According to the report, the new provisions increase the risk of political influence, restrict civil servants’ freedom of speech, and create opportunities for systemic politicisation.

Similarly, the Georgian Young Lawyers’ Association (GYLA, 2024) expressed concern about the legal changes, which include provisions allowing the dismissal of public officers regardless of their mobility options, thereby weakening their job security. Other problematic elements include performance evaluation criteria and the increased vulnerability of structural unit heads and their deputies.

The return to centralised control, according to these analyses, marks a potential reversal of the meritocratic and depoliticising trends initiated in the 2010s. Although the official discourse continues to emphasise meritocracy and professional development, the current practice

often diverges from these values. As Khuroshvili (2021) emphasises, there are specific institutional and political characteristics that continue to shape the design, implementation, and actual outcomes of civil service policy in Georgia.

The literature thus paints a complex and dynamic picture of Georgia's civil service transformation-one marked by reformist impulses, external influences, internal resistance, and recurrent contradictions between policy intentions and realities.

### **Public servants' policy: from concept to reality**

The principles of Georgia's Law on Public Service – "On Public Service" - are genuinely ambitious, which is often the case. The law's creators aim to establish ideal models and declaratory policy frameworks. However, recognising the law's practical realities at the stage of transfer and implementation is crucial. The goals of Georgia's Law on Public Service include promoting career progression, establishing a unified civil service system based on merit, integrity, political neutrality, as well as accountability and impartiality, and providing a legal foundation for its operation (Law of Georgia on Public Service, 2015). The 2014 approved introduction to civil service reform also states that its purpose was to create an effective civil service founded on meritocratic principles and ensure the development of fair, impartial policies in the long run (Concept of Public Service Reform, 2014). The reform centers on establishing the Institute of Professional Public Servants. To effectively achieve these and other goals, the Civil Service Bureau was appointed in 2015 as the agency responsible for overseeing the unified Public Service system, promoting transparent governance, ethical standards, and a professional, career-focused public service (Civil Service Bureau, 2015). Its responsibilities included researching, analyzing, and monitoring the public service sector. It is also important to note that the Civil Service Bureau was dissolved in 2025. Additionally, it was charged with preparing and issuing recommendations based on specific case studies. One significant innovation approved in

the 2015 Law of Georgia on Civil Service was the clear separation of political and administrative activities to distinguish state service from public service. The law outlines principles such as equality before the law, efficiency, merit-based appointments, impartiality, equal access, accountability, political neutrality, career development, transparency, and social and legal protection for officers (Law of Georgia on Public Service, Chapter II, Articles 7-18, 2015). Accordingly, the public service system was to be built around these principles. Effective steps were necessary to ensure the success of the reform concept, with the law fully coming into force on 1 January 2017. Special emphasis was placed on separating public service from state service to prevent involvement in activities driven by justice, legislative, and political motives. Hence, the law also regulated the legal status of employees hired via employment or administrative agreements and the procedures for applying the law to them. The introduction of competitions also included a provision for individuals employed under employment agreements to be admitted to the public service through simplified competition. The law also defined the institution of employees under administrative agreements, allowing a state official to hire a person into public service without competition, under the terms of such an agreement. Furthermore, the concept of a professional public officer was clarified: a lifetime appointee or elected official who begins working as a public servant within the state system. Their career advances gradually from lower to higher positions, based on competence, merit, and professional knowledge. Experts see the reallocation and regulation of roles as a significant positive development - "The first tangible achievement was bright roles. Managers reevaluated their roles, which means they began to think as team managers. We were slowly moving toward the stated goal. It was beneficial to ensure career continuity and professional development as a state commitment (respondents: 2, 3). To participate in the civil service, public servants must engage in professional development programmes offered by the Civil Service. The Government of Georgia's Ordinance on the Professional Development Needs sets out the core and supplementary development programmes

relevant to public officers, with participation in basic programmes being mandatory. The need for additional programmes is determined by each public institution, considering criteria such as job requirements, assessment results, and the institution's strategic goals.

### **Human Resource Instruments in Practice: Recruitment, Competition, and Professional Development**

Documentation indicates that the public service should foster a career development environment for professional public servants. However, the actual implementation process shows challenges (Ordinance N627, 2014; Law of Georgia on Public Service, 2015; Ordinance N242, 2018). Supported by the USAID CIF Project, the Democracy Governance Initiative (GGI), with local experts, conducted an analysis titled "Analysis of Planning and Implementation of Professional Development Programs in Public Service." The 2019-2020 data revealed that initially, the process was superficial. Activities lacked focus on actual needs, making it difficult to execute planned activities (Gotsadze, 2020). Experts reported that "professional development" may not work. Very superficial training was conducted. Imagine you have 40 hours to cover five important topics, including strategic planning with its exercises. According to modern standards, it has been a long time since the development of the organisation was associated with the professional development of employees. Initially, it can be said that for professional development, zero white was allocated for training. All advancements, such as work analysis, training, implementation, and expert services, were funded by donors. Without donors, it would be impossible to implement all this. "Professional development systems did not work the way they should have worked" (respondents: 3, 4, 5). The involvement of international donors and partners is highlighted across various documents and analyses.

The Civil Service Bureau's 2020–2021 Annual Report details several donor-supported initiatives carried out before it was abolished in 2025. These include the European

Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) project “Strengthening the Civil Service Bureau to Ensure Public Service Reform.” This project helped create a remote work manual, analytical methodologies, and training modules focused on corruption prevention, ethics, change management, and performance assessment. Trainers were prepared as part of this effort, and Lithuanian experts shared practical experience with Georgian officials, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Civil Service Bureau, 2020). In 2021, the EU and the Council of Europe hosted the regional workshop “Developing Transparency of Beneficial Owners,” with participation from the Civil Service Bureau along with international partners such as OECD SIGMA, the Council of Europe, and IACC. Interview evidence highlights that donor involvement was crucial throughout the reform process. One respondent remarked, “the involvement and activity of donors was significant throughout this reform. UNDP practically funded the service provided by the Civil Service Bureau. Of course, there were other donors as well. The state’s share in this activity was minimal. The government did not actively obstruct reform, but the real stimulus came from donors” (respondent 1). Chapter 5 of the Law of Georgia on Public Service deals entirely with the issues of admission to the position of a public official. Article 27 sets the basic requirements for admission. Article 34 deals with the creation of a competition for vacant positions. In this case, the topic of competitions is interesting. A person can only be appointed to a fourth rank position through an open competition, while appointments to third, second and first rank positions may be made as a result of an internal or closed competition. Full Face Competitions are usually announced throughout the public service system. However, a third, second and first rank position may be appointed based on an open competition, if a selection has not been made based on a closed competition (Law of Georgia on Public Service, 2015). According to Resolution N204 of the Government of Georgia,<sup>1</sup> types of

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<sup>1</sup> "An effective citizen of Georgia who meets the requirements provided for by Articles 27 and 29 of the Law of Georgia on Public Service has the right to participate in an open competition" (Ordinance of the Government of Georgia, N204, 2020)

open, internal, closed<sup>2</sup> and simplified public competitions are defined. According to Resolution N182 of 2020, internal amendments were made to Resolution N204 of 2017 (the definitions of competitions have not changed). Specific changes affected the type of internal competition. According to Article 25, as a rule, an internal competition is announced for filling a vacant position of a professional public officer within the scope of a public institution or institution system

Prior to its abolition, representatives from the Civil Service Bureau had the legal authority to attend internal competitions for monitoring purposes. When attending, a representative was required to prepare a report on the competition's conduct. Experts emphasized that “the ability of the Civil Service Bureau to monitor competitions and interviews was important because documenting and reporting on commissioners and procedures had a disciplining effect”; “nobody wanted to appear in a negative report. Reports were submitted to the government and the Prime Minister” (respondents: 4, 6). Former interviewees also recalled cases of pre-arranged or simplified interviews conducted by commission members, which were monitored by Bureau representatives. The Bureau also oversaw appointments by verifying compliance with mandatory qualification requirements for specific ranks, both during the competition and at the appointment stage (respondent 7). Additionally, during this period, some public institutions appointed individuals under incorrect contract types. Bureau inspectors reviewed whether positions were permanent or temporary and evaluated the legal nature of technical contracts. Under the law, employing staff under contractual arrangements was prohibited. One respondent noted, “there were cases when public institutions employed persons under the wrong contract. In such cases, notes and recommendations were issued” (respondent 7).

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<sup>2</sup> "A current professional civil servant, a person enrolled in the reserve of officers and a person employed under an employment agreement shall have the right to participate in a closed competition, if he/she has been working in the civil service system for at least one year" (Ordinance N204, 2020 of the Government of Georgia).

Regarding closed competitions linked to civil servant mobility, interview evidence indicates that the reserve mechanism failed to operate effectively. In practice, following the announcement of closed competitions, institutions frequently proceeded to open competitions due to the absence of suitable reserve candidates . As one respondent explained, “institutions would contact the Bureau regarding reserve candidates, after which the Bureau would respond that no relevant candidate was enrolled, and an open competition would be announced” (respondent 7).

According to the pre-abolition annual reports of the Civil Service Bureau for 2020–2023, the number of reserve individuals enrolled amounted to 259, 56, 289, and 91 respectively. In 2022 alone, 354 closed and 625 internal competitions were announced, while 194 officials were subjected to mobility procedures and 289 were enrolled as reserves. These figures indicate that, even during the period of institutional operation, the number of closed and internal competitions substantially exceeded the pool of available reserve candidates (Civil Service Bureau, 2020–2023).

### **Evaluation, Politicisation, and the Design–Reality Gap**

As already mentioned, it is important to have a declaratory policy and a seemingly comprehensive reform. However, it is also important to consider the kind of reality the reform encounters during the implementation stage. Also, what stage of development the current institutions are at and what resources are available for the implementation of the reform? The fact is that even after the reform was enacted, this problem was not solved. One of the above-mentioned aspects of the reform proved less effective in practice, as it failed to meet the reality of achieving the desired results. For example, the reserve and the systems of Georgian civil servants were not ready for closed competition. As one of the respondents notes, "maybe closed competitions needed more time for development" (respondent 3). Cases of nepotism should be

noted in regard to the topic of competition. Although public service was planned as part of public administration reform, the opposite is often the case. Respondents, current and former civil servants, note: "There were times when they told me who should appoint me to a particular position, who should be promoted to my former position, but I personally never did it. "Career development was also just written on paper. This was happening based on who you were close to and how loyal you were to the ruling party. "There are services where they first find the preferred candidate and then announce the competition. Of course, this is not bad in all cases, but, for example, if I have a good preferred candidate, I should not be afraid that he will not prevail in the competition. If they appoint someone without a contest, it means that they are afraid that he will not overcome the competition" (respondents: 8, 10, 11). As can be seen from interviews, there is a practice when, at the interview stage, the candidates are aware of the alleged questions in advance, which of course puts the candidates in an unfair position (respondent 9).

According to the 2018-2020 government programme, the goal of the government was to establish effective public administration. It was also determined that, in order to achieve this, effective policy-making and a focus on challenges were necessary. Public Administration Reform (Government Programme 2018-2020, 2017) was a key part of the government initiative. The Public Administration Guide of Georgia 2020 was established in 2015 by the OECD/SIGMA, based on the principles created. It should be noted that the Action Plans for 2015-2016, 2017-2018, and 2019-2020 were developed to ensure the successful implementation of Georgia's Public Administration Reform Road. These documents detail the reform stages and review significant challenges faced. The third Action Plan, 2019-2020, was launched to maintain the momentum of public administration reform (Public Administration Reform Action Plan 2015-2016; Public Administration Reform Action Plan 2017-2018; Public Administration Reform Action Plan 2019-2020). The 2019-2020 Reform Action Plan has six main directions,

with specific steps outlined under each. For instance, the Policy Development and Coordination section states that the goal for 2019-2020 is to enhance the quality of the policy development cycle. The aim in public service and human resource management is to implement changes introduced by laws enacted from July 1, 2017, and 13 subordinate acts. All this relates to various challenges, which highlights the importance of the Civil Service Bureau and the responsibilities of its representatives in helping the civil service system overcome these issues. It is also noted that the concept of civil service reform is rooted in establishing the Institute of Professional Public Servants, aiming to free the public service from political influence and to create a fair career advancement system. Regarding this goal, the officer assessment system should be highlighted. The Law of Georgia on Public Service specifies how and when an officer's career develops. Movement from a lower hierarchical position to a higher one, and from a low to a high position within the same rank, occurs through internal or closed competition. The Ordinance of the Government of Georgia (Resolution N220, 2017), "On the Approval of the Procedure and Conditions for the Evaluation of a Professional Public Officer", states that the legal outcomes of the assessment involve awarding a class, recognition, and identifying professional development needs. The ordinance explains the evaluation process, system, methodology, and involved parties. At the legislative level, this ordinance governs part of the professional appraisal process. However, practical experience shows that initially, managers and HR personnel sometimes found it difficult to implement the evaluation system. Often, due to personal relationships and resentment, everyone received identical scores irrespective of merit. Nevertheless, this approach gradually changed (respondent 4). Regarding the attitudes of former and current civil servants towards the officer evaluation system, some remarked: "In my assessment, the current form of the public officer assessment system is catastrophic. Often, it functions as a punishment mechanism rather than a tool for professional development. If a low score was given, it was a punishment; if a high score, everyone received an equally high score"; "It was not a transparent

and fair process. The policy design was good, but as a tool-no"; "I had issues with the assessment when I started working in public service and faced my first evaluation. I was unfairly rated low by someone who was not my immediate supervisor. I was assigned for two weeks and assessed for two weeks. Naturally, I had feedback from that" (respondents: 10, 12, 13). Beyond concerns about transparency, accountability, and fairness, it is also crucial that the evaluation system for professional public servants remains part of a unified framework that influences career advancement (respondent 3). These arrangements reflect the operation of the officer evaluation system during the implementation phase of the 2017–2020 public administration reform.

### **Performance Evaluation and Design-implementation Constraints**

An analysis of the Civil Service Bureau's activity reports from 2022 and 2023, **produced during the final phase of its operation**, reveals notable trends in the performance evaluation of civil servants, raising serious questions about the integrity and effectiveness of Georgia's meritocratic framework. According to the 2022 report, 64. 7% of civil servants received the highest performance rating, 34. 7% were assessed as "good," while only 0. 0.3% received a "satisfactory" and another 0. 0.3% an "unsatisfactory" rating. The 2023 data shows an even more skewed distribution: 84. 16% received the highest possible evaluation, 15. 84% were rated "good," and the remaining categories did not exceed 0 0.1%. This pattern demonstrates that 99. 4% of civil servants in 2022, and a similarly overwhelming majority in 2023, were classified as either “good” or “outstanding” (see Annexes 1 and 2.)

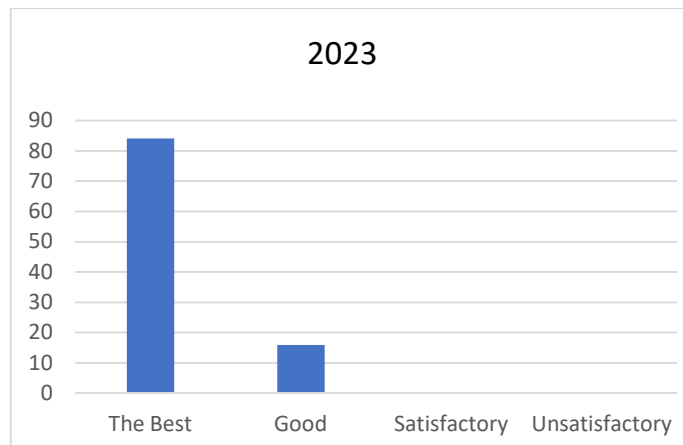
Such a uniform distribution of high ratings strongly suggests that the performance evaluation system is not being applied rigorously or objectively. Experts view these results as unusual, indicating that the appraisal process may be symbolic or procedural rather than substantive. These figures do not align with the operational reality of any complex public administration system, where performance variation, misconduct, or underperformances are

statistically inevitable. The data implicitly portrays a flawless bureaucracy-one in which disciplinary issues are virtually nonexistent and the overwhelming majority of employees meet or exceed expectations. This idealised representation stands in stark contrast to known systemic issues in Georgian public administration, including politicisation, inefficiencies, and inconsistent application of human resource policies.

Moreover, the validity of these evaluations becomes even more questionable when considered alongside disciplinary and dismissal data from 2024. If performance is nearly universally rated as high, it logically follows that disciplinary sanctions or dismissals should be extremely rare. However, the record of dismissals in 2024-especially in light of controversial amendments to the Law on Public Service-implies that performance evaluations are not being used as the basis for HR decisions. Instead, this disconnect reinforces the conclusion that evaluations have a façade-like character in Georgia’s civil service system. They do not reflect genuine performance assessments but rather serve as formalities that conceal underlying political or administrative dynamics. Ultimately, these patterns expose a significant gap between the meritocratic principles outlined in policy design and their actual application in everyday governance.

Annexes 1 and 2.





These empirical findings can be interpreted through Richard Heeks' Design–Reality Gap model (Heeks, 2002), which attributes policy and reform failures to mismatches between formal systems and the actual institutional, political, and administrative contexts where they are applied. Heeks asserts that reforms are most prone to failure when policy assumptions do not align with existing organizational capacities, incentive structures, and behavioral norms. Interview evidence supports this, with respondents highlighting unprepared institutions and inherited administrative practices as major obstacles to reform implementation (respondents 3, 5).

In Georgia, civil service reform showcases a clear expansion of the design–reality gap across several areas. Although the legal framework aligns with internationally accepted principles of meritocracy, political neutrality, and performance-based management, actual implementation continues to reveal gaps in institutional readiness, managerial practices, and political support. As some interviewees noted, well-designed policies often failed to operate as intended due to weak organizational trust and limited enforcement, especially at middle management levels (respondent 3).

The findings also reveal that the design–reality gap is dynamic, increasing as political will diminishes over time. Interview data indicate strong political commitment during the law-drafting phase, but this gradually faded during implementation, threatening the sustainability of the reform. One respondent commented, “political will existed during 2014–2017 when laws

were drafted, but then gradually weakened and is now almost nonexistent,” emphasizing that effective policy enforcement ultimately depends on political and human agency rather than formal rules (respondent 1).

### **Radical change of government policy**

On December 13, 2024, the Law on Public Service was revised, introducing significant changes to public service contract types. These legislative amendments are best understood in the context of the broader political shift in state policy seen since 2023–2024. The revision coincided with a gradual decline in emphasis on EU membership aspirations and a slowdown in implementing EU-style reforms. While earlier reforms of public administration focused on Europeanisation under the Association Agreement, the December 2024 amendments indicate a move away from long-term institutional convergence toward short-term political control and administrative flexibility. This shift reflects a broader trend where commitments to meritocracy, political neutrality, and a career civil service-principles promoted by the EU and OECD/SIGMA-have been increasingly subordinated to domestic political interests. Consequently, the amendments are not just technical changes to employment arrangements but also a political recalibration of governance priorities, signaling a transition from reforms driven by Europeanisation to a more discretionary, politicised public administration model.

Importantly, heads of primary structural units and their deputies are now appointed through administrative agreements that cannot extend beyond the term of the current political authorities. This means that a change in political leadership automatically results in the turnover of senior officials. The reforms also specify that civil servants dismissed during reorganisation are no longer eligible for reinstatement, even if courts rule in their favor. Such individuals are entitled only to outstanding salary payments and compensation capped at three months’ salary, with the option to join the reserve.

The current amendments conflict with the original goal of creating an impartial, politically neutral, and professional public sector. The Public Administration Reform Action Plan 2023–2024 aims to strengthen the Civil Service Bureau, enhance professional growth, and improve vocational training, while the 2023–2026 reform strategy focuses on using cooperation under the Association Agreement to build a transparent, effective, and accountable civil service. However, these documents also highlight weaknesses in the Civil Service Bureau's role, especially the loss of managerial staff. Challenges in professional development, HR management, and employee evaluation persist.

Since the amendments, the gap between policy goals and implementation has widened. A simplified reorganization process threatens civil service stability, and civil servants hired under administrative agreements are more vulnerable. Increased discretion in senior appointments raises concerns about political influence and meritocracy violations, especially until December 2024 (respondents 1, 3). The rising number of dismissals reflects this trend. Some experts are calling for the abolition of the Civil Service Bureau, criticizing it as ineffective and more a political tool than a reform agent. Dismissed officers report that breaches of political neutrality were mainly cited for their termination (respondents 10, 11, 13).

OECD reports that many European countries have shifted from career-based to contractual employment systems to boost administrative flexibility. If Georgian reforms aim for a similar goal, they seem fragmented and lack a cohesive institutional framework, calling for a comprehensive overhaul. Overall, if maintaining a career-based civil service remains a priority, current reforms seem fundamentally incompatible. Reorganization measures are also widely seen as harming civil servants' rights (respondent 5).

## **Conclusion**

This study aimed to examine the key features of policy design and implementation related to civil servants, focusing on understanding the underlying factors that shape these policies. The central research question-What are the key features of the policy and its causes, concerning civil servants?-was addressed through a combination of qualitative research methods, including 13 in-depth interviews and a comprehensive review of relevant legislative, policy, and institutional documents.

This approach enabled a systematic study, analysis, and evaluation of both declared and enacted policies, while also identifying challenges faced in Georgian civil service policymaking. The analysis uncovered a notable gap between policy design and its practical implementation. Experts pointed out that during policy formulation, reforms should better reflect practical realities and cultural traits of the Georgian civil service. Although the civil service reform aimed to enhance and modernise the system, its execution was inconsistent and often fell short of its goals. Several factors explained these issues: low institutional and political readiness, and the persistent influence of Georgia's Soviet administrative legacy, which continues to shape civil service norms and behaviour. These structural and cultural legacies hinder the development of a genuinely modern, merit-based, and politically neutral system. The study also found that recent legislative changes-especially the amendments to the law of December 13, 2024-were misaligned with the system's design, objectives, and content.

Such changes conflicted with earlier reform goals and further diverged civil service policy from broader public administration reform aims. While reforming public administration is a step forward, legislative measures alone have not ensured effective outcomes. The Law of Georgia "On Public Service," along with its bylaws and resolutions, provided a legislative framework for policy design. Still, implementation shortcomings hindered system development, prevented the formation of a unified, stable civil service, and weakened core principles like

career advancement, political neutrality, merit, and accountability. The research also revealed significant gaps between declared policies and actual practice, including inconsistencies in competition procedures, problems managing civil servant reserves and mobility, irregular use of different contract types, and weaknesses in the evaluation system.

Competitions were sometimes artificially simplified or complicated; reserve and mobility mechanisms were unprepared for internal and closed competitions; and evaluation scores often lacked differentiation, serving as punitive or routine measures. These findings support the initial assumptions: (1) that implementation failures are linked to institutional readiness and political will, and (2) that gaps between policy and practice persist. The Civil Service Bureau and international donors are crucial for advancing the system, primarily through capacity-building and aligning with international standards. Experts agree that reforms are necessary but noted that implementation remains the main obstacle to achieving reform goals.

The study's findings are relevant both academically and practically. Academically, they enrich debates on civil service systems, policy design, and implementation in transitional democracies with empirical insights from Georgia. Practically, they can guide policymakers, civil servants, and leaders in bridging the gap between policy and practice, informing future reforms with realistic, context-aware, and institutionally supported approaches that uphold political neutrality, merit, accountability, and professional development.

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