

Reforming the Machinery of the State: Bounded Policy Success in Georgia's Civil Service

Davit Oboladze – Incoming PhD Researcher, School of Politics and International Relations, University of Nottingham

Email: d.oboladze@hotmail.com

Abstract

This chapter examines Georgia's civil service reform as a case of bounded policy success in a hybrid regime. Using McConnell's multidimensional framework - programmatic, process, political, and temporal - and drawing on the Multiple Streams Framework (MSF), Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), and Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), elite interviews, legislative process tracing, and documentary evidence, it situates the trajectory of civil service reform in Georgia (2004–2025), explaining both the institutionalisation of meritocratic rules under the 2015 Civil Service Law and the subsequent rollback in 2024–25 (including the abolition of the Civil Service Bureau). I show how external alignment (EU and OECD–SIGMA) and bureaucratic entrepreneurship produced visible gains (standardised recruitment, HRMIS, ethics frameworks, service delivery islands), while uneven capacity, informal networks, and the absence of a protected senior civil service left reforms vulnerable. Conceptually, the chapter traces mechanisms - selective coupling, isomorphic mimicry, drift and displacement - that translate executive dominance into symbolic or decoupled implementation. Empirically, it documents asymmetries across ministries and municipalities and shows how narrative reframing and coalition shifts enabled rapid reversal despite formal compliance. The contribution is threefold: (i) a mechanism-centred account of how hybrid regimes convert legal success into precarious practice; (ii) a reframing of *success* as durability under political contestation; and (iii) practical design implications (ring-fenced analytical and HR capacity, enforceable senior civil service rules, transparent appraisal and consultation logs) for building resilient administrative systems beyond legal enactment.

Keywords: civil service reform; policy success; hybrid regimes; Georgia; EU and OECD–SIGMA alignment.

Introduction

Civil service reform has long been regarded as a cornerstone of building accountable, effective, and responsive states (Grindle, 1997; Meyer-Sahling, 2009). In post-Soviet countries such as Georgia, where politicisation, patronage, and institutional fragility were deeply entrenched, civil service reform has carried both the symbolic and structural weight of modern governance. It reflects not only administrative modernisation, but a broader political recalibration toward professionalism, meritocracy, and institutional legitimacy (Klitgaard, 1997; Kakachia et al., 2018).

Georgia’s reform trajectory has been shaped by reformist political leadership, EU-aligned conditionality, and national bureaucratic entrepreneurship. However, these drivers operated within a hybrid governance setting characterised by executive dominance, fragmented accountability, and selective enforcement (World Bank, 2018; Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2020; Freedom House, 2021). The Rose Revolution in 2003 catalysed an aggressive anti-corruption and deregulatory reform wave (2004–2012), which broke sharply from the post-Soviet past. These were followed by more structured reforms anchored in the EU-aligned Public Administration Reform (PAR) agenda from 2015, culminating in the adoption of the Civil Service Law. Backed by the EU, UNDP, and USAID, the law institutionalised performance-based recruitment, ethics frameworks, and standardised career progression. However, implementation revealed a persistent gap between formal norms and administrative practice, as informal political influence remained entrenched (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015; Kupatadze, 2020).

The 2024 legislative amendments, authorising non-competitive dismissal, and the subsequent abolition of the Civil Service Bureau (CSB) in early 2025 exposed the fragility of these reforms. Framed as reorganisation, the changes enabled politically motivated dismissals and re-politicised core civil service structures. This reversal underscores the fragility of institutional gains in regimes lacking embedded accountability mechanisms and normative consensus.

Table 1. Comparative Architecture: 2015 Civil Service Law vs. 2024 Amendments

Feature	2015 Law	2024 Amendments	Implications
Recruitment	Open competition, standardised exams, HRMIS postings	Dismissals permitted under ‘reorganisation’; mid-level managerial posts moved to contracts	Erodes impartiality in recruitment
Protections / Status	Civil servant status for managerial cadre; ethics and appraisal mandates	Mid-level managers reclassified as administrative contractors	Weakens neutrality and professional safeguards
Oversight (CSB)	Civil Service Bureau as central coordinator/monitor	CSB abolished; functions fragmented (e.g., Anti-Corruption Bureau)	Fragments oversight and career pathways
EU–SIGMA alignment	Alignment with PAR and EU acquis; OECD–SIGMA benchmarks	Divergence from EU best practice	Undermines institutional trust and EU credibility

Note: Maps design shifts to expected implementation effects across recruitment, protections, oversight, and EU alignment.
Sources: OECD–SIGMA (2017a–c); Civil Georgia (2024; 2025); Transparency International Georgia (2024a–b).

The chapter applies McConnell's multidimensional success framework (2010), unpacking the reform across programmatic, procedural, political, and temporal dimensions. Drawing on policy analysis literature, primary interviews, and legislative review, it critically examines the conditions under which reform was both institutionalised and reversed. Ultimately, it argues that civil service reform in Georgia, while strategically significant and institutionally ambitious, remained fragile in the absence of political anchoring, legal safeguards, enforcement capacity, and normative entrenchment.

Historical and Institutional Background

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia inherited a fragmented and politicised bureaucracy that was defined by weak institutional capacity and entrenched corruption (Nodia & Scholtbach, 2006; Cheterian, 2009). Early reform efforts, including the 1997 Civil Service Law, were largely symbolic and poorly enforced. Administrative structures lacked autonomy and coherence, with informal networks often supplanting formal rules and procedures. Political loyalty rather than competence served as the principal basis for bureaucratic advancement (Cheterian, 2009).

Georgia's reform trajectory was catalysed by the 2003 Rose Revolution, which brought to power a new political elite committed to radical modernisation. The incoming administration under President Mikheil Saakashvili launched an aggressive anti-corruption and state-building agenda, often described as 'shock therapy.' Civil service reform became a central component of this strategy, aimed at eroding patronage networks and establishing a system grounded in administrative efficiency, meritocracy, and institutional rationalisation. Thousands of civil servants were dismissed, ministries were restructured, and salaries were raised to reduce corruption incentives. New recruitment systems and basic merit principles were introduced, though the process remained highly centralised and top-down (Di Puccio, 2010). While corruption decreased and service delivery improved, critics pointed to the lack of transparency, the bypassing of due process, and the concentration of power in the executive.

Institutional consolidation began with the 2004 establishment of the Civil Service Bureau (CSB), a coordinating body for Human Resource Management (HRM). Initially limited in scope and capacity, the CSB gradually evolved into the central technical body responsible for harmonising HR standards, overseeing recruitment procedures, and guiding legal reforms. This institutional consolidation laid the foundation for the more ambitious reform package introduced by the 2015 Civil Service Law. The 2015 Law was embedded within the broader Public Administration Reform (PAR) strategy, launched in alignment with Georgia's 2014 EU Association Agreement. Structured around six pillars - policy planning, human resources management, accountability, service delivery, public financial management, and local governance - the PAR framework provided strategic direction, evaluation mechanisms, and coordination platforms for institutional reform. The PAR strategy positioned civil service reform not as a standalone issue but as integral to broader governance goals. Benchmarks were set, annual monitoring was institutionalised, and key performance indicators (KPIs) were defined. The 2015 Law, aligned with EU and OECD-SIGMA benchmarks, formalised merit-based recruitment, ethics, and career progression (SIGMA, 2017b; 2017c). However, implementation remained uneven. Ministries resisted oversight, and high-level appointments

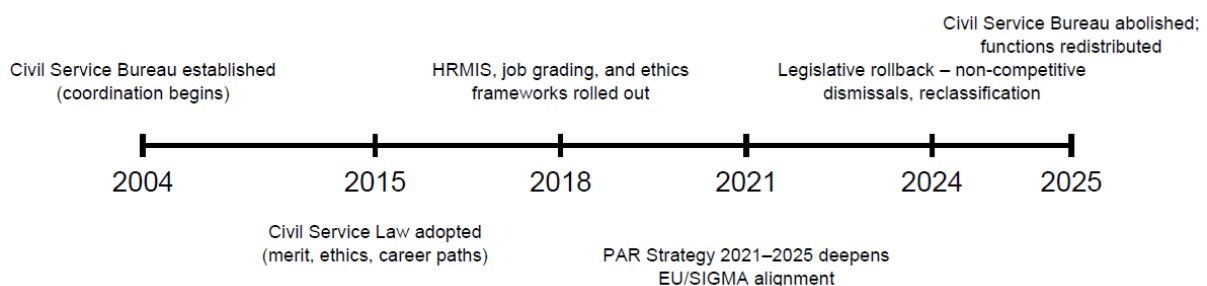
continued to reflect political discretion. Thus, the post-2015 period marked a shift from legal drafting to implementation challenges - what Grindle (2004a) famously called the ‘good enough governance’ dilemma.

Despite sustained external anchoring, reform ownership and commitment within key state institutions remained fragmented, inconsistent, and susceptible to elite-driven recalibrations. The trajectory of reform was sharply undermined in 2024 with the introduction of accelerated amendments to the Civil Service Law. These changes authorised the dismissal of civil servants without competition under the pretext of ‘reorganisation’ and reclassified mid-level managerial roles as administrative contracts, removing requirements for Georgian citizenship, proficiency in the state language, and public service qualifications. By stripping these roles of civil servant status, the amendments dismantled core meritocratic protections introduced by the 2015 Law (Transparency International Georgia, 2024a). Rather than a routine policy adjustment, the amendments represent a marked reversal of earlier reforms, underscoring how progress in hybrid regimes remains highly contingent on legal entrenchment, political accountability, and institutional resilience.

Programmatic Dimension: Legal Architecture, Reform Instruments, and Institutional Design

At the heart of Georgia’s civil service reform lies a programmatic architecture that evolved from fragmented, largely symbolic regulation in the 1990s to a formalised, EU-aligned framework by the mid-2010s. While this formal transformation - anchored in the 2015 Civil Service Law - denoted a commitment to professionalism, neutrality, and performance-based governance (SIGMA 2017b; 2017c; Civil Service Bureau, 2019), implementation remained highly uneven. Persistent gaps between normative ambition and administrative practice exposed the fragility of these gains in a hybrid regime context.

Figure 1. Timeline of Civil Service Reform in Georgia (2004–2025): Institutional Anchors and Turning Points



Note: Sequence highlights consolidation (2015–2023) and subsequent reversal (2024–2025).

Sources: Civil Georgia (2024; 2025); OECD–SIGMA (2017a–c); Transparency International Georgia (2024a–b).

1. Legal Frameworks and Normative Aspirations

The 1997 Law on Public Service offered a basic regulatory foundation but failed to enforce clear boundaries between political and administrative roles (Meyer-Sahling, 2009). The adoption of the 2015 Law, following extensive technical support and EU conditionality, marked a conceptual shift, standardising merit-based recruitment, promotion standards, and professional ethics, with the intent to entrench a depoliticised, career-based bureaucracy. It created clear legal distinctions between political and administrative positions, formalised open competition for recruitment, mandated probation and appraisal mechanisms, and set out structured pathways for promotion and professional development (SIGMA, 2017b; 2017c; Civil Service Bureau, 2019). These reforms reframed the civil servant as an impartial professional committed to the public good, marking a critical departure from Georgia's post-Soviet administrative legacy. However, the law's legal coherence did not ensure enforceability: line ministries retained significant discretion, and key provisions were inconsistently internalised.

2. Implementation Instruments: Design and Implementation Gaps

To operationalise the 2015 Law, Georgia introduced several key administrative tools intended to institutionalise merit-based governance:

- Human Resource Management Information System (HRMIS): Enabled vacancy tracking and oversight, but municipal-level adoption remained limited due to capacity constraints.
- Job Classification and Grading System: Aimed to rationalise remuneration and career paths, yet undermined by inconsistent implementation and political discretion.
- Performance Appraisal Frameworks: Intended to support merit-based progression, but often became procedural formalities, lacking evaluative depth or linkage to advancement (UNDP, 2021b; 2021c).
- Ethics Commissions: Mandated across institutions but rarely operationalised, lacking both institutional capacity, commitment and enforcement power, particularly at the municipal level.
- Training and Professional Development Programmes: Supported by donors, yet weakly linked to career incentives and rarely embedded in organisational routines.

Despite their normative sophistication, these instruments revealed deep implementation asymmetries. Compliance was highest in reform-oriented ministries (e.g., Justice, Finance) but remained superficial or absent across subnational administrations (UNDP, 2021b; 2021c). As Grindle (1997) cautioned, reform instruments alone cannot embed professional norms unless accompanied by behavioural internalisation, consistent political backing, and institutional accountability.

3. Achievements and Tensions: Between Compliance and Subversion

International assessments praised the coherence and ambition of Georgia's civil service framework (European Commission, 2021); however, beneath the surface, a persistent tension between formal compliance and substantive transformation endures. Competitive recruitment processes were sometimes used to legitimise pre-selected candidates (IDFI, 2021d), and

performance evaluations were distorted or procedurally detached from advancement (UNDP, 2021b). Ethics frameworks exist nominally but lack operational traction (UNDP, 2021c). These patterns reflect selective norm internalisation, symptomatic of broader informal governance structures. As Grindle (1997) argued, without behavioural change and bureaucratic socialisation, structural reforms risk stagnating as formal exercises.

These tensions culminated in the 2024 legislative amendments, which undermined merit-based guarantees, authorised politically driven dismissals, and led to the abolition of the Civil Service Bureau. This formal rollback confirmed the underlying fragility of programmatic achievements and highlighted how institutional success, however formalised, remains vulnerable in the absence of normative entrenchment and political protection.

4. Strategic Alignment and Fragile Anchoring

Georgia's reform efforts demonstrated notable strategic coherence, integrated within the broader Public Administration Reform (PAR) agenda (Government of Georgia, 2021). Yet this coherence proved insufficient to safeguard reform durability. Although adaptive mechanisms were introduced, such as revised guidelines and incremental amendments, the legal architecture remained vulnerable.

The 2024 legislative amendments, framed as administrative reorganisation, revoked safeguards for merit-based recruitment and managerial independence; they authorised non-competitive dismissals and removed requirements for citizenship, language proficiency, and civil service qualifications. These changes reversed core pillars of the 2015 Law, revealing how sophisticated frameworks amount to shallow institutionalisation absent normative and political embedding. Without credible enforcement and independent oversight, legal design remains performative, institutionalising form without function and leaving reforms exposed to rapid reversal.

Georgia's experience thus underscores a critical lesson in programmatic reform analysis: legal consolidation and international endorsement are insufficient without national accountability mechanisms and sustained political commitment. In hybrid regimes, programmatic success is only as resilient as the coalitions and institutional cultures that defend it.

Process Dimension: Embedding Reform within State Bureaucracy

If the programmatic layer of Georgia's civil service reform defined 'what' was to be done, the process dimension reveals 'how' reforms were conceived, coordinated, and implemented within a highly fluid political-administrative context. In transitional governance environments like Georgia, formal legal frameworks rarely unfold as intended; their effectiveness depends on political commitment, institutional alignment, and stakeholder ownership. This section unpacks the process architecture of reform, highlighting the dynamics of policy formulation, bureaucratic leadership, inter-agency coordination, civil society engagement, and the negotiated realities of implementation.

1. Reform Design and Policy Formulation

The design of Georgia’s civil service reform evolved from rapid, top-down experimentation in the post-Rose Revolution period to a more structured, consultative approach in the mid-2010s. The early model delivered swift anti-corruption gains but lacked deliberation and institutional embedding (Mitchell, 2009; Grindle, 2004b). This efficiency-focused model achieved short-term anti-corruption gains but offered little space for state capacity or reform ownership. By contrast, the 2015 Law and Public Administration Reform (PAR) Roadmap were shaped through broader stakeholder engagement, guided by EU, OECD–SIGMA, and GIZ support. Yet even these efforts remained elite-driven, with key design choices, particularly around ethics, grading, and senior appointments, predefined. Civil society input was largely constrained to technical domains, with limited influence over strategic choices (UNDP, 2021a). In MSF terms, EU conditionality and donor timelines aligned the problem, policy, and politics streams, opening a brief policy window for passage of the 2015 Law (Kingdon, 2011).

2. The Role of the Civil Service Bureau and Bureaucratic Entrepreneurs

The Civil Service Bureau (CSB) emerged as the central bureaucratic entrepreneur, translating international standards into national policy frameworks. As a legal entity under the Prime Minister’s Office, its formal mandate encompassed coordination, oversight, and institutional development. According to the CSB’s 2020 Annual Report, this included setting HRM standards, operating the unified vacancy portal, monitoring ethics/asset declarations, and coordinating PAR-related HR streams (Civil Service Bureau, 2020). From 2013 onward, reform-minded leadership within the Bureau leveraged their technical credibility and donor networks to position the CSB as a policy entrepreneur. This strategic positioning enabled the Bureau to bridge international best practices with local context, translating OECD and EU frameworks into actionable national policies. It formed coalitions with ministries like Justice and Finance, which supported institutional modernisation. However, the CSB lacked sanctioning authority; implementation remained at the discretion of line ministries, leading to fragmented uptake. The Bureau’s influence was normative, not binding, anchored in coordination, persuasion, and donor-backed credibility.

3. Inter-Agency Coordination and Institutional Rivalries

Delegating Human Resource Management (HRM) authority to ministries was intended to promote agency ownership but often led to coordination failures and institutional competition. Ministries varied widely in interpreting reform mandates, with capacity asymmetries compounding the problem. Resistance from politically dominant agencies, such as the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure, resisted full compliance. Furthermore, frequent political turnover eroded reform continuity, and in the absence of cross-party consensus, implementation remained vulnerable to recalibration and drift.

4. Engagement with Civil Society and Non-State Actors

Civil society actors like the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI), Transparency International Georgia (TI), Rondeli Foundation, and Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS) offered critical scrutiny of reform progress, particularly in areas of recruitment transparency and ethics oversight. However, their

involvement was selectively encouraged, confined to technical/procedural aspects rather than strategic agenda-setting. Broader societal engagement remained minimal, with civil service reform failing to gain sustained public attention. Despite these constraints, CSO reports provided an essential layer of external accountability, especially where internal oversight mechanisms were ineffective or politically compromised.

5. Implementation as Negotiated Practice: The 2024 Reversal and Its Implications

The implementation of civil service reform in Georgia unfolded as a negotiated process, shaped by institutional interests, capacity gaps, and political calculations. Institutions such as the Ministry of Justice standardised reform tools, such as the HRMIS, performance appraisal systems, and piloting ethics protocols, while others deferred or resisted compliance (Civil Service Bureau, 2019). Municipal administrations, in particular, struggled with technical and fiscal limitations, often defaulting to informal hiring and politicised HR practices (IDFI, 2021c).

This uneven institutional landscape was explicitly exposed by the 2024 legislative amendments. Introduced via expedited parliamentary procedures, the revisions allowed for dismissals under the pretext of ‘reorganisation,’ exempted mid-level managers from merit-based protections, and removed requirements for citizenship, language proficiency, and service qualifications (Transparency International Georgia, 2024a). The changes dismantled core protections of the 2015 Law and triggered condemnation from CSB staff and civil society actors (Civil Georgia, 2024). The situation escalated further in early 2025 with the formal abolition of the Civil Service Bureau. Its core functions, oversight of ethics, asset declarations, and coordination, were redistributed, most notably to the Anti-Corruption Bureau (Civil Georgia, 2025). This institutional dissolution represented more than administrative reorganisation; it marked a strategic rollback of reform governance and oversight architecture (Transparency International Georgia, 2024b; Civil Georgia, 2025).

Taken together, the 2024 amendments and the CSB’s abolition demonstrate how executive-dominant coalitions exploit drift, displacement, and conversion to re-politicise personnel systems while preserving a façade of formal compliance (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010; Hacker, Pierson and Thelen, 2015).

Political Dimension: Reform, Power, and Contestation

If the programmatic and process dimensions reveal the formal contours of Georgia’s civil service reform, the political dimension exposes the power configurations and strategic calculations that shaped its trajectory. In transitional democracies, reform is never solely technical; it is inherently political, entangled with elite strategies of legitimacy, institutional control, and regime durability. Georgia’s reform experience illustrates how administrative modernisation and political consolidation often unfold in tandem, and how reform success can remain contingent upon shifting elite incentives and international leverage.

1. Reform as a Political Instrument

Since the Rose Revolution, civil service reform in Georgia has served dual purposes: as a vehicle for state modernisation and a tool for executive consolidation. President Saakashvili's administration implemented reforms, such as merit-based recruitment, competitive salaries, and anti-corruption measures, framed as depoliticisation, yet these were often accompanied by a turnover of personnel with loyal officials (Mitchell, 2009). As Di Puccio (2010) contends, the coexistence of formal neutrality and informal political control exemplified strategic ambiguity: reforms positioned a commitment to Western governance norms while reinforcing centralised authority. This strategic ambiguity, pairing modernisation with political consolidation, rendered reform a flexible, but ultimately fragile, policy instrument.

2. Reform Champions and Conditional Political Will

Throughout the reform trajectory, certain actors emerged as central reform entrepreneurs, leveraging their positions and networks to advance reform agendas. Key reform drivers, including the Civil Service Bureau (CSB), Ministry of Justice, and Ministry of Finance, emerged as bureaucratic allies during windows of opportunity, particularly when reforms aligned with EU integration goals. However, political will proved conditional. The reform trajectory accelerated during stages of intensified international pressure, such as the EU Association Agreement (2014–2017), but diminished during electoral cycles and political crises. Discretionary delay, such as the deferral of digital recruitment systems, highlighted resistance to ceding control over appointments. In this context, political will was less a function of principled commitment than of strategic utility.

3. Resistance and Informal Networks

Bureaucratic resistance, especially from politically appointed senior officials and local elites, posed ongoing challenges to reform implementation. Performance appraisal tools, job classification systems, and HRMIS were frequently manipulated or delayed, preserving discretionary control. The lack of a formalised senior civil service further entrenched political discretion at top administrative levels. Informal networks operated alongside formal institutions, diluting accountability and constraining reform impact, especially at the municipal level (Transparency International Georgia, 2019).

Additionally, the absence of a formalised senior civil service framework perpetuated blurred lines between politics and administration. While mid-level officials were subjected to reform procedures, senior appointments frequently escaped scrutiny. Attempts to institutionalise depoliticised recruitment at the top tiers of bureaucracy were persistently obstructed by political interests.

4. Donor Influence and External Conditionality

International actors, especially the EU, UNDP, GIZ, and OECD–SIGMA, provided critical technical assistance and strategic direction, embedding reform benchmarks within national policy frameworks. EU conditionality linked reforms to visa liberalisation and budgetary support, bolstering political salience (Kakachia et al., 2018). However, donor leverage was inherently limited. In the absence of sustained national ownership, external pressure produced

fragmented gains rather than institutionalised transformation. Reform fatigue also surfaced, as donor-driven timelines often clashed with political dynamics and administrative realities.

5. Symbolism, Performance, and Reform Reflection

Georgia's reform discourse frequently embraced the normative framework of European integration and modern governance. High-visibility projects like Public Service Halls projected images of efficiency and transparency. However, performative reforms often eclipsed substantive change. Ethics commissions, appraisal frameworks, and training systems, though prominently launched, frequently lacked enforcement, resourcing, or institutional uptake. This dynamic aligns with Andrews et al.'s (2012) notion of 'isomorphic mimicry': adopting reform structures for appearances without transforming underlying behaviours or power dynamics. In Georgia, such mimicry allowed governments to demonstrate compliance with international standards while preserving informal control over key bureaucratic levers.

6. Political Reversal and the 2024 Amendments

The 2024 amendments to the Civil Service Law and the abolition of the CSB in early 2025 marked a pivotal reversal in Georgia's reform trajectory. Framed as an administrative reorganisation, the amendments authorised non-competitive dismissals and removed key safeguards from mid-level managerial roles, effectively re-politicising public service appointments. The CSB's dissolution and the reassignment of its oversight functions to bodies with less institutional independence represented not just bureaucratic reorganisation but a strategic erosion of reform safeguards.

Rather than reflecting policy failure or administrative inefficiency, these actions revealed the vulnerability of reforms lacking political entrenchment. The CSB, while technically competent, remained institutionally marginal, dependent on donor backing and lacking national coalition support. As Andrews (2013) argues, reforms that lack state ownership or coalition-based enforcement often produce 'signals of success' without building resilient systems. Georgia's case confirms that even legally entrenched reforms can be rolled back when they constrain executive power.

This trajectory highlights a core lesson: reform durability in hybrid regimes rests not only on legal design and international validation but also on embedded coalitions, credible oversight institutions, and political incentives aligned with long-term governance goals (Grindle, 2004b; Sedelmeier, 2014). In the absence of these anchors, reform remains contingent, symbolic, and reversible. Coalitional realignment among party elites and central agencies reframed the governing narrative toward organisational restructuring, enabling drift and displacement without overt repeal (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Jones and McBeth, 2010).

Temporal Dimension: Reform Sequencing, Institutional Consolidation, and the Contingencies of Durability

Civil service reform unfolds over time, not as a linear trajectory but through phases shaped by shifting political coalitions, administrative capacity, and reform narratives. In Georgia, the sequencing and endurance of reform cycles have reflected both moments of strategic

consolidation and critical episodes of reversal. A temporal analysis helps explain why some programmatic innovations were gradually institutionalised, while others remained vulnerable to erosion or rollback.

1. Reform Waves and Political Cycles (2004–2024)

Georgia's reform trajectory can be delineated into three temporal phases:

- 2004–2012: Marked by rapid, executive-driven reform under the post-Rose Revolution government, this phase prioritised anti-corruption, public trust, and evident transformation. While administrative efficiency improved, the bypassing of deliberative structures, stakeholder consultation, and phased institutional development ultimately undermined the long-term sustainability of these early reforms (Mitchell, 2009; Di Puccio, 2010).
- 2012–2020: Civil service reform became more structured and legally grounded, culminating in the adoption of the 2015 Civil Service Law and the Public Administration Reform (PAR) Roadmap. This phase emphasised alignment with European standards, focusing on legal harmonisation, capacity building, and the institutionalisation of merit-based recruitment processes. However, progress slowed due to uneven implementation and declining political commitment (SIGMA, 2017a).
- 2020–2024: Defined by reform operationalisation under the 2021–2025 PAR Strategy, this phase reflected increasing reform fatigue and political disengagement. The 2024 legislative amendments to the Civil Service Law and the subsequent abolition of the Civil Service Bureau (CSB) marked a critical setback, exposing the fragility of institutional continuity when not anchored in embedded national support or cross-partisan legitimacy (Grindle, 2004a; Peters, 2019).

2. Continuity and Disruption Across Administrations

While successive governments upheld formal commitments to civil service reform, continuity was largely rhetorical. The 2015 Civil Service Law remained formally intact across multiple administrations, and the Civil Service Bureau (CSB) operated with procedural consistency. Reform was routinely presented as part of Georgia's alignment with European governance standards (SIGMA, 2017a; European Commission, 2022), although beneath this discursive consensus persisted marked substantive discontinuities. Political transitions consistently disrupted the reform trajectory, shifted institutional priorities, and diverted administrative capacity. Reform champions were frequently replaced, and key instruments, such as performance appraisals, were neglected in practice, despite legal mandates (UNDP, 2021b). These dynamics underscored a deeper challenge: embedding reform in systems where norms are perceived as externally imposed or lack sustained political commitment (Andrews, 2013). The 2024 legislative rollback and the dissolution of the CSB revealed the fragility of these foundations, reinforcing theoretical insights that without state-anchored coalitions and politically defensible norms, even long-standing reforms remain exposed to reversal (Grindle, 2004a; Peters, 2019).

3. Sequencing, Timing, and Institutional Memory

Georgia's reform sequencing reflects a tension between political urgency and institutional preparedness. The post-Rose Revolution phase prioritised symbolic transformation over durable bureaucratic consolidation, which Grindle and Thomas (1991) term 'politics first, institutions later.' While this approach yielded initial gains in efficiency and anti-corruption visibility, it left subsequent reform cycles vulnerable to capacity gaps and institutional discontinuity. Later efforts focused on legal harmonisation, yet institutional memory remained fragile. Frequent turnover, especially in HR units, and insufficient commitment to sustaining professional capacity, particularly at the municipal level, undermined policy learning and disrupted implementation cycles (UNDP, 2021c). Without preserved knowledge systems or continuity of institutional memory, reform efforts were fragmented, leaving no meaningful institutional imprint. The 2024 rollback clearly demonstrated that fragile institutional foundations leave reform architectures highly vulnerable to reversal.

4. The Role of Time in Institutionalising Norms

Time serves not only as a chronological measure but as an evaluative lens for assessing reform endurance. In Georgia, certain components of civil service reform, such as digitalised recruitment procedures and conflict-of-interest compliance, have become institutionalised as routine bureaucratic practices. In contrast, ethics commissions, performance evaluation systems, and career development frameworks remain inconsistently applied, reflecting structural limitations in political commitment, incentive alignment, and administrative coherence. Despite regular monitoring through the EU and SIGMA frameworks, reform uptake has too often relied on external validation rather than state-level ownership. The 2024 legislative reversal illustrates that longevity alone does not confer resilience; reform endurance relies on the extent to which practices are embedded behaviourally, anchored politically, and sustained institutionally. Without these conditions, even long-standing provisions remain vulnerable to neglect or reversal.

5. Reform Durability and the Risk of Reversal

Durability, in transitional governance contexts, is not defined by the continued presence of formal provisions, but by the ability of reforms to persist once external incentives have faded. The Georgian case reveals that civil service reform endures only when politically anchored, normalised in practice, defended by political actors, and embedded in the functioning of state institutions.

The 2024 legislative amendments and the dissolution of the Civil Service Bureau (CSB) marked a critical turning point. These actions did not merely reverse specific provisions; they redefined the governance logic underpinning the reform effort. The removal of oversight safeguards and depoliticisation mechanisms confirmed what Andrews (2013) and Grindle (2004a) caution: when reforms lack deep political anchoring and sustained bureaucratic ownership, they remain exposed to reversal once elite incentives shift.

While EU conditionality and SIGMA benchmarks helped secure formal compliance, they were insufficient to foster embedded legitimacy. Reform practices that are not politically sustained or operationally integrated are unlikely to endure shifting regime priorities. The 2024 developments thus signify a broader reconfiguration of the political-administrative

framework—less a deviation from reform than a calculated consolidation of executive authority.

Case Illustrations: Asymmetries of Implementation and the Fragility of Reform Institutionalisation

Understanding Georgia’s civil service reform requires moving beyond national frameworks to examine how reform is negotiated, reframed and contested across institutional settings. The cases below highlight how uneven leadership, capacity, and political insulation shaped divergent reform outcomes, revealing a fragmented and fragile architecture.

1. Reform Anchoring through Bureaucratic Leadership

The Ministry of Justice emerged as a reform anchor, institutionalising competitive recruitment, HRMIS, and performance-based management. The latter was not simply compliance; it reflected strategic alignment with EU conditionality and donor frameworks. Organisational self-assessment exercises between 2013 and 2017 led to internal restructuring, reinforcing meritocratic norms across key divisions. However, this embeddedness was uneven. Donor-supported reform areas demonstrated clearer institutional consolidation, while neglected domains remained weakly embedded, revealing asymmetries in reform commitment and the absence of sustained bureaucratic anchoring. Moreover, political-administrative boundaries remained fluid at senior levels, with deputy minister appointments shaped more by informal negotiation than by formal procedures (Kapanadze & Gvenetadze, 2021).

2. Technocratic Islands of Reform

Public Service Halls (PSHs) represented a flagship reform—high-profile, performance-driven, and operationally decoupled from traditional bureaucratic constraints. Grounded in New Public Management principles, centralised recruitment, standardised training, and real-time performance monitoring (Christensen & Lægreid, 2007). While the PSH model achieved measurable gains in service delivery (UNDP, 2017a), its institutional features were not replicated across the broader administrative system. PSHs remained functionally and structurally isolated, illustrating selective reform uptake rather than comprehensive system-wide transformation. Kakachia et al. (2018) argue that the model, though highly visible, reflected vertical consolidation rather than horizontal institutional diffusion. Framed as ‘islands of excellence,’ PSHs remained institutionally detached from the broader administrative system, and their implementation had limited impact on the coherence, capacity, and procedural alignment of the wider civil service architecture.

3. Capacity Gaps and Political Capture

At the municipal level, civil service reform confronted its structural limits. Despite decentralisation rhetoric, local administrations remained structurally unprepared and politically exposed. Fewer than 30% adhered to competitive recruitment procedures (IDFI, 2021d), while outdated classifications, weak digital infrastructure, and exclusion from national capacity-building frameworks defined the administrative baseline.

Political interference and informal hiring remained entrenched across most municipalities, undermining any consistent application of national reform standards. Clientelist practices shaped recruitment far more than formal procedures, reducing reform to a superficial exercise. While municipalities like Batumi and Telavi showed targeted progress through donor-supported initiatives, these examples had no structural impact. Local administrations remained disconnected from the reform agenda, excluded from protective institutional frameworks, under-resourced, and institutionally exposed (IDFI, 2021e).

4. Synthesis: Reform as Fragmented Institutional Practice

The uneven progress across institutions reflects the fragmented nature of Georgia’s civil service reform, shaped by disparities in administrative capacity, institutional authority, and political alignment. The enduring change was most evident where leadership continuity, political backing, and external support aligned, such as in the Ministry of Justice, yet these conditions remained uneven across the state institutions (DAI, 2021). The Public Service Hall model illustrates the limitations of vertically bounded reforms lacking cross-institutional diffusion (Library of Congress, 2012), while municipal experiences reveal how weak administrative capacity and persistent political interference undermine implementation (IDFI, 2021c).

This institutional fragmentation proved critical during the 2024 rollback when the absence of resilient reform coalitions and the concentration of reform ownership within a narrow set of central institutions enabled the weakening of core provisions of the 2015 Civil Service Law, and the dissolution of the Civil Service Bureau. The episode underscored the vulnerability of reforms rooted in isomorphic adaptation rather than deep institutional embedding (Pritchett, Woolcock and Andrews, 2013; Mahoney and Thelen, 2010).

Critical Reflections: Reframing Reform Success in Hybrid Regimes

Building on the preceding analysis of Georgia’s civil service reform through programmatic, procedural, political, and temporal dimensions, a key evaluative question emerges: *to what extent can the reform be meaningfully conceptualised as a policy success?* This section interrogates that issue through the analytical lens of multidimensional policy success theory (McConnell, 2010; Marsh and McConnell, 2010; Bovens, ’t Hart and Peters, 2001), highlighting the epistemological assumptions, normative hierarchies, and institutional perspectives embedded within prevailing evaluative frameworks. It critically examines which metrics are elevated in assessments, whose perspectives are privileged in the construction of success narratives, and how institutional trade-offs, whether strategically instrumentalised or structurally embedded, have shaped reform trajectories and outcomes within Georgia’s hybrid political-administrative setting.

Table 2. Programmatic, Process, Political, and Temporal Dimensions of Georgia’s Civil Service Reform

Dimension	Key Features	Evidence/Assessment
Programmatic	The 2015 Civil Service Law introduced meritocracy, depoliticisation, and EU alignment.	Coherent legal architecture, institutional consolidation, SOPs; however, uneven uptake across institutions

Dimension	Key Features	Evidence/Assessment
Process	Inclusive policy design with EU input; capacity-building mechanisms; CSB coordination; municipal asymmetries	Policy consultations, training programs, and donor engagement. Institutionalisation incomplete; capacity gaps; selective internalisation
Political	Reform backed by 2012–2020 governments; contested post-2020 with rollback in 2024.	Conditional success; vulnerability to politicisation exposed. Parliamentary debates, party positions, executive dominance.
Temporal	Initial success and institutionalisation 2015–2023; reversal with 2024 amendments.	Trajectory demonstrates the fragility of reforms in hybrid regimes. Bounded success; weak durability under contestation.

Note: Summarises evaluative judgments across McConnell’s dimensions, showing bounded success and weak durability under contestation.

Sources: McConnell (2010); Marsh & McConnell (2010); SIGMA (2017a–c; 2021); UNDP (2021a–c); IDFI (2021a–e).

Official narratives have largely framed Georgia’s reform as a policy success. International recognition of the 2015 Civil Service Law, improvements in governance indices, and institutional innovations such as the Public Service Halls were presented as evidence of effective modernisation and alignment with EU Public Administration Reform (PAR) principles (SIGMA, 2017a; 2017b; 2017c; European Commission, 2021). However, these narratives construct reform meaning around elite perspectives and internationally defined performance standards, often blurring the boundary between output legitimacy and deeper institutional transformation. As McConnell (2010) and Andrews et al. (2012) caution, formal achievements and symbolic reforms can obscure the limited internalisation of core principles like meritocracy, political neutrality, and accountability.

Empirical assessments reveal this disconnect. Procedural safeguards were frequently subverted, ethics bodies remained structurally marginalised, and performance evaluations rarely influenced career advancement (UNDP, 2021b; 2021c; IDFI, 2021e). While user satisfaction with service delivery improved in certain agencies, core principles of merit, impartiality, and accountability were not uniformly institutionalised (UNDP, 2017b). Disparities in access, arbitrary dismissals, and politically motivated appointments persisted, undermining both trust and legitimacy. These dynamics suggest that the reform resembled what Andrews et al. (2012) term ‘isomorphic mimicry’: the adoption of reform templates that symbolically align with international expectations but fail to challenge underlying patterns of political entrenchment and structural resistance to change. Genuine reform resilience is contingent not on the appearance of functionality but on the degree to which new norms, practices, and oversight mechanisms become internalised within administrative systems. The trajectory of Georgia’s civil service reform exemplifies this tension between formal adoption and substantive institutionalisation (Andrews et al., 2012; Grindle, 2004a).

The 2024 legislative rollback marked a critical juncture. The abolition of the Civil Service Bureau and the reclassification of managerial positions as politically appointed roles revealed the fragility of the reform’s foundations. Far from being isolated technical revisions, these changes represented a deliberate rollback of accountability safeguards, illustrating what Peters

(2019) describes as the strategic reconfiguration of administrative structures to consolidate executive discretion. The absence of cross-partisan coalitions or deeply embedded reform norms meant that once political incentives shifted, formal structures could be revoked with limited resistance. Furthermore, the abolition of the Civil Service Bureau in 2025 was not merely an administrative reorganisation but a systemic shift away from institutionalised oversight. The Bureau, despite its limited enforcement authority, served as the central policy advisory body and institutional anchor of merit-based standards. Its abolition reflects what Mahoney and Thelen (2010) describe as *layered drift*, a mode of gradual institutional change in which formal structures persist, while their function is incrementally undermined or redirected to accommodate evolving political agendas. In Georgia, this trajectory culminated in a deliberate institutional reversal, underscoring the inherent fragility of externally endorsed reforms insufficiently embedded within the national political landscape.

The rapid adoption of the 2024 amendments, framed as technocratic restructuring but substantively removing merit-based protections, reflects what Hacker et al. (2015) term ‘policy drift’: a recalibration of institutional rules without formal repeal, designed to reshape outcomes while preserving superficial legal continuity.

This episode challenges traditional approaches to evaluating reform success. As Mahoney and Thelen (2010), Grindle (2004b), and Hacker et al. (2015) argue that institutional change is often gradual and contested, shaped by elite strategies and evolving political alignments. Durable reform success requires embedded institutional norms, societal legitimacy, and political coalitions capable of defending reform commitments over time. The Georgian case illustrates how externally validated reforms, lacking national political anchoring, can be gradually undermined or reversed through policy drift, displacement, or executive dominance.

To meaningfully assess reform durability in hybrid regimes, evaluative frameworks must move beyond legal formalism and procedural metrics. They must apply a political economy lens, one that recognises power asymmetries, elite strategic behaviour, and the fragility of institutional legitimacy in the absence of multi-actor political alignment. Reform resilience hinges not merely on design, but on how institutional rules are defended across electoral cycles and insulated from political interference. This calls for meta-evaluation: a critical reflection on who defines reform success, which interests these narratives serve, and how institutional endurance is constructed, or subverted, over time. In Georgia, donor benchmarks and flagship reforms obscured the absence of structural safeguards, revealing civil service reform as a political project vulnerable to elite recalibration.

Ultimately, Georgia’s experience calls for a reframing of success not as a static endpoint, but as a condition of institutional resilience. True reform success entails the defence of principles—not merely their adoption, and their sustained embedding within administrative and political structures. In hybrid regimes, the capacity of reforms to survive beyond the tenure of their architects is the strongest test of their legitimacy. As such, evaluating success requires not only recognising progress but also diagnosing the conditions under which it can be reversed or eroded.

This discontinuity questions the conceptual frameworks traditionally used to evaluate policy success. As McConnell (2010) suggests, success in governance must be disaggregated into dimensions of programmatic effectiveness, process legitimacy, political sustainability, and temporal endurance. Georgia's case reveals a reform that may have scored highly on the first two dimensions during its initial phase but failed to consolidate political and temporal resilience. Once elite incentives shifted, the absence of protective coalitions and weak normative anchoring allowed for rapid institutional dismantlement.

Conclusion

Georgia's civil service reform presents a rich and complex case of bounded policy success in a transitional governance context. Its two-decade trajectory reveals the interplay between ambitious programmatic design, partial institutionalisation, and eventual rollback. While reform efforts produced notable achievements, legal harmonisation, service delivery innovation, and procedural alignment with EU standards, they fell short of embedding the core principles of meritocracy, accountability, and depoliticisation across the administrative system.

This chapter examined three phases in the reform's evolution: the post-Rose Revolution reconfiguration (2004–2012), legal and institutional consolidation (2012–2020), and the implementation and reversal phase (2020–2024). Each period exposed persistent tensions between formal reform outputs and deeper political dynamics. The final phase, culminating in the 2024 legislative amendments and the abolition of the Civil Service Bureau, marked a critical turning point, revealing the structural fragility of reforms lacking durable political backing and normative anchoring.

Applying the multidimensional framework of programmatic, procedural, political, and temporal evaluation (McConnell, 2010; Marsh and McConnell, 2010; Grindle, 2004a), this chapter has argued that policy success in hybrid regimes must be reframed as a negotiated and contingent process, rather than a fixed or definitive outcome. Georgia's civil service reform illustrates the limitations of equating success with legal enactment or institutional visibility and instead calls for a more contextually informed analytical understanding of the conditions under which reforms are sustained, contested, or reversed. Specifically, the analysis demonstrates that:

- Legal frameworks, however well-crafted, are insufficient in isolation; their effectiveness depends on sustained enforcement, integration into bureaucratic practice, and the institutional uptake of reform norms across institutional levels.
- Procedural legitimacy must be institutionalised, not assumed. Transparent, predictable, and consistently applied processes are essential to building trust, ensuring credibility, and fostering reform ownership within both the administrative system and wider society.
- Reform durability rests on political alignment beyond short-term electoral cycles. Without enduring elite coalitions, multi-level political alignment, and insulation from partisan interference, reform architectures remain exposed to reversal.

- Temporal continuity alone does not generate resilience. The endurance of reform requires mechanisms that preserve institutional memory, promote adaptive learning, and reinforce reform principles amid shifting political and administrative contexts.

The case also highlights the limits of externally driven success narratives. While international benchmarks and donor frameworks provided initial reform incentives, they did not guarantee institutional sustainability. Once reform institutions fell outside the core priorities of political elites, they lacked the embedded support necessary to withstand reversal. The symbolic alignment with EU and OECD standards often diverted attention from weak normative consolidation and fragmented institutional grounding, exposing reforms to erosion when elite incentives shifted.

For scholars and practitioners of public sector reform, Georgia's civil service trajectory exemplifies a case of bounded policy success: meaningful institutional progress realised within the constraints of a hybrid regime. It affirms that reform is possible in transitional contexts but conditional on more than technocratic design or external validation. Reform resilience requires sustained political commitment, cross-sectoral coalitions, and the entrenchment of accountability norms capable of withstanding shifting elite incentives. This case invites further comparative inquiry into the institutional conditions that enable reform resilience across hybrid governance systems.

Ultimately, the sustainability of reform will be determined not by formal instruments or compliance with international benchmarks, but by the extent to which a new administrative ethos—anchored in integrity, professionalism, and public accountability - is cultivated, internalised, and defended from within. Embedding such values into the institutional architecture of the state is neither linear nor assured, but it remains a critical, though uncertain, pathway toward institutional legitimacy, governance resilience, and sustainable reform in post-authoritarian settings. The Georgian case thus underlines a wider design implication: civil service reform can only achieve durability when impartial recruitment, credible oversight, and institutional safeguards are embedded as systemic features rather than episodic political commitments.

Author's Note

The resilience of democratic institutions is never assured, particularly in transitional contexts where reform gains remain exposed to political recalibration. Georgia's trajectory provides a compelling lens to examine this tension. Written amid a historic reversal of civil service reform, where principles of neutrality, merit, and professionalism face dismantlement, this chapter traces both the arc of reform and its rollback. It not only documents a case of policy innovation but also interrogates its fragility. More broadly, it reflects on what occurs when ambitious governance reforms confront authoritarian regression, offering insights for reformers, scholars, and practitioners navigating similar challenges across the Global South.

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Short Academic Bio

Davit Oboladze is a policy professional with over a decade of experience in public administration reform, legal reform, and service delivery, working with organisations such as USAID, UNDP, UNHCR, GIZ, and IRC. He holds an MSc in Public Policy from the University of Bristol. Davit has led multiple strategic policy evaluations in Georgia, including the implementation of civil service reform and evidence-based policymaking initiatives. He is currently developing a PhD project on institutional and technical barriers to evidence-informed policymaking in transitional democracies. His research bridges practice and theory, drawing from extensive fieldwork, stakeholder engagement, and public sector innovation.