Political Control and the Crisis of Bureaucratic Neutrality in Georgia's Public Administration

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Abstract: The paper explores the erosion of bureaucratic neutrality in Georgia's public administration, focusing on the paradox between formal legal modernization and the persistence of informal political control. Since the adoption of the 2017 Law on Civil Service, Georgia has been widely recognized for aligning its administrative framework with European standards of merit, professionalism, and accountability. Yet, despite significant legislative progress, empirical evidence reveals that the civil service remains deeply susceptible to political influence. Through qualitative field research conducted between 2019 and 2024, including interviews and focus groups with civil servants, HR managers, and administrative experts, the study uncovers how political loyalty continues to determine recruitment, promotion, and job security.

The research identifies several key patterns of politicization: anticipatory compliance by bureaucrats seeking to align with political expectations; competition procedures that formally adhere to meritocratic standards but are substantively predetermined; and reorganizations strategically used to replace disfavored staff. The analysis also demonstrates how performance evaluation systems, introduced to promote accountability, often function as symbolic tools for rewarding loyalty rather than measuring competence. Particularly acute is the situation in municipal administrations, where economic dependency and proximity to elected mayors intensify political pressure, leading to systemic compliance and the erosion of ethical autonomy.

The December 2024 amendments to the Law on Civil Service institutionalized this regression by transforming permanent senior positions into temporary contracts tied to political terms, abolishing reinstatement rights, and weakening oversight by the Civil Service Bureau. These changes have converted the career civil service into a politically contingent structure, undermining institutional memory, job security, and professional morale. As a result, Georgia's civil service is once again synchronized with political turnover, effectively reversing a decade of reform.

From a theoretical standpoint, the paper situates Georgia's experience within the broader scholarship on reform without transformation, decoupling, and isomorphic mimicry in transitional democracies. It argues that while legislative alignment with European Administrative Space standards is necessary, it is insufficient without corresponding ethical, cultural, and institutional transformation. The findings illustrate that depoliticization cannot succeed through law alone; it must be internalized as a professional and moral value shared by both civil servants and political elites.

The study concludes that the regression of neutrality represents not only an administrative setback but a democratic one. The politicization of the bureaucracy undermines public trust, weakens accountability, and jeopardizes Georgia's European integration trajectory. However, the persistence of reform-minded officials and civil society activism offers a foundation for renewal. The paper calls for restoring tenure protections, strengthening oversight, and promoting ethical education to re-establish neutrality as a cornerstone of democratic governance. In doing so, it contributes to comparative debates on bureaucratic resilience and the fragility of reform in post-Soviet contexts, offering insights applicable to other transitional administrations navigating the tension between modernization and political control.