The Process of Formation of Meritocracy in Transforming Public Services

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Summary

Modern bureaucracy in Georgia is facing a challenge—to reform into a healthy system based on the principles of meritocracy or to find alternative ways of functioning, which will hinder its development into an open, democratic system. In order to study the factors that determine the principles for managing public services and the success of public servants, the specific situation of our society should be taken into consideration. In the transforming post-Soviet Georgian society, the socio-economic, legal and knowledge systems are evolving; they are being 'filled in' with new systems and content alien to our experience. It is a transition from a totalitarian society to an open one. This situation, followed by the painful process of changing values, presents the individual with a challenge: To transform and find ways of adapting to this new environment.

Commonness in Soviet and post-Soviet ways of government and informal practises are especially problematic in state institutions as the state is the first guarantor of protection and regulation of legal norms. After the Rose Revolution in Georgia, many state institutions began reforming. Public service reform, one of the most important for effective functioning of the state, is among these institutions. Every group in society is interested in making public service more effective, productive and transparent.

This research presents the hypothesis of informal relationship prevalence over meritocratic principles in the public service management system, which hinders the process of institutionalisation of meritocratic principles.

Therefore, one of the main research aims is the description/study of strategies for public service management and the identification/analyses of factors assisting/hindering the formation of the new type of meritocratic management.

The *objects of this empirical sociological research* are public services and the public servants employed there. The selection of public servants included those of different rank and employed in different public institutions (ministries, the State Chancellery etc.).

The sociological research is based mainly on *qualitative research methods*, although a *quantitative research method* will also be employed. The following methods were used: Analysis of theories, analysis of documents, *in-depth interviews* and *narrative interviews*. All gathered material - documentation sources and interview transcripts - will be processed using both quantitative (traditional content analysis) and qualitative approaches (qualitative content analysis, discourse analysis, etc.).

What regulates social behaviour, in socio-cultural unity, is a typical complex of behavioural patterns directing an individual, including his/her professional activities. Any professional activity is determined by professional functions, i.e., a profession requires individuals to have certain behavioural qualities.Hence, an active behaviour regulator, forming a typical

behavioural image of professional activities, determines professional activities.Absence of qualities corresponding to market economy requirements in the governmental sector considerably hinders the process of population adaptation to the new situation in the sphere of labour. This can become one of the basic reasons for the development of informal labour relations in the governmental labour sphere.

Informal labour relations include any relations emerging at work beyond formal relations, i.e., when labour relations are based more on personal contacts - friendship, nepotism, patronage, good relationships with the management, etc. - rather than formal rules or agreements. Formal relations, on the other hand, include relations established by a formal document (statutes, regulations, instructions, orders, agreements, etc.).

Survey results demonstrate that career development is based on 'unwritten rules'. Accordingly, discussion of this issue is taboo and limited to very general and stereotypical answers. While discussing career development criteria, employees often refer to the issue of 'showing off in front of a head person'.

While discussing management principles, civil servants focus on *'human relations'.* In public service, the 'human, collective nature of relationship' is considered very important. The 'human, collective nature of relationship' of a departmental head toward employees and citizens is understood as an absence of the feelings *'fear'* and *'punishment'*.

The **criteria for career progression and success conforming to meritocratic principles are not clearly formed in public service**, and discourse on it shows that public servants's reflection on the subject is superficial.

The practise of employee evaluation creates an environment that **is mainly defined by external factors and varies by circumstance. Institutional management strategy is weak and poorly developed.** The environment is created by a newly appointed head and not by an open, formal, well-established system of public service. It demonstrated that there is a lack of structure and a dominance of personal and circumstantial approaches in public service.

The civil servant performance **evaluation system is a closed system**—it is not publicly discussed. Similar to other closed systems, relevant discussions are held in lobbies and behind closed doors.

According to the research results, the adaptation strategy dominant among Georgian civil servants is oriented toward gaining protection and patronage in exchange for subordination, obedience, loyalty and supervisor dependency. Paternalism is spread in every level of public service. **While evaluating their supervisor, civil servants often refer to an individual as a 'guardian'**. The research demonstrates that a departmental head should be 'in good relations with subordinates', 'should take everyone's case close to heart', 'should care for the well-being of employees', 'should be understanding to everyone's situation', 'should be considerate of every employees' situation', 'should be human', 'first of all, should have human character', 'should be philanthropic', 'should be kind' etc. Focusing on personal characteristics illustrates the dominance of informal relations that is a feature of the paternalistic relationship between supervisors and subordinates.

Paternalism is beneficial for both parties involved. Formal, contract-based legal norms are replaced with non-formal norms based on personal contacts. A subordinate's dependence on a supervisor is a crucial aspect of paternalism. This relationship is beneficial for 'paternalistic' civil servants because it helps them to delegate responsibility for defining and implementing life strategies; it also aids in the avoidance of decision-making in difficult situations.

Supervisors, by assuming all responsibility, establish paternalism through demonstrating distrust towards employees and developing a model of non-partnership business relations.

Dependence of a subordinate on a departmental head is therefore strengthened, empowering the latter beyond the frames defined and granted by law.

Paternalism is widely seen in the lower levels of public institutions, but it is also practised in business relations at the higher echelons of their hierarchical structure. Every managerial level that is not able to fulfil responsibilities assigned and granted to it by law delegates its own rights to an upper level employee. Power is thus concentrated in upper levels and only high-level officials can make decisions. The decision-making process is therefore closed and opaque (not transparent). Escaping responsibility is beneficial for both civil servant and head. ***Principles of centralised management dominate in public service institutions***.

In conclusion, it can be asserted that trust remains the main pillar of the public system, which is therefore not based on professionalism and qualification. Trust is understood as non-conditional devotion. Thus, the idea of the structure remains with the notion of successors and the replacement of nomenclature, rather than an open, merit-based, system.