

STRATEGIC COORDINATION AND POLICY CAPACITY: EXECUTIVE INSTITUTIONS AS DRIVERS OF GOVERNANCE INNOVATION IN ARMENIA

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Abstract: This article examines the transformation of executive institutions in the Republic of Armenia through the lens of political sociology, viewing them not merely as administrative structures but as arenas of struggle for symbolic and material capital, spaces for the reproduction of power relations, and agents of institutional change. Employing Bourdieu's neo-institutional optics, Evans's concept of state autonomy, and Mann's theory of state capacity, the study analyzes the dialectic between formal rules and informal practices in the process of administrative modernization. Particular attention is paid to the sociology of reform actors - the bureaucratic elite, the expert community, and international organizations - and the mechanisms of their interaction in the space of state policy. Empirical analysis reveals a contradiction between the discourse of modernization and practices of patrimonial governance, between the formal rationality of Weberian bureaucracy and personalized networks of influence. The study demonstrates that the success of administrative reforms is determined not by technical solutions but by profound transformations of the habitus of civil servants, the restructuring of power relations within the bureaucratic field, and changes in the symbolic economy of public administration. This analysis connects contemporary sociological frameworks with Armenia's ongoing executive authority reforms, examining how institutional design intersects with political culture and governance capacity in a post-Soviet context.

Keywords: *bureaucratic field, state capacity, institutional isomorphism, symbolic capital, patrimonial governance, state autonomy, agents of change, power relations, Armenia.*

Introduction: A Sociological Perspective on Public Administration

Public administration has traditionally been examined through the prism of formal institutions, constitutional mechanisms, and administrative procedures. However, such a perspective, remaining within the confines of legal and managerial discourses, overlooks a fundamental dimension - the social nature of state institutions. Political sociology offers a different analytical lens, allowing us to see power relations behind formal structures, social practices behind procedures, and habitus and symbolic struggle behind rationality (Bourdieu, 2014; Jessop, 2016).

The state, as Bourdieu argued, represents not simply a set of institutions but a field of struggle for the monopoly on legitimate symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Wacquant,



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1992). Executive power in this perspective emerges not as a neutral technical apparatus for implementing political decisions but as an autonomous actor with its own interests, logic of action, and strategies of reproduction. Bureaucracy possesses specific capital - knowledge of procedures, control over information, and the ability to interpret rules - which converts into influence on the political process (Evans, 1995).

In the post-Soviet context, this issue acquires special acuteness. The legacy of the Soviet management system encompasses not merely formal institutions and procedures but deeply entrenched practices, mental schemas, and models of interaction between state and society. Transforming this legacy requires not only institutional design but a change in what Bourdieu calls *habitus* - a system of durable dispositions that generate practices and representations (Bourdieu, 2014). Administrative reforms, in this perspective, represent not a technical task but a form of social engineering aimed at transforming power relations and symbolic structures (Grzymala-Busse, 2007; Ledeneva, 2013).

Recent empirical research analyzing Armenian governance from 2000-2024 reveals a complex trajectory of administrative transformation characterized by three distinct phases: the persistence of traditional bureaucratic structures (2000-2008), the attempted adoption of New Public Management principles (2008-2018), and the gradual shift toward Good Governance models following the 2018 Velvet Revolution. Systematic analysis of this period using international governance indices demonstrates measurable progress alongside persistent challenges. Armenia's performance in the UN E-Government Development Index fluctuated between ranks 86-110, while its E-Participation Index ranged from 59-135 during 2010-2022 (United Nations, 2022). In ICT infrastructure, Armenia achieved its strongest results in 2016 and 2022, ranking 61st and 64th respectively, indicating substantial technical capacity despite governance challenges (ITU, 2022).

The experience of the Republic of Armenia is particularly interesting in this regard. As a small post-Soviet state aspiring to European integration, Armenia faces the necessity of simultaneously transforming multiple dimensions of statehood. Moreover, the reform process occurs under conditions of limited state autonomy, where external actors - international organizations, donors, and consultants - play a significant role in defining the agenda and methods of modernization. This generates a specific configuration of power relations where global discourses of managerial rationality meet local practices of personalized governance (Centeno, Kohli & Yashar, 2017; Wedel, 2009).

Armenia's transition from a super-presidential system to a parliamentary republic following the 2015 constitutional reforms created new opportunities and challenges for executive institution development. The 2018 Velvet Revolution further intensified demands for administrative modernization and good governance. These political transformations provide a unique laboratory for examining how formal institutional changes interact with informal practices, how reform narratives compete with established bureaucratic cultures, and how international pressures for modernization encounter domestic political realities (Harutyunyan, 2021; Markarov, 2020).

Theoretical Framework: The State as Field and Practice

The concept of field, developed by Pierre Bourdieu, provides a productive analytical framework for understanding the functioning of state institutions. A field represents a space of objective relations between positions defined by the distribution of specific types of capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In the bureaucratic field, such specific capital consists of administrative expertise, knowledge of procedures, access to information, and the ability to interpret rules. Agents in this field - civil servants of various ranks - struggle for the accumulation and conversion of this capital into other forms: symbolic power, social prestige, and material benefits (Bourdieu, 2014).

A critically important dimension of this struggle involves control over the definition of legitimate forms of practice. Who has the right to determine what counts as competence? Which forms of knowledge are recognized as relevant for decision-making? Which procedures are considered proper? These questions are not resolved by technical means but are the subject of symbolic struggle between different factions of the bureaucracy - technocrats and political appointees, 'reformers' and 'conservatives,' specialists from different professional jurisdictions (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

In the post-Soviet context, the structure of the bureaucratic field is marked by specific characteristics. The Soviet legacy left a tradition of 'double knowledge' - official, explicit knowledge and informal, implicit knowledge. Formal rules coexist with informal practices of circumventing them; official procedures are supplemented by personal connections and patron-client relations. This creates a dual structure of capital where success is determined not only by possession of formal expertise but also by the ability to navigate informal networks (Ledeneva, 2013; Hale, 2015).

Recent scholarship on post-Soviet bureaucracies emphasizes the persistence of informal governance mechanisms even as formal institutions are modernized (Gans-Morse, 2022; Radnitz, 2021). This duality creates what Gel'man (2021) terms 'bad governance traps' - self-reinforcing patterns where informal practices undermine formal institutional reforms, while weak formal institutions perpetuate reliance on informal mechanisms. Understanding this dialectic is essential for analyzing Armenian executive institutions, where Soviet-era administrative culture encounters contemporary reform pressures.

State Autonomy and Embedded Autonomy

The concept of state autonomy, developed within neo-Weberian political sociology, emphasizes the capacity of state institutions to act independently of immediate pressure from social groups (Evans, 1995). However, as Peter Evans demonstrates, productive autonomy is not absolute but 'embedded' - a combination of institutional independence with rootedness in social networks that provide access to information and channels for policy implementation (Evans, 1995; Evans & Rauch, 1999).

Applied to executive institutions, this means the necessity of balancing bureaucratic rationality with political responsiveness, adherence to procedures with adaptability, and professional expertise with understanding of social context. The problematic nature of this balance becomes especially apparent in situations of administrative reform, when old mechanisms of embeddedness are destroyed while new ones have not yet formed.

There arises a risk of either excessive autonomy, turning bureaucracy into a closed caste, or its instrumentalization by political actors (Migdal, 2001; Fukuyama, 2013).

In the Armenian context, the question of executive power autonomy is complicated by the legacy of hypertrophied presidential rule, where bureaucracy traditionally functioned as an instrument of presidential power, deprived of substantial autonomy. The parliamentarization of the governance system following constitutional reforms created opportunities for strengthening the autonomy of executive institutions; however, the realization of this possibility encounters persistent practices of personalized control and distrust of bureaucratic independence (Asatryan, 2019; Danielyan & Minasyan, 2020).

Contemporary governance research emphasizes the importance of 'relational state capacity' - the ability of state institutions to form productive partnerships with societal actors while maintaining autonomy (Soifer & Hau, 2022; Giraudy et al., 2021). This framework is particularly relevant for Armenia, where the state must simultaneously build capacity, establish legitimacy, and navigate between domestic political demands and international reform pressures. The challenge lies in developing what Cingolani (2021) terms 'quality state capacity' - not merely technical administrative capability but the ability to generate public value and maintain democratic accountability.

State Capacity: Infrastructural and Despotic Power

Michael Mann proposed a distinction between two forms of state power - the despotic ability of elites to make decisions without institutionalized negotiation with social groups, and infrastructural power as the state's capacity to penetrate society and implement political decisions throughout the territory (Mann, 2012). This distinction is critically important for understanding the limitations of public administration in the post-Soviet space.

Post-Soviet states are often characterized by asymmetry between these two forms of power. Relatively high despotic power - the political elite's ability to make decisions - is combined with weak infrastructural power - limited capacity to implement them. Bureaucracy possesses formal authority but lacks the resources, competencies, and legitimacy for their effective use. Moreover, under conditions of societal distrust in state institutions, infrastructural power encounters passive or active resistance (Tilly, 1992; Hanson & Kopstein, 1997).

Strategic coordination and policy capacity, which are the focus of this study, represent precisely elements of infrastructural state power. They determine the ability of state institutions not simply to declare goals but to mobilize resources, coordinate the actions of multiple actors, adapt to changing conditions, and achieve desired results. Developing these elements requires not merely administrative reforms but fundamental transformation of relations between state and society (Soifer, 2023; Berwick & Christia, 2018). Recent scholarship emphasizes that infrastructural power development is path-dependent and deeply shaped by historical legacies, making Armenia's Soviet inheritance particularly consequential for contemporary reform efforts (Lee & Zhang, 2022).

The Sociology of Administrative Reform Actors: Bureaucratic Elite and the Paradox of Reform

A Three-Level Framework for Analyzing Executive Power Effectiveness

While the sociological concepts discussed above illuminate power dynamics within bureaucratic fields, analyzing governance effectiveness requires a systematic multi-dimensional approach. This study employs a three-level analytical framework that integrates institutional, strategic, and operational dimensions.

The Institutional Level examines the formal architecture of executive power, including constitutional arrangements, separation of powers mechanisms, and the legal framework governing bureaucratic autonomy. In Armenia's case, the 2015 constitutional reforms fundamentally altered institutional configurations by transitioning from a super-presidential to a parliamentary system, creating new opportunities and challenges for executive institution development (Harutyunyan, 2021). However, empirical analysis reveals that formal institutional changes have encountered implementation challenges, with the principle of separation of powers facing practical obstacles related to informal influence mechanisms and political interference (Asatryan, 2019).

The Strategic Level focuses on policy coordination capacity, strategic planning systems, and the mechanisms for translating long-term objectives into coherent policy programs. Here, the gap between formal strategic documents and actual implementation becomes particularly evident. Armenia possesses numerous government programs, sectoral strategies, and action plans developed with international expert participation, yet their connection to budgetary processes and operational decision-making remains weak (Galstyan & Hakobyan, 2021). Strategic planning often functions parallel to real decision-making, which is determined by short-term political considerations rather than systematic long-term planning (Harutyunyan, 2023).

The Operational Level addresses the concrete tools and mechanisms through which executive institutions deliver services and implement policies, including digital governance platforms, monitoring systems, and administrative procedures. This dimension has shown the most measurable progress in Armenia. The development of e-governance infrastructure, reflected in international rankings, demonstrates significant technical advancement. Analysis of Armenia's performance shows improvement in specific areas: the country achieved ranks of 61-64 in ICT infrastructure development in 2016 and 2022 respectively (United Nations, 2022). However, operational effectiveness remains constrained by incomplete integration of information systems, limited coverage of digital services across all government functions, and gaps in digital literacy among both civil servants and citizens.

The interaction between these three levels is crucial. Institutional reforms create enabling conditions but require strategic capacity to translate into coherent programs and operational capability to achieve tangible results. Conversely, operational improvements (such as e-governance tools) cannot fully realize their potential without supporting strategic frameworks and institutional guarantees of autonomy and accountability. This systemic interdependence explains why fragmented reforms targeting individual levels yield limited outcomes - a pattern evident in Armenia's

reform trajectory where progress at the operational level has not been matched by comparable advancement in strategic coordination or institutional consolidation.

Administrative reforms represent a paradoxical enterprise: they are carried out by the very bureaucrats whose practices and privileges are subject to transformation. This paradox points to a fundamental problem of reform agency. Who is the subject of administrative modernization? Does there exist within bureaucracy a faction interested in changes that potentially limit its discretionary power and call into question established practices? (Thelen, 2004; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010).

Sociological analysis reveals the heterogeneity of the bureaucratic elite and the existence of different factions with competing visions of the desired future. One can identify 'technocrat-reformers' - typically younger specialists with Western education, oriented toward international standards and modern managerial practices. Their symbolic capital is based on possession of expert knowledge and connections with the international community. They see reforms as an opportunity to strengthen their positions against traditional bureaucracy, whose capital is based on knowledge of informal rules and personal connections (Campbell & Pedersen, 2001; Berman, 1997).

Opposing them are 'conservatives' or, more precisely, carriers of traditional bureaucratic habitus, whose practices and identity were formed under different institutional conditions. For them, reforms represent a threat of devaluation of their capital - that knowledge and those skills that ensured their position in the bureaucratic field. Resistance to reforms often takes the form not of open opposition but of more subtle practices - selective implementation, formal adherence to the letter while ignoring the spirit, sabotage through procedural delays (Scott, 1998; Lipsky, 2010).

It is important to understand that this division is not absolute and not static. There exists a significant 'gray zone' of bureaucrats whose positions depend on specific context and the balance of forces. Moreover, even those who sincerely support the idea of reforms may in practice reproduce old behavior patterns - not out of malice but because habitus, being a system of durable dispositions, changes more slowly than formal rules. This creates the phenomenon of institutional isomorphism described by DiMaggio and Powell (1983), when organizations adopt the form of new institutions without changing the content of practices.

Recent research on public sector reform emphasizes the importance of 'reform coalitions' - cross-cutting alliances that bridge bureaucratic, political, and civil society actors (Andrews et al., 2017; Pritchett et al., 2023). In Armenia, the formation of such coalitions has been hindered by weak civil service professionalization, high turnover following political transitions, and limited horizontal coordination mechanisms. The 2018 Velvet Revolution created momentum for reform, but sustaining it requires building institutional mechanisms that outlast individual reform champions (Mirzoyan, 2022; Galstyan & Hakobyan, 2021).

International Organizations as Agents of Transfer

International organizations play a critically important role in processes of administrative modernization in post-Soviet states - the World Bank, European Union, OECD, various technical assistance programs. They function not simply as sources of financing or technical expertise but as agents of transfer of institutional models and managerial discourses. This process is far from neutral transmission of 'best practices'

but represents a form of symbolic domination, the imposition of a particular vision of proper governance (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Campbell & Pedersen, 2001).

The mechanisms of this transfer are manifold. Conditionality of financial assistance, where reforms of a certain type become prerequisites for receiving resources. Training programs and internships that socialize national elites in the logic of international organizations. Expert missions and assessments that legitimize certain approaches and delegitimize alternatives. All this forms what can be called a 'global field of administrative reforms,' where positions are determined by proximity to or distance from 'international standards' (Wedel, 2009; Stone, 2020).

However, the transfer process is not unidirectional. Local actors do not simply passively accept external models but actively interpret them, adapt them, and sometimes instrumentalize them to achieve their own goals. The rhetoric of reforms can be used to legitimize changes that serve the interests of certain elite factions. 'European standards' become a discursive resource in the struggle for power within the bureaucratic field. What emerges can be called 'strategic mimicry' - the creation of external attributes of reforms while preserving essential practices (Kelley & Simmons, 2020; Schimmelfennig & Scholtz, 2008).

In Armenia's case, the EU's Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) and various World Bank governance programs have significantly shaped the reform agenda. However, as Delcour and Wolczuk (2021) observe, such external influences often produce 'selective adaptation' - domestic actors adopt reforms that serve their interests while resisting those that challenge existing power structures. The challenge for Armenia is developing what Börzel and Risse (2012) call 'transformative power' - the capacity to internalize international norms rather than merely comply formally with external requirements.

Expert Communities and the Production of Knowledge about the State

A third important actor is the expert community - researchers, consultants, think tank analysts. They occupy a specific position at the intersection of academic, political, and bureaucratic fields, producing knowledge about the state that claims scientific objectivity but is inevitably embedded in power relations. Experts do not simply describe the reality of public administration but actively construct it through categories of analysis, measurement indicators, and recommendations for reform (Desrosières, 1998; Porter, 1995).

What Foucault called 'power-knowledge' emerges - the inseparable connection between the production of knowledge and the exercise of power (Foucault, 2007). Defining what counts as 'good governance,' which indicators are used to measure it, which problems are recognized as priorities - all these are acts of power, masked by technical and scientific language. International indices and ratings evaluating governance quality function not simply as measurement tools but as mechanisms of disciplining states, forming normative pressure toward conformity with a particular model (Broome & Quirk, 2015; Davis et al., 2012).

In the Armenian context, the expert community remains relatively fragmented. There exists a gap between academic researchers, often detached from practical management problems, and practicing consultants, whose work is determined by donor orders.

Institutional mechanisms for systematic interaction between experts and decision-makers are absent. Expertise is often perceived as a formal requirement necessary for legitimizing already-made decisions rather than as a resource for their justification (Asatryan & Hakhverdyan, 2020).

The rise of evidence-based policymaking discourse globally has increased demands for policy analysis capacity, yet Armenia faces challenges in developing this capacity. As Parkhurst (2017) and Cairney (2021) argue, technical expertise alone is insufficient - effective knowledge utilization requires political commitment, institutional mechanisms for evidence uptake, and what Weible and Cairney (2023) term 'knowledge brokerage' - intermediaries who can translate research findings into policy-relevant insights. Building such capacity in Armenia requires not just training analysts but creating institutional cultures that value evidence in decision-making.

Discourse and Practices: The Dialectic of Modernization

The Expert Brain Drain and Loss of Local Context

A particularly acute manifestation of the dynamics between international organizations and national expertise is what can be termed the expert brain drain - not in the traditional sense of physical emigration, but as a form of cognitive and institutional displacement. National experts who become integrated into international organizations, whether as permanent staff or long-term consultants, often undergo a gradual but profound transformation in their professional orientation, epistemological frameworks, and ultimately, their loyalties (Stone, 2020; Wedel, 2009).

This process operates through several interconnected mechanisms. First, socialization into international organizational cultures reshapes how experts perceive problems and solutions. The World Bank, UNDP, or EU bureaucracies have distinctive ways of framing governance challenges - emphasizing particular metrics, privileging certain types of evidence, valorizing specific reform models. National experts, to succeed within these institutions, must internalize these frameworks, gradually adopting the conceptual vocabulary and analytical templates of the organization (Broome & Quirk, 2015). What begins as strategic code-switching - speaking the language of the organization to secure resources or influence - becomes cognitive assimilation, as the international framework displaces local knowledge structures (Mosse, 2005; Apthorpe, 2011).

Second, career incentives systematically favor international over local agendas. Advancement within international organizations depends on demonstrating alignment with organizational priorities, producing outputs that fit standardized formats (logical frameworks, results matrices, standardized indicators), and avoiding positions that might be perceived as parochial or resistant to 'best practices.' National experts who maintain strong local embeddedness and advocate for context-specific approaches that deviate from organizational templates risk being perceived as difficult, unsophisticated, or captured by local interests (Mosse, 2011; Wedel, 2009). The reward structure thus incentivizes what can be called strategic de-contextualization - the deliberate minimization of local specificity in favor of internationally legible formulations (Scott, 1998).

Stage	Professional Orientation	Primary Loyalty	Knowledge Base
Stage 1: National Expert	Domestic policy context	National institutions	Local tacit knowledge, networks, political economy
Stage 2: Initial Contact	Bilingual (local + international)	Divided loyalties	Learning international frameworks
Stage 3: Regular Consultant	Increasingly international	Career advancement focus	Strategic code-switching
Stage 4: Full Integration	International development discourse	Organizational priorities	International templates dominate
Stage 5: Cognitive Displacement	Global best practices	International agenda	Loss of local context

Table 1. The Expert Brain Drain Trajectory: Progressive transformation from local embeddedness to cognitive displacement

Mechanism	Process	Armenian Manifestation	Consequence
Socialization into International Cultures	Adoption of organizational frameworks, metrics, and priorities; gradual internalization of international discourse	Armenian experts frame problems as "governance gaps" and "European alignment" rather than power relations and distributional conflicts	Policy recommendations technically sound but politically naive; disconnect from implementation realities
Career Incentive Structures	Advancement requires alignment with organizational priorities; context-specific approaches seen as "parochial"	Experts produce standardized deliverables (logical frameworks, results matrices) detached from Armenian institutional realities	Strategic de-contextualization; minimization of local specificity for international legibility
Structural Dependency Creation	Best national experts absorbed by international organizations; domestic capacity erodes	Armenian ministries cannot match international salaries; qualified analysts leave public service	Government becomes dependent on external expertise; cycle reinforces international framework hegemony

Table 2. Mechanisms of Expert Brain Drain in Armenia: Key processes, manifestations, and consequences.

In the Armenian context, this dynamic manifests in several observable patterns. National experts who join international organizations or become regular consultants for donor programs often exhibit progressive detachment from domestic policy debates. They continue to work on Armenia-related projects, but increasingly frame problems through the lens of international development discourse rather than domestic political economy. Issues are analyzed in terms of 'governance indicators,' 'institutional capacity gaps,' and 'alignment with European standards' rather than the concrete power relations, distributional conflicts, and historical legacies that shape Armenian governance.

Empirical research on Armenian reform processes reveals that expert recommendations often exhibit striking disconnect from implementation realities. Strategic documents and policy frameworks developed with international expert participation frequently propose reforms that are technically sound from a managerial perspective but politically naive, failing to account for the informal power structures, resource constraints, and institutional cultures that determine actual implementation (Asatryan & Hakhverdyan, 2020). This is not simply a matter of 'technical' versus 'political' knowledge, but reflects the fact that internationally-oriented experts increasingly lack the tacit knowledge, network awareness, and contextual understanding necessary for effective reform design (Mosse, 2005).

Moreover, the brain drain operates as a structural mechanism reinforcing dependency. As the most capable national experts are absorbed into international organizations, domestic policy capacity erodes. Ministries and government agencies struggle to retain qualified analysts who can match the salaries and prestige offered by international organizations. This creates a cycle where domestic institutions become increasingly dependent on external expertise, which further reinforces the hegemony of international frameworks and the marginalization of locally-grounded knowledge (Mkandawire, 2014; Wedel, 2009).

Addressing this requires not simply retaining experts domestically (often impossible given salary differentials) but creating institutional mechanisms that preserve local embeddedness even as experts engage internationally. This might include: rotating assignments that prevent permanent detachment from domestic institutions; requiring sustained engagement with local academic and policy communities as a condition of international consulting work; developing domestic peer review and validation processes that critically assess internationally-derived recommendations; and strengthening domestic research and policy analysis capacity sufficiently to provide credible alternative framings to international templates (Pritchett et al., 2023; Andrews et al., 2017). The goal is not isolation from international knowledge but avoiding the cognitive colonization that occurs when international frameworks fully displace local analytical capacity.

Rationality and its Boundaries

The discourse of administrative reforms in Armenia, as in many post-Soviet states, is permeated with rhetoric of rationality, efficiency, and modernization. It appeals to the Weberian model of rational bureaucracy characterized by impersonality of procedures, meritocracy, and professionalism. This rhetoric creates a normative horizon against which the existing state of affairs is evaluated and reform goals are formulated.

However, sociological analysis reveals complex relations between this discourse and actual practices (Graeber, 2015; Soss et al., 2011).

First, the very concept of rationality turns out to be culturally specific and historically conditioned. What appears rational from the standpoint of Western administrative tradition may not be so in a different social context. Personal connections, patron-client relations, informal agreements - all this can be viewed not as deviations from rationality but as alternative forms of rationality adapted to conditions of institutional uncertainty and low trust in formal procedures (Ledeneva, 2013; Hale, 2015).

Moreover, the imposition of formal rationality without transformation of the social conditions in which it must function can lead to paradoxical results. Formal procedures intended to ensure impersonality and transparency become resources for manipulation. Documentation and reporting requirements generate 'bureaucratic theater' - the production of formal documents detached from real processes. Control mechanisms create incentives for gaming with numbers and indicators instead of real improvement of results (Scott, 1998; Muller, 2018).

Recent scholarship on 'performing the state' highlights how formal compliance can mask substantive non-implementation (Teets & Hurst, 2020; Tsai, 2021). In Armenia, this manifests in what can be termed 'reform simulation' - the adoption of strategies, creation of agencies, and proclamation of reforms that exist primarily on paper. This pattern is not unique to Armenia but represents a broader challenge in contexts where external reform pressures encounter weak domestic implementation capacity and limited political commitment (Pritchett et al., 2023; Andrews et al., 2017).

Strategic Coordination as Social Practice

Strategic coordination, viewed from the position of political sociology, represents not a technical process of harmonizing plans and actions but a complex social practice involving negotiations, compromises, and coalition formation. It unfolds in a space structured by power relations, where different ministries and agencies possess unequal resources and different symbolic capital. Coordination requires not simply formal mechanisms but trust, a common language, and shared understanding of problems (Fukuyama, 2013; Christensen & Lægreid, 2007).

In the post-Soviet context, the problem of coordination is complicated by the legacy of the Soviet system, where coordination was carried out through party structures and personal connections of the nomenklatura. The abolition of these mechanisms created a vacuum that was not filled with effective alternatives. Formal coordination structures - interagency commissions, working groups - often function formally, serving rather to legitimize decisions than their actual development. Real coordination occurs through informal channels and personal contacts, which makes it opaque and dependent on specific persons (Ledeneva, 2013; Wedel, 2009).

A special role in the process of strategic coordination is played by what can be called the 'center of government' - the prime minister's office, the chancellery, and other structures attached to the head of executive power. These structures claim the role of neutral coordinator standing above sectoral interests. However, sociological analysis reveals that they themselves are actors in the bureaucratic field, possessing their own interests and strategies. Their coordination capabilities depend not only on formal

powers but on symbolic capital - authority, expertise, proximity to political leadership (Alessandro et al., 2021; Dahlström et al., 2020).

In Armenia, the Government Administration has undergone significant reforms aimed at strengthening its coordinating capacity. However, effectiveness remains limited by high staff turnover, weak analytical capacity, and tensions between political leadership and permanent civil servants. International experience suggests that effective center-of-government institutions require both technical capacity and political authority - what Lindvall and Teorell (2022) term 'administrative capacity coupled with political clout.' Building such capacity in Armenia requires not just structural reforms but cultural change in how coordination is understood and practiced across government.

Policy Capacity: Knowledge and Power

Policy capacity in a sociological perspective is connected to the question of types of knowledge recognized as legitimate in decision-making processes. Which forms of expertise are considered relevant? Whose knowledge carries weight in policy discussions? These questions are not resolved by epistemological criteria but reflect power relations within and around the state apparatus. Different types of professional knowledge - legal, economic, engineering, sociological - compete for recognition of their relevance and ability to define problems and solutions (Desrosières, 1998; Porter, 1995).

In the post-Soviet space, this competition is marked by the dominance of legal formalism and distrust of social sciences. Problems are defined predominantly in legal terms - as questions of legislative regulation rather than social relations. Economic knowledge is recognized in the form of neoclassical economics, while institutional and political economy remain marginal. Sociological knowledge, if used at all, is predominantly in the form of public opinion surveys reduced to percentages of support (Aslund, 2013; Wilson & Popova, 2019).

Developing policy capacity requires not simply hiring qualified analysts or creating research units but transforming the epistemic culture of public administration. This includes recognizing the multiplicity of relevant forms of knowledge, creating spaces for dialogue between different expertises, and developing the ability to reflect on the limitations of each type of knowledge. Critically important is also overcoming the gap between knowledge production and its utilization - situations where analytical materials are produced for formal compliance with requirements but do not influence real decisions (Craft & Howlett, 2013; Wellstead et al., 2023).

Armenia's attempts to strengthen policy analysis capacity face multiple challenges. Ministry analytical units often lack autonomy and resources, with analysts subordinated to political pressures and short-term demands. The broader ecosystem - think tanks, universities, research institutes - remains underdeveloped and poorly connected to government. As Wu et al. (2022) observe, effective policy capacity requires not just individual analytical skills but institutional frameworks that support evidence use, including leadership commitment, organizational cultures valuing analysis, and mechanisms for knowledge exchange between producers and users of policy research.

Trajectories of Transformation: Between Isomorphism and Innovation Institutional Isomorphism and Its Mechanisms

The theory of institutional isomorphism, developed by DiMaggio and Powell (1983), offers an explanation for why organizations in similar institutional fields become alike, even when this does not lead to increased efficiency. Applied to administrative reforms, this means a tendency to copy forms and structures recognized as legitimate in global governance discourse, regardless of their correspondence to local context. Three mechanisms of isomorphism are distinguished: coercive, mimetic, and normative.

Coercive isomorphism manifests through pressure from international organizations, conditionality of financial assistance, and requirements of European integration. States are forced to adopt certain institutional forms not because they are convinced of their effectiveness but because it is necessary for obtaining resources or legitimacy. Mimetic isomorphism arises under conditions of uncertainty, when organizations copy practices of others perceived as successful. Normative isomorphism is connected with professionalization, when carriers of certain education and professional socialization bring similar practices into different contexts (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Campbell & Pedersen, 2001).

In the Armenian case, all three mechanisms can be observed in action. Adoption of development strategies, creation of agencies according to certain models, implementation of management tools - all this often occurs under the influence of external actors. At the same time, formal adoption of institutions is not accompanied by their real institutionalization - embedding in practices, formation of corresponding competencies, change of culture. The phenomenon of 'façade institutions' emerges, existing on paper but not functioning in reality (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2020; Börzel & Schimmelfennig, 2022).

Habitus and the Possibility of Transformation

The persistence of old practices despite formal institutional changes points to a deeper problem - the durability of habitus. Habitus, according to Bourdieu (2014), represents a system of durable dispositions acquired through socialization that generate practices and representations. It functions as a 'structured structure' (product of past experience) and 'structuring structure' (generating current practices). Changing habitus is a lengthy process requiring not simply cognitive learning of new rules but deep resocialization.

For bureaucrats socialized in the Soviet or post-Soviet management system, certain practices - personalization of relations, hierarchical communication, formalism - are natural, self-evident. They are reproduced not by conscious choice or rational calculation but because they represent habitus, which Bourdieu describes as 'history turned into nature.' Transforming this habitus requires not just training in new procedures but changing fundamental schemas of perception and evaluation (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

At the same time, the concept of habitus does not presuppose complete determinism. Bourdieu emphasizes its adaptive character - the ability to change under the influence of new experience, especially in situations of structural crisis when old schemas cease to work. Administrative reforms, especially radical ones, create such situations of crisis, opening possibilities for transformation. However, this possibility is

realized only under certain conditions - the presence of alternative models, support for changes, time for new experience (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008; Swartz, 2013).

Recent scholarship on institutional change emphasizes the importance of 'critical junctures' - moments when structural constraints are loosened, creating opportunities for path-breaking reforms (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007; Soifer, 2012). Armenia's 2018 Velvet Revolution represented such a critical juncture, yet translating revolutionary momentum into sustained institutional transformation has proven difficult. As Slater and Simmons (2013) observe, critical junctures create possibilities but do not determine outcomes - agency, coalition-building, and sequential decision-making shape whether windows of opportunity are realized or squandered.

Empirical Dimensions: Contradictions of Modernization in Armenia: Dissonance Between Discourse and Practice

Empirical analysis of administrative reforms in Armenia reveals a significant gap between official modernization discourse and real management practices. This gap manifests at multiple levels. At the document level - between ambitious development strategies and limited resources for their implementation. At the institutional level - between formally created structures and their real functioning. At the practice level - between declared principles of meritocracy, transparency, and professionalism and persisting patron-client relations, nepotism, and personalization of management (Asatryan, 2019; Danielyan & Minasyan, 2020).

This dissonance should not be interpreted simplistically - as elite hypocrisy or inability to reform. Rather, it reflects a fundamental contradiction in the transformation process, when new institutional forms are superimposed on durable social structures and practices. Civil servants may sincerely support the idea of reforms but act according to logic embedded in their habitus. Political leaders may promote modernization but depend on patronage networks for mobilizing political support (Markarov, 2020; Mirzoyan, 2022).

This contradiction is especially vivid in the area of strategic planning. Formally, Armenia possesses a developed system of strategic documents - government programs, sectoral strategies, action plans. These documents are developed with participation of international experts, use modern terminology and instruments. However, their connection with the real budgetary process and operational decisions remains weak. Strategic planning functions parallel to real decision-making, which is determined by short-term political considerations and crisis response (Galstyan & Hakobyan, 2021; Harutyunyan, 2023).

Patrimonial Practices in Modern Forms

Measuring Reform Progress: Evidence from International Indices

While the dissonance between discourse and practice represents a fundamental challenge, systematic measurement using international governance indicators provides empirical evidence of both progress and persistent gaps in Armenia's administrative modernization.

E-Government Development: Armenia's trajectory in the UN E-Government Development Index (EGDI) reveals uneven progress. Over 2010-2024, Armenia's

EGDI (E-Government Development Index) score in 2024 is reported as ≈ 0.8422 , placing it 48th out of 193 countries. In 2022, Armenia's EGDI ranking was 64th. According to the UN data center, earlier values (for example 2022) show Armenia's EGDI value as 0.7136 (rank 68) and 0.5944 (rank 87) in prior years (United Nations, 2024). This volatility reflects both domestic reform dynamics and rapid advancement of other countries, creating a 'moving target' effect.

E-Participation and Citizen Engagement.

According to the UN E-Government Survey 2024, Armenia demonstrates uneven progress in e-participation: while the country has significantly advanced in the Online Service Index (OSI), its performance in the E-Participation Index continues to fluctuate widely. Over the past decade, Armenia's rank has ranged from the mid-50s to above 130, and in 2024 it remains notably lower than its overall EGDI position. This persistent volatility indicates that, despite substantial improvements in technical infrastructure and digital service provision, institutionalized mechanisms for citizen involvement - consultation, co-creation, participatory policy design - are still underdeveloped and often depend on ad hoc governmental or donor-driven initiatives rather than stable administrative routines (United Nations, 2024).

ICT Infrastructure.

In contrast, Armenia's performance in ICT infrastructure remains comparatively strong. As shown by ITU and UN metrics, the country has maintained solid rankings - 61st in 2016 and 64th in 2022 - reflecting high internet penetration, a dynamic technology sector, and a relatively favorable digital connectivity environment (ITU, 2022; United Nations, 2022). The 2024 findings confirm this trajectory: Armenia's Telecommunications Infrastructure Index (TII) continues to exceed regional averages, providing a stable operational foundation for digital government expansion.

World Bank Governance Indicators.

Cross-comparison with the 2023 Worldwide Governance Indicators reveals similar structural patterns: incremental improvements in regulatory quality coexist with persistent weaknesses in government effectiveness and control of corruption (World Bank, 2023).

These governance gaps reinforce the sociological perspective that formal modernization of institutions does not automatically generate high-quality administrative performance.

E-Participation and Citizen Engagement: The E-Participation Index shows greater volatility, with Armenia ranking between 59th and 135th during the same period (United Nations, 2022). This suggests that while technical infrastructure has advanced, systematic mechanisms for citizen participation remain underdeveloped and dependent on specific initiatives rather than institutionalized practices.

ICT Infrastructure: Armenia's strongest performance appears in ICT infrastructure, achieving ranks of 61st (2016) and 64th (2022) globally (ITU, 2022; United Nations, 2022). This reflects Armenia's robust technology sector and high internet penetration, providing a solid technical basis for digital government services.

World Bank Governance Indicators: Analysis reveals similar patterns - moderate progress in regulatory quality alongside persistent challenges in government effectiveness and control of corruption (World Bank, 2023). These indicators corroborate the sociological analysis, suggesting formal institutional reforms have not yet translated into consistently high governance performance.

This empirical evidence supports the theoretical argument that effectiveness requires simultaneous improvement across institutional, strategic, and operational dimensions. Armenia's relatively strong performance in operational indicators (ICT) combined with weaker strategic performance (e-participation) illustrates the limitations of fragmented reform approaches.

The concept of neopatrimonialism, developed for analyzing post-colonial states, proves productive for the post-Soviet context as well. Neopatrimonialism is characterized by coexistence of formal rational-legal institutions with informal patrimonial practices. State positions are used not only for performing public functions but also for accumulating private goods. Personal connections and loyalty play a key role in career advancement and resource distribution alongside or instead of formal criteria of competence (Hale, 2015; Gel'man, 2021).

In the Armenian context, neopatrimonial practices do not disappear with formal adoption of modern institutions but adapt, taking new forms. Appointments to key positions are formally carried out through competitive procedures but are really determined by personal connections and political loyalty. State resources are distributed through formal tender procedures, but outcomes are often predetermined. Control mechanisms exist but are selectively applied depending on political conjuncture (Asatryan & Hakhverdyan, 2020; Danielyan, 2022).

It is important to understand that these practices are not simply remnants of the past or results of insufficient modernization. They perform certain functions in the context of weak formal institutions and low trust. Personal connections compensate for the unreliability of formal procedures. Patronage networks ensure loyalty and coordination where formal mechanisms do not work. Moreover, for many actors these practices appear not as deviation from the norm but as the norm itself - the natural way the state functions (Ledeneva, 2013; Radnitz, 2021).

Conclusion: Prospects for Transformation

Public Demand, Societal Preferences, and the Ambivalence of Reform Support

A critical but often-elided question in analyses of administrative reform concerns the actual preferences and demands of society regarding governance. Technocratic reform discourse typically assumes a latent demand for 'good governance' - transparency, meritocracy, rule-following - that is suppressed only by elite resistance and institutional inertia. This assumption deserves critical scrutiny, particularly in contexts where informal networks, personalized exchange, and selective rule application have historically provided essential functions for navigating institutional uncertainty and resource scarcity (Ledeneva, 2013; Hale, 2015).

The relationship between Armenian society and governance reform is characterized by profound ambivalence rather than straightforward support or opposition. Survey data reveals this complexity. On one hand, polls consistently show high levels of

dissatisfaction with government performance, widespread perception of corruption, and stated support for reforms (Caucasus Barometer, 2021; World Values Survey, 2022). The 2018 Velvet Revolution demonstrated genuine popular mobilization around demands for clean government, rule of law, and institutional accountability (Harutyunyan, 2021; Markarov, 2020). This provides evidence of authentic societal demand for governance transformation.

However, behavioral evidence and ethnographic research reveal more complex patterns. The same citizens who express abstract support for meritocracy and transparency frequently engage in and expect personalized treatment, network-based access, and informal problem-solving. When faced with bureaucratic obstacles - obtaining permits, accessing public services, navigating regulatory requirements - citizens routinely mobilize personal connections (tanish, blat) rather than relying on formal procedures (Ledeneva, 2013). This is not simply elite corruption imposed on unwilling citizens, but a participatory system of reciprocal obligations in which significant portions of society are complicit beneficiaries (Hale, 2015).

Dimension	Stated Preference	Actual Behavior/Reality	Interpretation
Trust in Institutions	Express dissatisfaction with government performance; support anti-corruption	Only 15-25% trust government institutions; 70%+ rely on personal networks (Caucasus Barometer 2021)	Abstract support for reform but practical reliance on informal systems
Reform Support	High stated support for transparency, meritocracy, rule of law (post-2018 Revolution)	Conditional support; declines when reforms threaten discretionary authority benefiting them personally	Support rhetorical; resistance when reforms have personal costs
Network Reliance	Acknowledge corruption problems	Routinely mobilize personal connections (tanish, blat) for permits, services, problem-solving	Participatory system of reciprocal obligations with broad complicity
Generational Divide	Younger/educated: stronger support for formalization	Older/rural/lower SES: greater attachment to personalized networks (WVS 2022)	Reform coalitions possible but not universal; significant segments prefer status quo
Risk Aversion	Want "better governance"	"Who will help us if not our connections?" - anxiety about losing informal buffers	Fear of reform uncertainty; familiar inefficiency preferred to unknown formalization

Table 3. Public Preferences on Governance in Armenia: Evidence of ambivalence between stated preferences and actual behavior (Caucasus Barometer 2021, World Values Survey 2022).

Institution/Mechanism	Trust Level	Actual Reliance
Government Institutions	15-25%	Low (when alternatives exist)
Parliament	~20%	Low
Courts/Legal System	~25%	Low (avoid when possible)
Family Networks	>90%	Very High (primary problem-solving)
Personal Connections (tanish)	>70%	Very High (routine use)

Table 4. The Trust-Reliance Paradox: Gap between trust in formal institutions and reliance on informal networks (Caucasus Barometer 2021).

Available data from Armenia suggests several patterns:

- Trust asymmetry: Armenians report significantly higher trust in personal networks than in formal institutions. Caucasus Barometer data (2021) shows that while only 15-25% express trust in government institutions, over 70% report relying on family and personal networks for problem-solving.
- Conditional reform support: Support for anti-corruption measures and institutional reforms is highest in abstract formulation but declines when specific implications are made concrete. Citizens support prosecuting 'corrupt officials' but resist reforms that would eliminate discretionary authority that might benefit them personally.
- Class and generational divides: Younger, more educated, and urban populations show stronger consistent support for formalized, rule-based governance, while older generations and those in rural areas or with lower socioeconomic status exhibit greater attachment to personalized, network-based systems (World Values Survey, 2022;)
- Risk aversion and uncertainty: Focus group research reveals that even those critical of current systems express anxiety about reforms that might eliminate familiar (if inefficient) mechanisms without guaranteeing functional alternatives. The question 'who will help us if not our connections?' reflects genuine concern about navigating bureaucratic systems without informal buffers.
- This ambivalence has profound implications for reform sustainability. If significant portions of society benefit from or depend on informal governance mechanisms, reforms that threaten these systems may encounter not just elite resistance but also popular ambivalence or passive obstruction. Citizens may support reform rhetorically while continuing to participate in and perpetuate informal practices, creating the 'simulation' dynamic discussed earlier (Gel'man, 2021).

This creates a fundamental political dilemma for reformers. Formal rationalization and rule-based governance, while potentially more efficient and equitable in aggregate, may impose short-term costs and uncertainties on populations that have adapted to informal systems. Personalized governance, while inefficient and distributionally arbitrary, provides flexibility and responsiveness that rigid formal systems often lack - particularly for those lacking resources, education, or institutional access (Scott, 1998; Migdal, 2001).

A realistic reform strategy must therefore acknowledge this complexity rather than assuming automatic societal support for formalization. This might involve several elements:

- Sequential reform: Prioritizing reforms that deliver tangible benefits to broad populations (e.g., digital services that actually work, simplified procedures, reduced processing times) before tackling entrenched systems that, while problematic, provide essential navigation tools for citizens (Pritchett et al., 2023).
- Functional substitution: Developing formal systems that genuinely substitute for informal mechanisms rather than simply prohibiting informal practices while failing to provide workable alternatives. If personal connections exist because formal systems are dysfunctional, improving formal functionality must precede delegitimizing informal practices (Andrews et al., 2017).
- Coalition-building: Identifying and mobilizing constituencies who would clearly benefit from formalization - typically younger, urban, educated populations who operate more effectively in rule-based systems and are excluded from traditional networks. The 2018 revolution demonstrated such coalitions' potential power (Harutyunyan, 2021).
- Transparency about tradeoffs: Honest public communication about the transition costs of reform - acknowledging that formalization may reduce flexibility and personal discretion while (eventually) improving equity and efficiency - rather than presenting reform as costless improvement (Pritchett et al., 2023).

Ultimately, sustainable governance reform requires not just technical capacity or elite commitment, but genuine societal demand for formalized, rule-based governance even when this entails surrendering the advantages of personalized systems. Whether such demand exists or can be cultivated in Armenia remains an open empirical question requiring ongoing research and careful political judgment. The evidence suggests neither simple opposition nor unambiguous support, but rather complex, context-dependent preferences that effective reform strategies must navigate rather than assume away.

The conducted analysis allows us to rethink the nature of administrative reforms and conditions of their success through the lens of political sociology. The key conclusion is that public administration effectiveness cannot be achieved through simple borrowing of institutional forms or implementation of managerial technologies. It requires profound transformation of social relations, power structures, and actor habitus. Administrative reforms in this perspective represent not a technical project but a form of social transformation fraught with conflicts, resistance, and uncertainty of outcome (Thelen, 2004; Streeck & Thelen, 2005).

Armenia's experience illustrates typical challenges of post-Soviet transformation. Formal adoption of new institutions does not guarantee their real institutionalization. Modernization discourse coexists with durable practices of patrimonial governance. External pressure for reforms encounters internal resistance and adaptation. Global governance models interact with local social structures, generating hybrid forms that do not fit ideal types (Grzymala-Busse, 2007; Ledeneva, 2013).

At the same time, this analysis should not lead to pessimism or fatalism. The sociological perspective, while emphasizing the durability of social structures and

practices, simultaneously indicates mechanisms of their transformation. Changing habitus is possible through new experience and resocialization. Power relations can be restructured through formation of new coalitions and mobilization of alternative resources. The symbolic economy of public administration is transformed through changing criteria of legitimacy and prestige (Bourdieu, 2014; Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008).

The question of reform temporality has critical significance. Transformation of social practices and habitus is a lengthy process requiring generational change. Expectation of quick results, characteristic of administrative reform discourse, does not correspond to sociological realities of institutional change. This creates the risk of disappointment and abandonment of reforms in the absence of immediate improvements. A more realistic understanding of transformation trajectory is necessary, recognizing the inevitability of transitional forms and hybrid configurations (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007).

Strategic coordination and policy capacity, analyzed in this study, represent not simply technical dimensions of state capacity but indicators of deeper transformations. The ability for strategic coordination reflects the degree of overcoming fragmentation of the bureaucratic field and formation of shared understanding of state goals. Development of policy capacity testifies to changing epistemic culture of governance and recognition of expert knowledge legitimacy. Progress in these areas is possible but requires a comprehensive approach accounting for sociological realities of state institutions (Fukuyama, 2013; Alessandro et al., 2021).

Promising directions for further research include more detailed analysis of micro-practices of public administration, study of career trajectories of different bureaucrat generations, analysis of discursive strategies of reform legitimization, and investigation of digital technologies' role in transforming power relations. An important direction is also comparative analysis of post-Soviet transformation trajectories, allowing identification of both general patterns and specific factors determining differences in outcomes (Grzymala-Busse, 2007; Gel'man, 2021; Hanson & Kopstein, 1997).

Ultimately, the question of public administration effectiveness is a question of the state's ability to be not simply an apparatus of coercion or administration but an institution legitimate in society's eyes, capable of learning and adaptation, oriented toward public good. Achieving this requires not technocratic solutions but democratization of the governance process itself - expansion of participation, strengthening of accountability, development of a public sphere where state practices can be subject to open discussion and criticism. It is in this direction that the path to genuine modernization of public administration lies, overcoming limitations of both traditional bureaucracy and neoliberal managerialism (Jessop, 2016; Sassen, 2014).

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Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.