

Politically Neutral Civil Service: Human Capital Driving Reform or a Vulnerable Link in Public Administration?

This publication examines the current state and challenges in implementing one of the key aspects of public administration reform — building a professional and politically neutral civil service system.

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The functioning of the civil service can be broadly divided into two interrelated dimensions:

- › **the role of the civil service in society** (practical implementation of tasks and functions of the state);
- › **civil service management processes** (the mechanisms governing the working conditions of civil servants).

The human capital of the civil service, working conditions, and the organisational structure of state authorities directly affect the quality of state functions and determine the role the civil service plays. This means human capital can become one of two options:

- **a driver of positive change** — when civil servants possess the necessary expertise, experience, and ability to implement new policies, digital solutions, and European governance standards, while the organisational structure of state authorities aligns with specific sectoral needs. In such cases, the responsibilities of each authority are clearly defined, vertical and horizontal coordination between them is strong, and continuity is ensured even during justified institutional transformations;
- **a factor of stagnation** — when civil servants face a lack of motivation, political pressure, inadequate remuneration, limited opportunities for professional growth, high staff turnover, or corruption risks. Under these conditions, the organisational structure of public administration is often fragmented and misaligned with current challenges and results in blurred institutional competencies, overlapping responsibilities, or accountability gaps.

The quality of state functions directly depends on how well the civil service is organised and managed, as well as on the level of training, motivation, and support of civil servants. State functions shape the **requirements for the civil service** — its workforce, structure, professional standards, and management principles. Civil service management should flexibly adapt to evolving state functions to ensure their effective implementation.

Thus, these dimensions are **interdependent** and should be considered in public administration reform processes.

The current composition of the civil service has been shaped by three key factors:

- › Power transition, organisational and functional shifts (2019)

Following the 2019 presidential and early parliamentary elections, Ukraine experienced a sweeping change in political leadership at all levels. This triggered turbulence within the system of central executive authorities (CEAs)¹, altering their coordination mechanism, redistributing competencies, and prompting structural changes in ministerial staff. Amendments to civil service legislation simplified both hiring and dismissal procedures.² It became possible to sign contracts for civil service positions (categories 'B' and 'C') without a

¹ [Resolution No. 829](#) of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine dated 2 September 2019 marked the beginning of turbulence in the system of central executive authorities.

² [Law of Ukraine No. 117-IX](#) dated 19 September 2019 'On Amendments to Some Laws of Ukraine on Restarting Power' (effective as of 25 September 2019).

competitive selection process. Additionally, a mechanism was introduced for the politically unmotivated dismissal of senior officials, while competitive selection procedures for these roles were dismantled. Such sweeping changes intensified staff turnover.³

The new political leadership created legal grounds to recruit a new, loyal team. At the same time, the simplified competition procedures revealed a shortage of qualified civil service candidates willing and able to undergo the previously required stages of the civil service selection process.

› The COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021)

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government [introduced quarantine measures](#), and Law [No. 117-IX](#) suspended civil service competitions.⁴ An [alternative hiring mechanism](#) was introduced for exceptional cases related to fulfilling public functions during quarantine, involving interviews with authorised officials, including remote formats such as videoconferences. Contracts were limited to two months after the end of quarantine, leading to mass appointments of individuals without civil service experience.⁵

In February 2021, Law No. [1285-IX](#) reinstated competitive hiring starting in August that year,⁶ with the possibility of extending existing contracts signed during quarantine for up to nine months after the law took effect. The government [instructed](#) ministries to limit contract extensions and relaunch competitions. This partially restored merit-based hiring (at least legitimising prior non-competitive appointments), though some exceptions remained,

³ [Statistical data on the quantitative composition of civil servants](#) for 2019 is not available on the NAUCS website, but the relative data for the first quarter of 2020 show staff turnover due to the reorganisation of agencies, with 29,428 vacant positions at the end of the first quarter of 2020 (73 in category 'A', 7,460 in category 'B', and 21,895 in category 'C'), the number of dismissals was 11,826 (14 in category 'A', 3,011 in category 'B', and 8,801 in category 'C'), the number of appointments was 9,181 (20 in category 'A', 2,165 in category 'B', 6,996 in category 'C'). Interdepartmental migrations in the first quarter of 2020 covered 5,421 persons appointed to positions by transfer (8 — category 'A', 1,243 — category 'B', 4,170 — category 'C').

⁴ [According to paragraph 8 of Section II 'Final Provisions'](#) of the Law of Ukraine dated 13 April 2020 No. 553-IX 'On Amendments to the Law of Ukraine "On the State Budget of Ukraine for 2020"', it is established that temporarily, for the duration of the quarantine and for 30 days from the date of its cancellation, the provisions of the Law of Ukraine 'On Civil Service' and the Law of Ukraine 'On Central Executive Authorities' regarding the conduct of competitions for civil service positions and appointments to civil service positions based on the results of the competition shall be suspended.

⁵ 8,281 people with no work experience [were appointed](#) to civil service positions, with the highest number in the first quarter before the quarantine was cancelled — 2,441.

⁶ [According to the Law of Ukraine dated 23 February 2021 No. 1285-IX](#) 'On Amending Certain Laws of Ukraine to Resume Competitions for Public Service Positions and Other Public Service Issues' (which came into force on 6 March 2021), it has been established that:

- competitions for positions held by individuals with whom contracts for civil service have been concluded for the duration of the quarantine period shall be announced within six months from the date of entry into force of this Law in accordance with the order in which contracts for civil service for the relevant positions were concluded;
- contracts for civil service during the quarantine period shall remain in force until the appointment of a candidate to a civil service position based on the results of a competition, but for no longer than nine months from the date this Law comes into force.

particularly regarding contract extensions and, consequently, the tenure of civil servants hired without competition.

Overall, the simplification of competition procedures following the power transition and the suspension of competitions during quarantine enabled the influx of new people loyal to the political leadership and a rapid staffing of newly created ministries without competitive hurdles.

› Full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine (since 2022)

The introduction of [martial law](#) in Ukraine profoundly impacted civil service operations. Law [No. 2259-IX](#) established special provisions for the operation of state authorities, including appointments to positions without competitive selection. The war has also imposed severe financial constraints on central and local executive authorities,⁷ further destabilising the civil service system.

The first months of the war were marked by a massive outflow of personnel from the civil service.⁸ Actual hiring for civil service positions only resumed in June 2022 under budgetary restrictions and without competitive procedures.⁹

Appointments made without competition during martial law, combined with staff shortages due to mobilisation, temporary displacement, including abroad, and subsequent resignations, negatively impacted the quality of the civil service workforce. Many new hires lacked prior experience and needed time to get up to speed and adapt to the differences between the private sector and civil service. However, this measure allowed the government to maintain operations during wartime.

Ukraine's professional civil service currently faces a series of systemic problems that undermine its ability to conduct evidence-based policymaking and effectively monitor policy implementation, including:

- frequent changes in the structure of central executive authorities (reorganisation, liquidation, changes in mandates and [coordination mechanisms](#)), which destabilise

⁷ In accordance with resolutions of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine [No. 245](#) dated 10 March 2022 and [No. 401](#) dated 1 April 2022, expenditures and lending from the general fund of the state budget allocated to central and local executive authorities have been reduced.

⁸ In 2022, 30,440 people resigned from civil service, in 2023 — 40,193, in 2024 — 37,673, and in the first half of 2025 — 19,049 people.

⁹ [According to data from the Report on the quantitative composition of civil servants](#), as of 15 May 2022, no appointments to positions had been made, but there had been a staff turnover. Since the beginning of 2022, 5,971 civil servants have resigned, including 901 since 15 April 2022. Staff turnover exceeded appointments to positions in 2022 by 3,674 people. This trend continued in 2023.

their operations. These changes lead to staff turnover, reduced productivity, loss of institutional memory, and a decline in work dynamics;

- erosion of meritocracy in civil service selection due to the suspension of competitive procedures during martial law;
- lack of a unified methodology for assessing candidates' suitability for civil service positions under martial law (each institution conducts evaluations at its own discretion);
- lack of clear legal safeguards protecting civil servants from politically driven dismissals;
- underdeveloped HR tools for onboarding and adaptation to help new hires (or those returning after long absences) realise their professional and personal potential and integrate effectively into the team;
- performance evaluations of civil servants are often superficial, failing to provide career growth opportunities and incentivise professional development.

The 2023 SIGMA [Monitoring Report](#) highlighted most of these systemic challenges. Throughout [2023–2024](#), the European Commission repeatedly emphasised key problems affecting the civil service in Ukraine: the failure to uphold merit-based selection, the underdevelopment of human resource management, and the ineffective regulation of the remuneration of civil servants. In response, the [Ukraine Facility Plan for 2024–2027](#) (under Component I) outlines a priority reform agenda in these areas to serve as the foundation for improving the public administration system in Ukraine.

The [Public Administration Reform Roadmap](#) also provides a set of measures aimed at achieving strategic outcomes in the areas of 'Civil Service and Human Resource Management' and 'Accountability'. These aim to build a capable, professional, and motivated civil service, optimise organisational structures, and strengthen accountability.

The [Public Administration Reform Strategy for 2022–2025](#) (hereinafter — the Strategy) sets out three key reform goals, including the establishment of a professional and politically neutral civil service that prioritises the interests of citizens.

Within the areas of 'Professional Civil Service and Human Resource Management' and 'Effective Administration', the Strategy identifies several tasks aimed at achieving the expected outcomes, specifically:

- › attracting highly qualified specialists to strengthen the civil service by ensuring fair and transparent selection based on merit, achievements, and equal treatment of candidates;

- › revising requirements for forming the Senior Civil Service Commission and competitive selection committees in state authorities to improve the quality of civil service selection procedures;
- › improving the organisation and operations of central executive authorities, including refining coordination mechanisms, optimising organisational structures, clearly defining and distributing functions and responsibilities, eliminating overlap, and introducing accountability for performance results.

State of Play and Progress of Reform

As of 2025, progress in building a professional and politically neutral civil service in Ukraine remains uneven across different areas. According to the [European Commission](#), the most notable achievements have been made in reforming the remuneration system, while human resource management lags behind. The selection process for civil service positions remains the most problematic area. The ongoing full-scale war has significantly impacted these processes, slowing or halting procedures that were underway before 2022.

In several [briefs](#), the Agency for Legislative Initiatives has outlined the reform progress in various areas and issues unresolved within the Strategy implementation.

Government and parliamentary legislative proposals (draft laws [No. 13478](#) and [No. 13478-1](#)) aim to address some of these issues, including:

- 1) introducing new concepts and related procedures into the Law of Ukraine 'On Civil Service': adaptation,¹⁰ internal competition,¹¹ newly appointed civil servant,¹² candidate and personnel reserve;¹³
- 2) clarifying requirements for the formation and membership of the Senior Civil Service Commission, its functions, and safeguards against interference with its activities;

¹⁰ The process of familiarisation, adaptation and social integration of newly appointed civil servants in a state body to the content and conditions of official activities in the state body and the team, based on the gradual acquisition of new professional knowledge and skills, learning the strategic goals and objectives of the state body, becoming familiar with the team and joining the organisational culture of the state body (adaptation period — from 1 to 4 months). For persons appointed to category 'B' civil service positions for the first time, adaptation is mandatory. For others — at the discretion of the head of the civil service.

¹¹ The selection of candidates for civil service positions in a state body from among the civil servants of that body is carried out in order to quickly and effectively fill civil service positions in the state body.

¹² An individual appointed to public service for the first time, or a public servant appointed to another position in public service in one or another state body.

¹³ The candidate reserve includes individuals who, during the competition, are included in the overall ranking of candidates for civil service positions. The personnel reserve is formed from candidates for civil service positions in categories 'B' and 'C', whom the appointing authority may redesignate as winners of the competition (deferred right).

- 3) refining requirements for the organisation and conduct of competitions for civil service positions, with an emphasis on achieving gender balance;¹⁴
- 4) enabling career advancement for civil servants based on their professional competence, performance evaluation results, and diligent fulfilment of their duties by allowing them to occupy higher positions within the same category and institution;
- 5) clarifying requirements for performance evaluations: tasks and performance indicators should reflect the employee's role in achieving institutional goals; a re-evaluation procedure is introduced for poorly rated employees.

These draft laws introduce an algorithm for resuming competitive selection for civil service positions¹⁵ held by individuals appointed without competition during martial law.

If martial law ends or is lifted before 1 June 2026, the process of announcing competitions for civil service positions will begin immediately, with no further delays envisaged.

The draft laws also set a deadline for how long civil servants appointed without competition may retain their positions.¹⁶

However, an extension may be granted, provided that the civil servant appointed without competition meets the legally established requirements for the position and continues working in the respective state authority.¹⁷

This algorithm aims to protect the civil service from a staffing crisis that could arise once competitive selection resumes, while also retaining experienced professionals (individuals who, although appointed to senior civil service positions or reinstated to the civil service without a competitive procedure, took their positions based on their professional merits).

Problems in Implementing the Reform

The processes of reforming public administration remain inconsistent, raising several personnel-related issues.

¹⁴ In order to ensure gender balance in a civil service authority, affirmative action may be taken to give preference in the selection of the winner of a competition to a candidate of the gender that is underrepresented in that civil service authority within the job category, provided that the candidates who have scored the highest total number of points in the overall ranking have equal professional competence.

¹⁵ For category 'A' — from 1 June 2026, the deadline for announcing competitions is 9 months; for category 'B' — from 1 July 2026, the deadline for announcing competitions is 12 months; for category 'C' — from 1 September 2026, the deadline for announcing competitions is 18 months.

¹⁶ For categories 'A' and 'B' — 18 months from the date of resumption of competitions; for category 'C' — 24 months from the date of resumption of competitions.

¹⁷ For category 'A' — at least one year at the time of resumption of competitions for this category of positions and at least one positive or excellent rating based on the results of the annual performance appraisal; for categories 'B' and 'C' — at least 6 months at the time of resumption of competitions for the respective categories of positions.

› Staff Turnover

Experiments with restructuring the system of central executive authorities are ongoing, highlighting the lack of a coherent strategic vision for the system's architecture and a [clear division](#) of roles and powers.¹⁸ These processes destabilise the system, dragging it into prolonged legal and organisational procedures linked to the liquidation or reorganisation of legal entities. This negatively affects the human capital of the civil service, contributes to chronic instability, and complicates proper staffing, particularly at middle and senior levels.

Over the years of implementing the Strategy, staff turnover has not decreased to the planned levels and, as of the second quarter of 2025, stood at 12.4%.¹⁹ Another noteworthy figure is the vacancy rate, which reached 19.6%²⁰ by the end of the same period.

› Political Neutrality vs. Political Bias

The absence of clear legislative protections against politically motivated dismissals remains one of the most vulnerable spots of the civil service. Following the 2019 government reshuffle, based on [Law No. 117-IX](#), state secretaries of ministries and heads of central executive authorities, whose work is coordinated by the government directly or through respective ministers (Category 'A' civil service positions), remain at the mercy of political figures, namely the Prime Minister or ministers.

The state secretary of a ministry is the highest-ranking civil servant within that ministry, accountable and subordinate to the minister. State secretaries are appointed by the government **for a five-year term**, with the possibility of reappointment.

Heads of central executive authorities are appointed by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine.

Appointments to these positions are made through competitive selection conducted by the Senior Civil Service Commission (hereinafter — the Commission) in accordance with the Law of Ukraine 'On Civil Service'.

However, since 29 September 2019 (the effective date of Law [No. 117-IX](#)), the Commission (like any competition commission within a state authority) no longer selects a single winner

¹⁸ The Cabinet of Ministers [adopted](#) a number of decisions on the reorganisation of central executive authorities: it renamed ministries, liquidated several of them and transferred functions, particularly in the areas of social policy, economy, ecology, defence and reintegration.

¹⁹ The calculation considers the ratio of the number of dismissed employees to the actual number of civil servants.

²⁰ The calculation considers the ratio of the number of vacancies to the total number of civil servants.

but instead identifies the top candidates for each position (up to three per vacancy),²¹ based on their overall ranking. The final decision on the winner rests with the appointing authority or the head of the civil service.²²

Winning a competitive selection for a civil service position is not enough — a candidate should also ‘please’ the appointing authority. This undermines the essence of a competitive selection, even despite the efforts of the National Agency of Ukraine on Civil Service (hereinafter — NAUCS) to ensure transparency by publishing the video recordings of interviews for Category ‘A’ positions on its [YouTube channel](#). This approach creates opportunities for pre-selected candidates, who would not be able to win in a fair competition, to be appointed to top positions.

Moreover, the laws of Ukraine ‘On Civil Service’ and ‘On Central Executive Authorities’ contain discrepancies, particularly in defining the number of candidates the Commission must submit to the appointing authority for selecting the head of a CEA. According to the Law ‘On Central Executive Authorities’, the Commission submits up to five candidates for government consideration. However, recent amendments to the Law ‘On Civil Service’ overlooked this provision.

Additionally, the Law ‘On Central Executive Authorities’ allows dismissals at the request of the Prime Minister or the relevant minister, without requiring any justification. This opens the door to politically motivated dismissals of high-ranking civil servants.

In practice, state secretaries of ministries are often replaced alongside (or even more frequently than) their ministers. For instance, over the past five years, the Ministry of Culture (in all its variations) has had four state secretaries ([A. Bidenko](#), [Y. Dul](#), [Y. Leshchuk](#), [O. Kurochenko](#)). None completed the legally mandated five-year term (though the current one still has a chance). Such practice prevents state secretaries from fulfilling one of their core function — ensuring stability and continuity within the ministry. Instead of being a symbol of institutional resilience and a guarantor of state policy continuity, this position increasingly becomes a **dependent element of political expediency**, undermining the effectiveness of ministerial operations and eroding its strategic function.

²¹ [Prior to the adoption of Law No. 1285-IX of 23 February 2021](#), the number of candidates for one position selected by the Commission or the competition commission in a civil service authority was higher — up to five persons.

²² [Prior to the adoption of Law No. 117-IX](#), in accordance with the Law of Ukraine ‘On Central Executive Authorities’, it was stipulated that:

- the State Secretary of the Ministry, whose main tasks include ensuring stability and continuity in the work of the Ministry, is appointed by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine upon the recommendation of the Senior Civil Service Commission for a term of five years with the right of reappointment;
- the head of the central executive authority, whose activities are supervised and coordinated by the Cabinet of Ministers through the relevant minister, and their deputies are appointed and dismissed by the Government on the recommendation of the Senior Civil Service Commission.

As of today, **no legislative initiatives have been proposed to revise this flawed mechanism.** This likely indicates that the current political leadership finds such a model convenient, as it retains levers of influence over staffing decisions, bypassing competitive selection.

Recommendations

In recent years, Ukraine's civil service system has faced serious challenges that have significantly impacted staffing policies, appointment and dismissal mechanisms, as well as the stability and professionalisation of the state apparatus.

While some reform successes are evident, creating a truly professional and politically neutral civil service remains a complex task. Achieving this requires coordinated efforts at all levels of public administration and depends on a range of factors — legislative, institutional, personnel-related, and political.

A paradox of civil service reform lies in the fact that civil servants themselves shape policies in this area. They deeply understand existing problems, systematise them, and draft proposals in the form of regulatory legal acts. Yet final decisions rest with political leaders, who change regularly, each bringing their own vision of priorities and directions of the reform. As a result, reform loses consistency, and its strategic orientation shifts, making it difficult to achieve long-term goals such as professionalisation and depoliticisation of the civil service.

Thus, civil servants are simultaneously the most valuable asset and the most vulnerable link in public administration reform. They provide stability, expertise, and institutional memory, but remain dependent on political decisions, which often prevents the full and consistent implementation of the reform.

One of the critical future tasks is to eliminate factors that create excessive dependence of the civil service on political figures. This requires strengthening the institutional autonomy of civil servants, ensuring the stability of their status, improving competitive procedures, and protecting them from politically motivated appointments and dismissals. To achieve this, the following steps are necessary:

- 1) Introduce coordinated amendments to the Laws of Ukraine 'On Civil Service' and 'On Central Executive Authorities', including:
 - a. restoring the practice of having the Senior Civil Service Commission and internal competition commissions select the winners for all categories of civil service positions;

- b. ensuring that state secretaries fulfil their core function of guaranteeing stability and continuity in the work of ministries, regardless of changes in political leadership. This requires clear legal guarantees protecting them from politically motivated dismissals when a new minister is appointed, thereby strengthening institutional memory and the continuity of policy implementation in their respective areas;
 - c. providing safeguards against politically motivated dismissals for heads of CEAs.
- 2) Introduce a practice of restructuring the CEA system based solely on a functional review of the entire system, identifying all possible alternatives, and providing justification for proposed changes, including financial and staffing resources necessary to implement such transformations.