The policy planning system in Georgia: design and implementation challenges

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Abstract: Policy planning plays an essential role in public policy and administration, from academia to its practical application. This article examines the policy planning system in Georgia, focusing on its design and implementation. Two research questions guide this inquiry: (1) How is the policy planning system design formulated in Georgia, and how compatible is it with the OECD/Sigma standards? (2) How is the policy planning system implemented, and what explains the gaps between design and implementation? Methods such as in-depth interviews, document analyses, and expert surveys, along with the frameworks of comprehensive rationalism and incrementalism, illustrate the linkages between design and implementation. The research indicates that Georgia's policy planning system demonstrates partial compliance with SIGMA/OECD principles at 45.2%, showing legislative coherence but weaknesses in evidence-based policymaking and stakeholder inclusion. A significant gap exists between formal design and practical implementation, determined by limited administrative capacity, incremental policymaking, and weak political will.

Keywords: public administration reform, policy design, policy implementation, government policy, sigma/OECD, policy development

Introduction

Public administration constitutes a fundamental aspect of the state, irrespective of its political system (Mosher & Chapman, 2020). As long as the concept of the state remains relevant, the formulation and execution of public policy, encompassing its planning and coordination, will continue to pose pressing and complex challenges (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020). Among the core components of the European Union's administrative methodology, policy planning and coordination emerge as particularly crucial (Sigma, 2019). This aspect is equally central to the public administration framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy (Hill, 2018), a policy area to which Georgia is formally committed through the 2014 Association Agreement with the European Union (Art. 333).

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Within Western polyarchies, EU member states, and partner countries, the quality of public administration directly correlates with societal welfare (Bluntschli, 2000, p. 62). Ambitious reforms and policy innovations remain unattainable without a well-structured and sustainable governance system (Kettl, 2000, p. 2). Since policy planning and coordination represent essential pillars of modern public administration, their theoretical and practical significance extends across both the academic and applied policy domains. In Georgia, these issues have gained particular relevance given the country's ongoing efforts to modernize its institutional design and align it with EU standards (Khuroshvili, Safaryan & Taskin, 2024). While several academic works (Barbariani, 2019; Mikava, 2019; Nasrashvili, 2018; Tughushi, 2021) have acknowledged aspects of these topics, a comprehensive systemic analysis of policy design and implementation challenges remains underexplored.

Public administration in Georgia is understood as the organized process of executive decision-making (Turava, 2016), encompassing administrative functions, distinct from law-making and judicial activity; however, even these spheres exhibit features of bureaucratic governance, bound by regulation (Law on Civil Service, 2015). Thus, policy planning and coordination are appropriately situated within the evolving public administration framework and are currently subject to ongoing reform efforts.

Georgia's obligation to approximate its administrative system with EU standards following the Association Agreement led to the launch of the Public Administration Reform (PAR) in 2015. From its inception, the reform highlighted policy planning and coordination as a strategic priority. Yet, the early phases exposed significant shortcomings: an incoherent policy planning system, weak methodology, legislative misalignment, limited budgeting integration, institutional coordination gaps, and underdeveloped accountability mechanisms. While initial steps, such as the 2015 Policy Planning Roadmap and 2016 Guidance, were taken, these proved insufficient. In 2019, Government Ordinance N629 introduced a revised system based on policy transfer and guided by evidence-based policy (EBP), results-based management (RBM), and the whole-of-government (WOG) approach (Tabatadze, 2021; Tabatadze & Dundua, 2023). Nonetheless, civil society organizations continue to point out persistent implementation gaps and mismatches between formal objectives and practice (Nadiradze & Chikhladze, 2015; Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, 2019; 2020; 2021).

This paper aims to study the policy planning system in Georgia in the context of design and its implementation. Two research questions guide this inquiry:
1. How is the policy planning system design formulated in Georgia, and how compatible is it with OECD/Sigma standards?
2. How is the policy planning system implemented, and what explains the gaps between design and implementation?

The theoretical framework of the study combines one principal and two supporting approaches. The main framework is grounded in the theory of comprehensive rationalism, articulated by Herbert A. Simon (1955; 1979; 1997), which facilitates a structured analysis of the logic and rationale behind decision-making processes, institutional architecture, and the strategic aims of policy coordination. Given the partial disconnection often found between design and implementation, the framework is complemented by incrementalism (Lindblom, 1959), which captures the gradual, adaptive nature of real-world administrative change.

By examining the interplay between policy design and implementation, this study enhances our understanding of Georgia's policy planning architecture, its alignment with European administrative norms, and the domestic challenges that shape its reform trajectory. The novelty and primary value of this study lie in its status as one of the first empirical works in the state to comprehensively explore the challenges of state policy planning and coordination. In Georgian academic circles, it is uncommon to find research that analyses the integrative or synthetic links between policy design and implementation, particularly studies that aim to evaluate both the officially declared policies and their actual practice within the context of public administration reform.

Furthermore, this paper addresses a significant empirical gap, as existing studies on the topic often lack a thorough empirical component. This work also functions as an independent re-evaluation of Georgia's policy planning system, which the OECD/Sigma has not systematically reviewed in recent years. Consequently, the paper offers original insights and contributes to the broader discourse on design and policy implementation in transitional governance contexts.

1. Theoretical review

Policy design is a crucial component of policy planning (Schneider & Ingram, 2005; Sidney, 2017), a concept consistently featured in public policy curricula. Policy design does not represent a random or chaotic product of the political process, but rather a structured framework composed of ideas, tools, and logic. This framework makes a significant contribution to the implementation process and ultimately impacts the outcomes of public policies. It also affects political mobilization and the quality of democracy by reflecting the dominant social constructions of knowledge and the categorization of societal groups (Sidney, 2017). Policy design can be understood as part of the broader process of policy formulation, which encompasses fundamental questions such as: What is the plan for solving a specific public problem? What are the intended goals, objectives, and priorities? What are the alternative options for achieving them? What are the associated costs and benefits? What external and internal factors influence each option? (Cochran & Malone, 1999).

At the operational level, policy design encompasses a variety of instruments, including legislation, regulations, administrative guidelines, and everyday implementation practices. These tools share several defining characteristics: they aim to address specific problems and outline objectives; they identify target populations and distribute benefits and costs, both materially and symbolically; they specify policy instruments and implementation rules; they establish functions and structures; and they articulate justifications through logic, data, rhetoric, and underlying assumptions (Schneider & Ingram, 2005). Beyond these components, policy design may also incorporate values, narratives, and ethical considerations. This conceptual framework offers a valuable lens through which to analyse the architecture of Georgia's policy planning and coordination system, which is formally based on three core principles: Evidence-Based Policy-Making, Results-Based Management, and the Whole-of-Government Approach.

The primary theoretical perspective used to analyse Georgia's policy planning system is Herbert Simon's theory of comprehensive rationalism (Simon, 1955, 1979, 1997). This approach emphasizes the declaration of very ambitious principles. Within the framework of comprehensive rationalism, decision-making is systematic, transparent, and focused on identifying the most efficient and effective policy solution. This model also assumes that actors have access to accurate information, adequate time, and the technical capacity to evaluate policy options in terms of their relative merits. It strongly aligns with the principles of evidence-based decision-making and results-oriented management. From a public administrative perspective, it reflects key attributes such as scientific management (Taylor, 2004), goal-driven organization, rational justification, empirical analysis, and accountability (Baba & HakemZadeh, 2012; Daniguelo, 2020; Saint-Martin & Allison, 2011). However, the practice is often inconsistent with what the government declares, leading to the use of comprehensive rationalistic logic in policy design, while the actual practice appears incremental.

Nevertheless, the rational model often faces significant limitations in real-world applications, particularly within transitional political contexts such as Georgia. Policymakers usually operate under conditions of bounded rationality, where access to reliable data is limited, institutional inertia persists, and political, cultural, and economic constraints influence decisions. In such circumstances, the theory of incrementalism proposed by Charles Lindblom (1959) provides a more realistic depiction of policymaking processes. Rather than pursuing radical or strategic changes, decision-makers tend to prefer minor, step-by-step adjustments—"muddling through"—that preserve the status quo while introducing limited innovations. This approach minimizes risks, avoids strong political opposition, and accommodates the practical constraints faced by bureaucratic institutions. In the Georgian context, incrementalism often explains why large-scale reforms in public administration, though theoretically sound, fail to produce transformative outcomes due to fragmented implementation and a lack of political continuity.

The Georgian policy planning system, while formally grounded in rational and strategic principles, also reflects the practical need for adaptability. Scholars such as Walker et al. (2001) have emphasized the importance of adaptive planning models that prioritize robustness and resilience over rigid optimization. In contexts marked by high uncertainty, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional comprehensive planning approaches often fall short of expectations. Adaptive policymaking, in contrast, seeks to design policies that remain effective under changing and unpredictable conditions. This raises critical questions for policymakers: how can they formulate policies that adapt to unexpected risks? What features ensure resilience in administrative structures? These questions are particularly relevant in Georgia, where policy planning must account for volatile regional security, fluctuating economic conditions, and limited administrative resources.

Practical policy tools such as SWOT analysis (Gurel & Tat, 2017), Sustainability Impact Assessment (SIA) (Lee & Kirkpatrick, 2000; 2001), and Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) (Carvalho et al., 2017) have gained traction as mechanisms to enhance planning quality. Among these, RIA plays a particularly significant role in the Georgian context. Mandated by the Government of Georgia (Ordinance No. 35, 2020), RIA serves as a structured method for evaluating legislative proposals to ensure regulatory quality and effectiveness. Although RIA is technically distinct from broader policy planning initiatives under the Public Administration Reform (PAR), both frameworks share a common emphasis on evidence-based decision-making and alignment with Sustainable Development Goals (Barbariani, 2019; Nasrashvili, 2018). Nonetheless, Georgia's application of RIA faces challenges relating to human resource limitations, uneven institutional coordination, and frequent political interference in the legislative process.

The policy planning system in Georgia officially incorporates three guiding principles: the Whole-of-Government approach (WOG), Evidence-Based Policy (EBP), and Results-Based Management (RBM). Each of these principles, however, faces specific challenges. The EBP model presupposes the availability of reliable data, adequate technical expertise, and an administrative culture that values analytical reasoning (Khuroshvili, 2024). In Georgia, these conditions are often unmet. Data systems are underdeveloped, and financial and human resources are limited; political actors may manipulate or ignore evidence to serve short-term interests (Costa, 2023; Parsons, 2001; Pawson, 2006). Likewise, RBM requires the integration of performance measurement tools, evaluation mechanisms, and clear lines of accountability—elements that demand both institutional capacity and political commitment (Mayne, 2007; Perrin, 2006). The implementation of RBM in Georgia remains uneven due to fragmented oversight, insufficient capacity-building, and a lack of coordination between government agencies. The Whole-of-Government approach, which emerged in response to the fragmented governance characteristic of the New Public Management paradigm (Hood, 2002), aims to foster

collaboration and coherence across public institutions. In theory, it promotes unified planning, horizontal coordination, and efficient service delivery. In practice, however, centralized decision-making and a culture of bureaucratic silos limit its effectiveness in Georgia. The approach requires not only technical reforms but also a shift in political and administrative mindsets, as well as strong coordination mechanisms across ministries and agencies (Boston & Eichbaum, 2005; Hunt, 2005; Pollitt, 2003).

While comprehensive legal frameworks and policy documents often outline ambitious goals, their implementation reveals significant limitations. Research on Georgia's public administration reform has consistently highlighted several challenges, including a lack of legally binding planning obligations, limited training for civil servants, ineffective monitoring and evaluation systems, and insufficient institutional incentives (Glurjidze, 2020; Tughushi, 2021). External actors— particularly international donors and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—have played a vital role in promoting planning tools and providing technical support. However, their efforts are sometimes undermined by the recipient government's limited ownership of reforms, weak bureaucratic capacities, and resistance to transparency.

Furthermore, Georgia's strategic alignment with the European Union has imposed extra demands on the policy planning system. The Association Agreement and the broader Eastern Partnership framework necessitate the country to adopt European standards in areas such as governance, transparency, and policy coherence (Muhhina, 2020). Although these obligations have led to the formal adoption of planning and monitoring tools, the actual practice often deviates due to persistent clientelism, politicization of the civil service, and uneven enforcement of meritocratic principles (Abashidze, 2016; Dolidze, 2015; Khuroshvili, 2021). The outcome is a planning environment where formal structures coexist with informal practices, and where ambitious reform narratives struggle to translate into effective implementation.

2. Research design and methodology

This paper aims to study the policy planning system in Georgia in the context of design and its implementation. The study draws on the 12 OECD/SIGMA principles as a normative benchmark to evaluate both the design and the implementation dimensions of Georgia's policy planning and coordination system. Based on the aim of the research, two key questions guide the research: 1. How is the policy planning system design formulated in Georgia, and how compatible is it with OECD/Sigma standards? 2. How is the policy planning system implemented, and what explains the gaps between design and implementation? To address these questions, the study adopts a mixed-method design, relying primarily on qualitative research methods—namely, in-depth interviews and document analysis—

supplemented by quantitative data gathered through expert surveys. While the survey tool generates numeric indicators, its primary function in this study is rather to enrich qualitative insights than to produce generalizable statistical claims.

The dependent variable in this study is the *design-implementation linkage*, understood as the relationship between formally declared policy intentions— typically articulated in strategic documents, action plans, or legislative frameworks—and their actual realization in practice. This is verified by comparing the formal design of Georgia's policy planning and coordination system against the 12 OECD/SIGMA principles. SIGMA is an initiative aimed at improving governance and management, jointly presented by the OECD and the EU, and primarily financed by the EU (Hill, 2017). This is assessed using a compliance scale, where 0–20% indicates complete non-compliance, 21–40% largely indicates non-compliance, 41–60% indicates partial compliance, 61–80% indicates primarily compliance, and 81–100% means full compliance.

The independent variables are twofold. First, the *practice of incrementalistic policy,* understood in the Lindblomian sense as a policy-making approach characterized by the status quo plus minor adjustments, small-scale operational interventions, and risk-averse decisions, is made in response to specific challenges (Lindblom, 1959). Secondly, the *political will of the government* is defined as the commitment of decision-makers to support or oppose a particular reform or policy issue (Post & Raile, 2010). The concept of political will is verifiable along three dimensions: the level of support articulated in official declarations, the level of support manifested during implementation, and the financial resources allocated to a given policy. The study's conceptual framework bridges theories of comprehensive rationalism and incrementalism. Theoretically, it draws on Simon's model of rationality (Simon, 1955, 1979, 1997) and Lindblom's theory of muddling through (Lindblom, 1959) to explain the coexistence of formal strategic planning with pragmatic, step-by-step adjustments in implementation. Operationally, the design-implementation linkage is assessed against SIGMA's standards, enabling a structured comparison of the intended policy design and actual practice.

The data collection process was structured around three types of research instruments. Two semi-structured interview guides were developed for qualitative data collection: the first targeted experts, decision-makers, and representatives of relevant organizations, while the second focused on 10 experts selected for their sectoral competence. In parallel, a structured expert survey was conducted to evaluate the extent to which Georgia's policy planning system aligns with each of the 12 OECD/SIGMA principles. The survey, distributed via email, required respondents to rate the policy's performance on a scale of 1 to 10. These results were interpreted using the compliance thresholds described above and used to contextualize qualitative findings.

Document analysis was another key method used in this study. It involved reviewing official state documents, including policy action plans, laws, ordinances,

government reports, and reform strategies. Both thematic and content analysis techniques were employed. Units of analysis ranged from individual words to larger segments such as clauses and paragraphs. A set of core codes—such as planning, implementation, deficiencies, finances, and evaluation—was identified, and broader thematic categories were developed, including policy design, implementation challenges, and institutional coordination.

Sampling for both interviews and surveys used a non-probability, purposive strategy. The interview sample comprised 7 experts in political and administrative sciences, 3 interdisciplinary scholars, and 2 former high-ranking government officials. For the expert survey, 10 respondents were selected: 4 from the field of public administration, 4 from public policy, and 2 from political science. All participants possessed academic qualifications and demonstrated subject-matter expertise through their research, professional experience, or practical engagement with public policy.

Ethical considerations were central to the research process. The study adhered to the five fundamental principles outlined by the American Psychological Association (Smith, 2003), including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Interviews were conducted in neutral and supportive environments to ensure that respondents were not influenced in revealing their perspectives. Anonymity was maintained through the use of coded identifiers, and all data were collected, stored, and used by Georgian legislation and the principles of intellectual property protection.

3. The evolution of the policy planning system of Georgia

The evolution of policy planning and coordination in Georgia began in 2013, following OECD/SIGMA's structural review of government administration. A shift toward a parliamentary republic enhanced the role of the prime minister, necessitating stronger administrative functions. Based on OECD/SIGMA's recommendations, Georgia established the Department of Policy Analysis and Strategic Planning (GoG Ordinance No. 626, 2014) to oversee planning, monitoring, and multisectoral coordination.

In 2015, Georgia adopted two primary strategic documents: the "Public Administration Reform Guide 2020" and the "Policy Planning System Reform Strategy 2015–2017" (Government of Georgia Decree No. 427, 2015). For the first time, the government acknowledged systemic issues in policy development and coordination, including a weak legal framework, fragmented planning, poor linkage with budgeting and legislation, and insufficient monitoring and evaluation (PAR Guide 2020, pp. 9–10). Prior policy documents lacked performance indicators and alignment with financial or legal frameworks. The reform efforts drew from OECD/SIGMA's "Principles of Public Administration" and lessons from Latvia and Lithuania (Policy Planning Strategy, p. 13, 2015). However, early reforms, including

the 2016 planning model, lacked a whole-of-government and evidence-based policy (EBP) approach. EBP was introduced more clearly in the updated 2019 Resolution N629. While the 2016 policy planning manual improved document standards, it failed to ensure clarity on assessment criteria, evidence quality, and public consultations. Consultations followed two unclear models—the Quick Results Approach (QRA) and the integrated approach—with methodologies that were also ambiguous. Training programs and institutional reforms under Task N5 of the 2015 strategy were underfunded and unevenly implemented. Some departments remained inactive, and the quality of staff training was inconsistent (Respondents: 2, 4, 9; PAR Roadmap Review, 2020, p. 35). Of the strategy's 22 activities, 14 were donor-funded, 7 lacked known funding sources, and only 1 was state-funded—Task N5. Key areas, such as legislative improvement, system unification, and performance-based management, received no state budget allocation (Action Plan, 2015).

In 2018, SIGMA evaluated Georgia's policy planning and coordination, scoring 105 out of 297 points (35.35%), which reflects poor performance. Principle 10 (Evidence-Based Policy) received only 3 out of 28 points (10.7%), with experts highlighting the limited availability of data and a lack of understanding among officials (Respondents: 1, 2, 3, 5). Principle 11, which addresses inclusiveness and coordination, scored 0 out of 41 and 5 out of 21. Experts noted that public consultations were merely symbolic and did not facilitate genuine participation (Respondents: 1, 5, 8). Principles 3, 8, and 9, which relate to budgeting, institutional structure, and EU integration, all received scores below 25%. The main challenges included fragmented planning, poor inter-ministerial coordination, and political clientelism (Respondents: 4, 5, 6, 9). Conversely, Georgia performed well in Principles 7 (parliamentary oversight, 18 out of 24) and 12 (legal quality, 19 out of 26), although minor issues with legislative access remained (Respondents: 1, 3, 10). A mere 0.4% of the 2015–2016 Public Administration Reform (PAR) budget (439,950 GEL out of 108.5 million GEL) was dedicated to policy planning and coordination, which respondents interpreted as indicative of low political will (Respondents: 5, 6, 9).

4. How does policy design function in practice?

The adoption of the Rules for the Development, Monitoring and Evaluation of Policy Documents in 2019, under Government Resolution No. 629, marked a pivotal moment in Georgia's efforts to institutionalize policy planning. However, despite its formalization, critical design flaws and practical shortcomings persist, raising fundamental questions about the system's effectiveness and inclusiveness.

A key concern arises from Article 7 of the Rules, which empowers the coordinating body and/or public agency to identify relevant stakeholders and ensure their involvement in the policy development process. Article 2 further describes the coordinating body, which encompasses the Administration of the Government,

ministries, the Office of the state minister, legal entities responsible to the Government or the Prime Minister, and consultative bodies. This framework allows the state to determine who qualifies as a stakeholder. As a result, there is a significant risk that individuals or groups critical of government policies may be excluded from stakeholder recognition, thereby omitting them from the policy planning process altogether. Furthermore, the criteria for identifying a stakeholder are ambiguous. For example, it remains uncertain whether local human rights organizations or their representatives will participate in strategy development, or if public consultations, which may "not be public at all," will include focus groups or other inclusive methods.

The next significant aspect involves public consultations, which Article 9 of the 2019 Rules mandates to be conducted either in person or electronically. In reality, however, these consultations often amount to mere formalities. Respondents mentioned, "For a public consultation to be considered conducted, agencies often post a strategy on their website, and it is unclear how much someone discusses it and comments on it" (Respondents 5 and 14). Although public consultation is emphasized, being referenced 26 times in the Policy Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation Handbook, mainly in the content sections, there has been little change in practice. The Handbook requires agencies to publicly announce the consultation's format, timing, participation criteria (if applicable), and logistical details (2019, p. 36), yet implementation remains weak. Agencies must also report the outcomes of the consultations, but a top-down culture continues to prevail. As another respondent pointed out, "Considering that this culture is not developed in Georgia and the population is not interested, they rarely participate in these consultations of their own free will" (Respondent 11). Therefore, merely posting a strategy online does not satisfy the public consultation requirement.

The voluntary aspect of progress reports under Article 11 presents significant issues. When an agency opts to submit a report, the coordinating body sets its frequency—either once every month, three months, or six months. Respondents emphasized the importance of these reports, stating, "The progress report helps the policy to succeed," and "The progress report is a tool for stakeholders to monitor how the policy is being implemented; therefore, its presentation should be mandatory" (Respondents 5 and 9). However, there is a lack of clarity about when and why the coordinating body mandates reports at varying intervals, and the absence of a mandatory requirement undermines the tenets of results-based management.

Significant challenges stem from Appendix 9 of Resolution 629, which introduces a 300-point evaluation framework for policy documents. This framework assigns 100 points each to content, methodological, and technical criteria. To pass, documents must secure at least 75 points in the first two categories and 87 points in the technical criteria. The methodological criteria's strategic section comprises 66 points, with a minimum requirement of 50 points. Importantly, indicators are required to follow the SMART model, which yields 20 points.

Additionally, goals should align with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), but only two points are allocated for each baseline and final target indicator. Despite the importance of SMART indicators as a methodological benchmark, the low emphasis on SDG alignment, combined with the challenge of acquiring strong indicators, results in a valuation of only 4 points, which feels disproportionate, even sarcastic. This point distribution suggests that aligning with the SDGs and providing baseline and final indicators is deemed ten times less critical than complying with SMART criteria.

In the technical criteria section, public consultation results count for 14 points, while the "indicator passport" is assigned 10 points. However, categorizing these components as technical is highly debatable. The indicator passport encompasses vital qualitative factors: its alignment with strategic objectives, detailed descriptions, verification sources, data collection agencies, and data frequency. Likewise, the evaluation of the public consultation report should be qualitative, emphasizing methodology, format, and analytical results. Reducing these to merely technical components diminishes their importance. Additionally, the scoring system lacks clarity; it is unclear when an item would earn 2, 6, or 9 points out of 10.

It is particularly concerning that stylistic and grammatical accuracy, along with terminological consistency, each receive 13 points. This is almost on par with the score assigned to the report on public consultations, which is essential for democratic policy planning. Such a scoring distribution implies that vocabulary and grammar are regarded as significant—if not more so—than genuine public engagement. In contrast, only 11 out of the total 300 points focus on evidence-based elements of the policy: 4 points for identifying main issues, 4 points for analysing causal factors supported by evidence, and 3 points for demonstrating negative outcomes with data. Conversely, a total of 26 points are allocated towards grammar and terminology. This imbalance clearly reveals that evidence-based policymaking tends to be a rhetorical focus rather than a practical one in this framework.

Evaluating challenges extends beyond just insufficient criteria; they are closely tied to the evaluators' institutional capacity. Typically, draft documents are assessed by the Government Administration before they receive approval. Even when striving for neutrality, the Administration often lacks the necessary sector-specific expertise for effective evaluations. Several respondents highlighted that: "The strategy for managing water irrigation systems cannot be assessed by an administration representative"; "The strategy for managing coal and steel, grounded in evidence, cannot be thoroughly evaluated by lawyers or policy analysts"; "Certain strategies are beyond the evaluation capacity of government administration"; and "Frequently, the Administration finds it challenging to engage with the document's content and must analyse it at a technical level" (Respondents 1, 5, 9, 14). Consequently, evaluations tend to become shallow, undermining the substantive integrity of the process.

Other respondents verified the issue. One remarked, "The government should not approve the strategy on excessive salt consumption or the strategy for managing ballast water, even though these strategies were presented to the government administration." To address the issue, the administration sought to distribute strategies by portfolio: one employee focused on security, another on economic matters, and so forth. However, as another respondent pointed out, "It is unthinkable that the government should have experts in all fields. That would be an incredibly unjustified expense." In practice, only the technical aspects were examined. In very technical strategies, such as evaluating the tuberculosis strategy, we only reviewed the technical section. However, we aimed to find the best foreign practices and compare them, which aided us in understanding how this was approached in other countries" (Respondents 7, 15).

One respondent proposed a potential solution by highlighting the underutilized resource of the Prime Minister's advisory corps. "The Prime Minister has a corps of advisors from various fields who, in theory, could evaluate strategies based on substantive criteria. These experts should be engaged according to their expertise. However, the current policy framework fails to define roles within agencies, and for several reasons, the corps has not participated in the process" (Respondent 15).

Georgia's policy planning and coordination system showcases a significant disconnect between stated goals and real-world implementation. This discrepancy goes beyond mere technical challenges, highlighting a more profound problem of political commitment. As several respondents pointed out, "there is no real will in this direction to fundamentally change something," and "what is written in official documents does not match the reality, which means that the real priority is not planning" (Respondents 5 and 12).

The ongoing submission of subpar policy documents, even with formal evaluation scores showing improvement (from an average of 62.75 in 2019 to 85.9 in 2021), highlights this concern. Although these numerical advancements exist, they do not indicate genuine progress in substance. The respondents observed that many strategies are still developed with help from external parties due to insufficient internal capacity, leading to often superficial improvements. Although training programs have increased from 9 to 12 modules and included over 227 civil servants, they do not seem to significantly improve output quality. The limited scale and fragmented nature of these initiatives suggest they result in incremental and symbolic changes rather than actual systemic reform.

This incrementalism is evident in the recurring challenges throughout different strategic periods. Although the 2019 reform sought to unify planning based on the principles of RBM and EBP, many persistent issues remain in the 2023 strategy, indicating that reforms function more as formalities rather than genuine transformative initiatives. The state emphasizes small administrative accomplishments, like finalizing Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) modules or

employee involvement in planning workshops, as measures of success, even though these have a limited effect on the quality of policies or their coordination.

Another sign of weak political will is the fragmented engagement between agencies. Although a WOG approach has been formally adopted, there is little coordination or strategic integration among institutions in practice. This leads to inconsistent implementation, duplication of efforts, and reliance on ad hoc, individual agency-level initiatives. One respondent aptly summarized this by stating, "Some projects are a political priority and receive attention, while others, even if formally important, are simply not pursued because there is no real interest in implementation" (Respondent 2).

Moreover, the state's failure to ensure access to reliable and up-to-date statistical data continues to undermine efforts towards evidence-based policymaking. The absence of a robust data infrastructure hinders agencies from accurately diagnosing problems or establishing measurable goals, despite the formal requirement to use SMART indicators and align objectives with the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Ultimately, these patterns point to a dual failure: both in the design of the policy planning and coordination system and in its operationalization. The presence of repeated, well-documented shortcomings, alongside a consistent pattern of symbolic compliance and superficial reform, reinforces the view that without genuine political commitment, Georgia's policy planning reforms remain incremental, fragmented, and ineffectual.

5. Relevance of SIGMA principles to the reality of Georgia: analysis based on expert assessments

This chapter assesses how Georgia's existing policy planning and coordination align with the SIGMA principles of good governance, drawing on insights from expert interviews. The evaluation is based on the average scores assigned by ten national experts, using a scale of 1 to 10- 1 indicating complete non-compliance and 10 denoting full compliance. This analysis emphasizes particular strengths and weaknesses while uncovering notable discrepancies between the formal policy framework and its practical execution.

The average score for all twelve SIGMA principles is 4.52 out of 10, or 45.2%, indicating *partial non-compliance*. Although this represents a modest increase of 9.9 percentage points from the 2018 SIGMA evaluation (35.3%), the overall score still highlights a fundamental misalignment between stated objectives and the actual policy-making practices in Georgia.

Principle 10 demonstrates the most significant implementation shortcomings, highlighting the importance of evidence-based policy-making and the systematic application of impact assessment tools. It receives the lowest score of 2.4. While the policy framework officially encourages the use of Regulatory Impact Assessment

(RIA) and other evidence-based approaches, ministries frequently regard these mechanisms as mere procedural steps rather than essential decision-making tools. The lack of established analytical capabilities within line ministries, alongside insufficient data access and weak inter-agency collaboration, greatly impedes the practical application of this principle.

Similarly, Principle 11, concerning inclusive policy-making and stakeholder engagement, receives a very low score of 2.5. This highlights a fundamental design flaw in public participation mechanisms, where consultations are either inadequately conducted or lack substantive impact on final decisions. Public feedback is often collected too late in the process or treated as a symbolic gesture rather than a genuine co-creation of policy. Furthermore, the absence of internal horizontal coordination among ministries further limits the integration of diverse viewpoints within the government, thereby reducing the coherence of policy outputs.
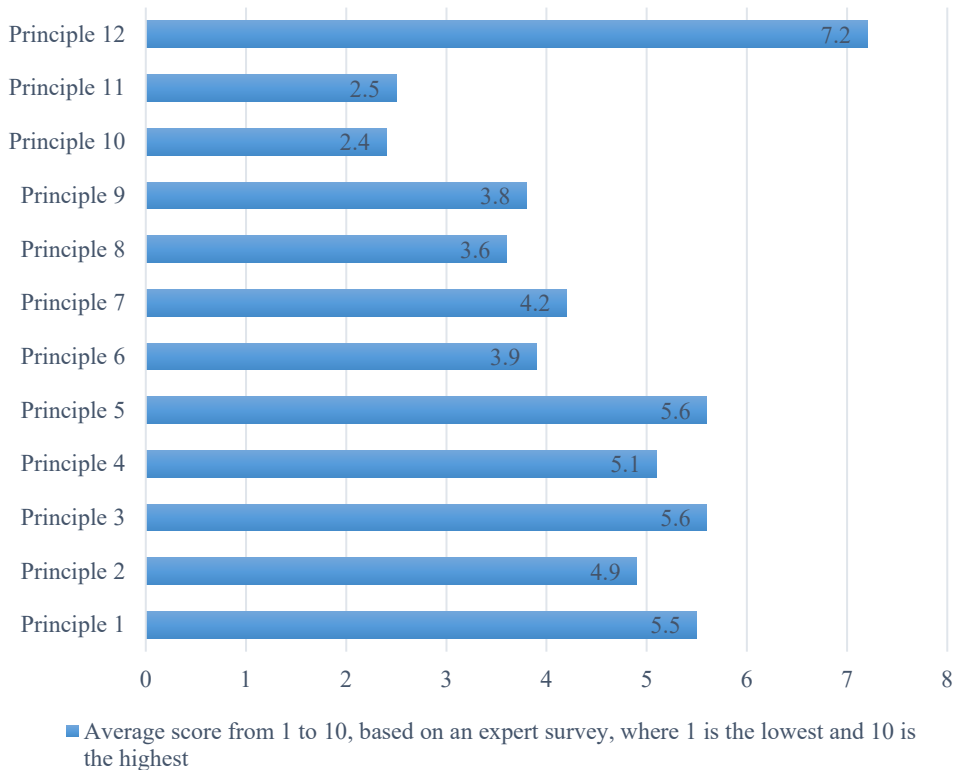
Principles 6, 8, and 9, with scores ranging from 3.6 to 3.9, reveal significant design and implementation challenges. Principle 6 assesses the transparency and legality of government decisions, uncovering weaknesses in professional administrative judgement and legal review. Ministries frequently encounter capacity constraints and inadequate coordination with legal departments, which diminishes the quality and legality of policy initiatives.

Principle 8 assesses the effectiveness of organizational structures and staffing in enhancing policy coherence, highlighting significant flaws within the civil service. Ministries frequently face challenges such as high staff turnover, lack of specialization, and unclear mandates. Consequently, policy development and legal implementation often stray from strategic goals.

Principle 9 addresses the incorporation of EU law and procedures into domestic policy-making, highlighting poor institutional design. Although there are formal structures in place to facilitate European integration, the implementation of EU norms tends to be sporadic and more reactive than proactive. The lack of strong coordinating entities and comprehensive policy tools results in EU compliance being limited to mere document alignment, rather than driving real change.

Principles 1 to 5 and **7** indicate partial compliance, scoring between 4.2 and 5.6. They encompass vital topics such as the role of central institutions in policymaking, the handling of the EU integration process, the alignment of sectoral policies with medium-term objectives, and the oversight of policy execution. Although the frameworks are established on paper, their effective implementation is hindered by disjointed planning cycles, uneven application, and insufficient alignment across institutions. While monitoring mechanisms exist, they seldom result in adaptive management or revisions to policies.

Figure 1. Relevance of the SIGMA principles to the policy planning system of Georgia based on expert assessments

Principle 12 — 7.2
Principle 11 — 2.5
Principle 10 — 2.4
Principle 9 — 3.8
Principle 8 — 3.6
Principle 7 — 4.2
Principle 6 — 3.9
Principle 5 — 5.6
Principle 4 — 5.1
Principle 3 — 5.6
Principle 2 — 4.9
Principle 1 — 5.5

■ Average score from 1 to 10, based on an expert survey, where 1 is the lowest and 10 is the highest

Source: author's representation

Parliamentary oversight, as described in Principle 7, reveals a gap between design and implementation. Although there is a constitutional obligation to oversee policy development, the Parliament has a limited influence on shaping or correcting government policies. Oversight primarily consists of routine reporting rather than active involvement in outcomes or strategic direction.

The only principle that scores above 60% is Principle 12, which addresses the coherence, structure, and accessibility of legislation. With a score of 72%, this area appears comparatively more developed. Legislation typically maintains consistency in format and style, and legal acts are accessible to the public. Nonetheless, this strength remains disconnected from the broader weaknesses in policy formulation and does not offset the systemic issues in upstream policy planning and coordination.

This assessment highlights a significant gap between Georgia's formal policy frameworks and their practical execution. Although official strategies theoretically align with SIGMA's principles, operational shortcomings—stemming from limited

institutional capacity, weak political commitment, and fragmented coordination—persist, hindering effective and coherent governance. While Georgia has made notable progress since 2018, it remains constrained and largely focused on formal compliance rather than substantial institutional transformation. Significant efforts are still required to bridge the gap between design and implementation, particularly in promoting evidence-based policymaking, stakeholder involvement, and policy coherence throughout the public administration system.

Conclusion

This study aimed to study the policy planning system in Georgia, focusing on both its design and implementation, by using the 12 OECD/SIGMA principles as a normative benchmark. It was structured around two key research questions: 1. How is the policy planning system design formulated in Georgia, and how compatible is it with OECD/SIGMA standards? 2. How is the policy planning system implemented, and what explains the gaps between design and implementation?

To address the first research question, this study performed a structured document analysis of strategic planning laws, guidelines, and significant government acts, including Government Resolution No. 629, complemented by an expert survey evaluating Georgia's alignment with the SIGMA principles. The results demonstrate partial compliance, yielding an average score of 45.2%. This suggests that while Georgia's policy planning system is designed to include several SIGMA elements, its alignment appears uneven and often superficial. The strongest alignment was noted with Principle 12 (document availability and publication), while Principles 10 and 11, focused on evidence-based policy-making and stakeholder inclusivity, exhibited the least compliance. This indicates that although Georgia's planning system has integrated certain OECD/SIGMA design standards, it suffers from significant gaps in institutionalisation and consistency, thereby confirming the response to the first research question. This scenario reflects a state that declares highly ambitious principles within a framework of Comprehensive Rationalism, yet practices an incrementalist approach.

The second research question—focused on the implementation and the design-implementation gap—was explored through semi-structured interviews, expert surveys, and thorough thematic coding of policy documents. The findings indicated that, while planning documents are created with formal procedural adherence, actual implementation is hindered by limited analytical capacity, poor coordination mechanisms, and superficial stakeholder engagement. Consultations frequently occur merely as a formality, with little follow-up. Evaluation frameworks, such as the government's scoring system, often prioritise formatting and technical compliance over meaningful content or policy effectiveness.

To verify the dependent variable—design-implementation linkage, the study compared the formal features of Georgia's policy planning framework with actual

implementation practices. This was verified through expert assessments and thematic coding, confirming that declared policy intentions are often not supported by appropriate financial, institutional, or administrative mechanisms. Strategic planning documents are typically maintained on paper but often lack strong oversight and clear resource commitments. The compliance scale (0–100%) used to interpret the survey results enabled a structured measurement of this linkage, showing apparent discrepancies between intended design and practical outcomes.

The two independent variables were also empirically verified: Incrementalist policy-making, as conceptualised by Lindblom (1959), was evident across multiple areas. Reform strategies, such as the 2023–2026 Public Administration Reform Strategy, adopt modest procedural updates rather than systemic reforms. Evidence from interviews and document analysis revealed that policies tend to evolve through small-scale operational interventions, rather than through comprehensive, strategic transformations. The features of "muddling through" were confirmed in cases of inter-ministerial coordination and system implementation, where improvements were incremental, maintaining the status quo, and fragmented.

Political will was evaluated along three dimensions: discursive support, commitment to implementation, and allocation of financial resources. Although reform narratives frequently highlight the importance of policy planning, actual budgetary allocation remains minimal, initially at 0.4% of the reform budget, and later decreasing to 0.2%. Furthermore, institutional follow-through is weak, with key coordinating bodies underperforming or lacking strategic leadership. These findings confirm the lack of sustained political will, which is critical to explaining the persistent implementation gap.

This research enhances the understanding of the design-implementation framework in the context of public policy in Eastern European countries. By merging theoretical models such as bounded rationality (Simon) and incrementalism (Lindblom) with practical empirical data, it creates a replicable method for future investigations into comparable governance systems. The paper's findings and conclusions offer value in three primary ways. First, it uncovers previously unexamined issues within Georgia's policy planning system, which can guide future reforms during both design and implementation. For example, the challenges related to Annex 9 of Resolution No. 629, which sets the criteria for evaluating policy documents, have not been thoroughly studied or acknowledged as a risk factor. The insights provided here can assist decision-makers and relevant public institutions in improving policy coordination mechanisms. Secondly, the paper acts as a key academic resource for researchers and stakeholders interested in qualitative studies on policy planning and coordination.

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