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ENHANCING THE PROFESSIONALISM OF CIVIL SERVANTS: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE OECD COUNTRIES

Professionalization of official activities is an important link in the process of strengthening the public service and increasing customer focus in relations between the public and private sectors. Time dictates higher demands on the professional and personal qualities of managers and ordinary employees of government agencies. Communication skills, flexibility in decision making, and analytical skills come to the fore. The aim of this article is to study the experience of OECD countries in this area, the main trends in the training and retraining of officials, with the development of recommendations for improving approaches to the professionalization of the state apparatus in Kazakhstan. The study examines and summarizes cases from countries such as the UK, USA, Canada, Japan, France, Lithuania, and Australia. In addition to the educational component, the policy of civil servants professionalization within the OECD countries is based on the meritocracy principles, gender equality, and continuous improvement of skills. Overall, the core principles for improving public service in OECD countries are professional, strategic and innovative. The paper concludes with recommendations aimed at advancing the professionalization of Kazakhstan's state apparatus, drawing on current practices and lessons learned from international best practices.

Key words: professionalization, training, retraining, government apparatus, Kazakhstan, OECD.

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Мемлекеттік қызметшілердің қызметін кәсібилендіруді арттыру: ЭЫДҰ елдерінің тәжірибесі

Ресми қызметті кәсібилендіру мемлекеттік қызметті дамыту процесінің маңызды элементі болып табылады, мемлекет пен қоғам арасындағы қарым-қатынаста тұтынушы назарын қамтамасыз етеді. Қазіргі уақытта мемлекеттік органдардың басшылары мен қызметкерлеріне қойылатын талаптар күшейе түсуде. Қарым-қатынас дағдылары, аналитикалық қабілеттер және шешім қабылдауда икемділік бірінші кезекке шығуда. Осы мақаланың мақсаты – ЭЫДҰ елдерінің осы бағыттағы тәжірибесін зерттеу, сондай-ақ Қазақстанда мемлекеттік қызметті кәсібилендірудің тиімді жолдарын ұсыну үшін лауазымды тұлғаларды даярлау мен қайта даярлаудың негізгі үрдістерін талдау. Зерттеу Ұлыбритания, АҚШ, Канада, Жапония, Франция, Литва және Австралия сияқты елдердің жағдайларын қарастырып, қорытындылар жасайды. ЭЫДҰ елдерінде мемлекеттік қызметкерлерді кәсібилендіру саясаты меритократия, гендерлік теңдік және дағдыларды үздіксіз жетілдіру қағидаттарына негізделеді. Мына елдерде мемлекеттік қызметті жетілдірудің басты қағидаттары кәсібилік, стратегиялық бағыт пен инновациялар болып табылады. Мақала соңында шет елдердің тәжірибесіне сүйене отырып, Қазақстанда мемлекеттік аппаратты кәсібилендіруді дамытуға қатысты ұсыныстар беріледі.

Түйін сөздер: кәсібилендіру, оқыту, қайта даярлау, мемлекеттік аппарат, Қазақстан, ЭЫДҰ.

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Повышение профессионализации деятельности государственных служащих: опыт стран ОЭСР

Профессионализация служебной деятельности является важным элементом процесса развития государственной службы, обеспечения клиентоориентированности во взаимоотношениях между государством и обществом. Время предъявляет возрастающие требования к профессиональным навыкам и личностным качествам менеджеров и сотрудников государственных органов. На первый план выходят навыки коммуникации, аналитические способности, гибкость в принятии решений. Целью данной статьи является исследование опыта стран ОЭСР в изучаемом вопросе, анализ ключевых тенденций подготовки и переподготовки должностных лиц, с выработкой рекомендаций по совершенствованию подходов к профессионализации государственной службы в Республике Казахстан. Исследование рассматривает и обобщает кейсы таких стран, как Великобритания, США, Канада, Япония, Франция, Литва, Австралия. Помимо образовательного компонента, политика профессионализации государственных служащих в странах ОЭСР базируется на принципах меритократии, гендерного равенства, постоянного совершенствования навыков. В целом, ключевыми принципами совершенствования государственной службы в странах ОЭСР являются профессиональное, стратегическое и инновационное направления. В завершении статьи даются рекомендации по развитию института профессионализации государственного аппарата в Республике Казахстан, с учетом имеющейся практики и передового опыта зарубежных стран.

Ключевые слова: профессионализация, обучение, переподготовка, государственный аппарат, Казахстан, ОЭСР.

Introduction

The development and training of skilled managers and the strengthening of senior civil service ranks are top priorities for governments worldwide. In Kazakhstan, building a professional state apparatus is a key strategic goal outlined in the “Kazakhstan-2050” Strategy. At this stage of development, the civil service needs professionals who can effectively learn, apply, and creatively use their knowledge. Beyond traditional “hard” and “soft” skills, there is a need for a broader set of competencies, often referred to as “essential skills,” necessary for work, learning, and life. These essential skills are applicable across various sectors and at different levels of complexity in the workplace.

The experience of OECD member countries is strategically important for the Government of Kazakhstan, especially in enhancing industrial competitiveness and combating corruption (OECD, n.d.-a). This study focuses on the professional training of civil servants, aiming to analyze the approaches taken by OECD countries in managing the professionalization of their state apparatus.

The primary aim of this paper is to develop recommendations for improving Kazakhstan’s ap-

proach to the professionalization of its civil service. The practical significance of this study lies in offering an objective evaluation of the reforms implemented in Kazakhstan, highlighting potential areas for future progress, and suggesting specific interventions crucial for integrating the professionalization of the state apparatus into the functioning of government bodies.

Literature review

The main functions of the civil service are administrative and service. Simultaneously, the civil service is considered as a professional activity that ensures the implementation of the powers of state bodies, and therefore is of a political nature. In a broad sense, the activities of civil servants are based on classical bureaucracy, which in modern conditions is undergoing changes and professionalizing. The process of bureaucratic professionalization is supported and developed within the government by increasing the education level of employees, acquiring new experience in modern realities. Along with this, the incentives for improving competencies are the desire to remain competitive in the labor market (Mikkelsen et al., 2022). The very concept of pro-

professionalization faces the paradox of the subjectivity of its perception. Since the competencies of public sector employees inevitably increase, the demands on civil servants from their main clients – citizens – also increase. In this regard, professionalization of public service becomes extremely important, taking into account the psychological, or subjective measurement of the level of competencies (Cigler, 2018). In the existing international literature, the concept of professionalization of the activities of civil servants is closely related to the development of specific professional competencies. One of the important competencies of civil servants is leadership skills. At the same time, a leader must have three types of competencies, including intellectual, managerial and emotional (Ayu & AB, 2019). In the European Union, special attention is paid to the ability of public organizations to increase the potential of their human resources, which is achieved through the concept of lifelong learning. At the same time, in the issue of increasing the potential of civil servants, not only professional, but also emotional competencies are important (Borisova, 2015). In line with the sustainable development agenda, there is an emphasis on adopting strategies focused on sustainable, “green” development and enhancing public services within the public sector. To achieve this goal, serious changes are required in the organizational culture, way of thinking and actions of civil servants (Grigorescu et al., 2023). While widely studied skills of civil servants, such as flexibility, creativity, and proactivity, are undoubtedly crucial, more traditional competencies, like analytical skills, also warrant deeper exploration by the academic community (Kruyen & Van Genugten, 2020). In modern public service, more and more attention is paid to data-driven decision-making. This requires a number of competencies that can be called “hybrid”, combining traditional and innovative skills. Such competencies include critical thinking, literacy, subject matter knowledge, teamwork, interaction with stakeholders and others (Dingelstad et al., 2022). It is noted that online dialogue with the population, as part of the daily work of a civil servant, requires the development of appropriate communication skills, including the ability to manage conflict situations (Lektorova et al., 2021).

In any case, the need for a particular competence should be interconnected with practical necessity (Pavlova, 2018). Professionalization of the civil service system of Kazakhstan is based on the principles of meritocracy, effectiveness, accountability and transparency. However, researchers note the need for deeper administrative reforms, based on

the need to adapt the state apparatus to new realities and strategic objectives of the state (Chernousova, 2017). Studying Kazakhstan’s models of civil servant competencies in comparison with the experience of OECD countries, Sergaliyeva et al. (2021) point out the insufficient use of information and communication technologies. The authors also emphasize the importance of highly professional personnel in the formation of a competitive economy, the ability of the state to successfully implement its policies. Among the primary qualities of civil servants, the ability to think critically, awareness and motivation are noted. The importance of mastering digital competencies by civil servants is due to the rapid transformation in this area, advances in artificial intelligence, cloud computing, and big data. Despite the threat that digitalization processes pose for some professions, in the field of civil service, these changes can improve the efficiency of public sector organizations (Casalino et al., 2020). With the continuing modernization of the civil service system in Kazakhstan, comprising the adoption of a competency-based approach and project management instruments, it is anticipated that there will be positive developments in the professionalization of the state apparatus. Professionalization of the civil service is a critical element for the effective functioning of the state apparatus and the successful implementation of state tasks. In modern conditions, increased attention is paid to the development of both traditional and innovative competencies, which requires constant training and adaptation to new challenges. Kazakhstan, following international experience and taking into consideration the peculiarities of its civil service, is actively introducing the principles of meritocracy, accountability and digitalization, which, in turn, contributes to increasing the professionalism of civil servants. However, to achieve sustainable results, further reforms and continuous improvement of skills and competencies are needed to meet the demands of the times and the expectations of citizens.

Methodology

This article employs a methodology that includes systems analysis, comparative analysis, and adaptation as an approach to studying international experiences in the professionalization of civil servants. The comparative analysis examines factors influencing the professionalization of public service in OECD countries and compares them to similar processes in Kazakhstan. To achieve this, a content analysis of key publications, official documents,

and texts related to professionalization policies in public service was conducted. This approach identified both structural and functional characteristics of mechanisms for professional development, recruitment processes, career progression, and performance evaluation of civil servants across different countries.

Thus, the methodology used in this article not only enables a thorough comparison but also facilitates the adaptation of successful practices from OECD countries to the specific context of Kazakhstan's civil service. This makes the research both analytical and practically oriented.

Results and discussion

OECD is an international economic organization of developed countries that includes 38 member states. These are mainly countries of the European Union, as well as **Japan, Canada, Australia, South Korea, the United States**, and a number of Latin American countries. The experience of these countries in the professionalization of official activities is valuable for the Republic of Kazakhstan, given the close cooperation of the Kazakh government with the OECD on issues such as **increasing industry competitiveness, combating corruption**, and others. In its official application for accession to the OECD, Kazakhstan outlined a strategic direction for incorporating the organization's best practices and standards into the National Development Plan through 2025 (Decree of the President of Kazakhstan, 2018).

In the context of human capital development, an analysis of OECD **documents** shows that a key role is assigned to education as a **conductor** of the development of the necessary skills and abilities that help **applicants** find their place in the global labor market (Panagiotopoulos & Karanikola, 2018). The continental European countries, which make up the majority of the OECD, adhere to the traditions of the rule of law as an element of national culture in the professionalization of public sector employees. These traditions are quite closed and resistant to external pressure. Their main principle is professional development based on meritocracy. Other OECD heavyweights, such as the United States, Great Britain, and the countries of the British Commonwealth, rely on Anglo-Saxon principles of public interest in this matter. They are characterized by the maximum reduction of differences between the public and private sectors in terms of human resource management.

The OECD, as a recommendatory platform for member countries, developed and released the Recommendations on Civil Service Leadership and

Capability in 2019. This document presents 14 principles of civil service in accordance with three areas, one of which is qualified and effective civil servants. The key points here are the principles of:

- continuous improvement of skills and competencies;
- attracting and retaining qualified personnel;
- selecting and promoting of candidates based on merit;
- instilling a culture of learning in the civil service;
- assessing initiative, talent and productivity.

Furthermore, the recommendations include a section addressing the development of a culture and leadership grounded in civil service values, along with the designing of adaptable and responsive employment systems (OECD, 2019).

The key principles mentioned above can be found in the professional performance management policies of OECD countries. OECD experts identify three stages of development that have a significant impact on both state development and the effectiveness of state interaction with citizens: professional – strategic – innovative (Table 1).

Among the OECD documents that served as the foundation for the development of the aforementioned documents are the Guidelines for Enhancing the Quality of State Regulation, the Guidelines for Managing Conflicts of Interest in the Civil Service, the Guidelines for Regulatory Management, and the Guidelines for Gender Equality in Education (OECD, 2024).

Thus, in Australia, the Gender Equality Strategy (2016-2019) provided for a set of measures to eliminate the gender imbalance in the civil service system at all levels and in all departments. These measures provide a new approach to ensuring gender equality in the Australian public service, which combines cultural change, practical initiatives, creating a favorable atmosphere in the workplace, as well as a number of innovative practices in employment. For example, the widespread use of flexible work schedules by employees of both sexes (OECD, n.d.-b).

The issue of gender is highly relevant to Kazakhstan's civil service. The existing disparities in gender representation among Kazakhstani civil servants are not only linked to cultural factors and entrenched societal stereotypes but also to the absence of regulatory incentives aimed at promoting women to leadership positions. The established dynamics within the civil service often demand after-hours work and participation in informal meetings outside the workplace (Yessimova & Zhunussova, 2022). These requirements are not always feasible for women, who frequently bear additional responsibilities for household duties and childcare.

Table 1 – Classification of the Phases in the Development of Public Service

Characteristics	Professional	Strategic	Innovative
Qualities required of civil servants	Independent; Value-driven; Ethical.	Result-oriented; Committed to facts; Future-oriented; Proactive; Networking ability.	Interactive; Data-driven; Citizen-centric; Curiosity-driven; Able to sense the audience; Able to break the rules.
Characteristics of civil service	Merit-based; Integrating soft skills, ethics and talent management; Strikes a balance between specialized and general knowledge jobs	Flexible and responsive; Attractive to professionals; Planning and effectively distributing competence potential; Future-oriented and receptive.	Organizational culture; Engagement; Autonomy; Mobility; Diversity; Commitment to life-long learning and professional development
Qualities of managers and senior civil servants	Experienced policy makers and efficient workflow managers	Transformational leaders managing changes	Collaborative and adaptable managers

Note – compiled by the authors from OECD data

The experience of OECD countries in introducing a separate corps of senior civil servants is interesting. A similar institution has been introduced in 30 member states of the international organization (Lobanov, 2010). Thus, in Great Britain, there is an institution of the Senior Civil Service, which includes civil servants, starting from a certain level (rank), who are a conductor between politicians and ordinary civil servants (United Kingdom Parliament). This experience is also being adopted in a number of post-Soviet countries – Corps “A” in the Republic of Kazakhstan can be called an alternative to this institution.

This approach is also being adopted by several post-Soviet countries, and the “A” Corps in the Republic of Kazakhstan can be considered an alternative to this institution. However, there are notable differences.

Selection and career advancement: In the United Kingdom and most European countries, appointments to senior positions are typically made through open competitions and are based on performance outcomes (Dargie & Locke, 1999: 186). In contrast, in Kazakhstan, this process tends to be more centralized and less transparent.

Political neutrality: In the UK, senior civil servants are required to remain politically neutral and are accountable solely to the government. In Kazakhstan, however, political factors may exert more influence on the civil service (Dargie & Locke, 1999: 181).

In general, the civil service system of Great Britain, as well as in other countries of Anglo-Saxon law, refers to an open model. Firstly, the selection of personnel for the civil service is carried out through an open competition. Secondly, wages and career growth depend on the performance of the civil servant. Significant changes in public administration in Great Britain occurred during Margaret Thatcher’s premiership. These reforms were based on the innovative principles of New Public Management, implemented as part of the administrative reforms of the 1980s and 1990s. New Public Management centers on the adaptation of effective business management techniques within the public sector. This approach enabled the public sector to address the inefficiencies inherent in the traditional bureaucratic model of governance. Core components of this new public administration approach, including performance-based strategies, the monitoring of qualitative and quantitative indicators, budget optimization, and the cultivation of an innovative organizational culture, were facilitated by the adoption of economic and strategic business tools.

Simultaneously, the Institute for Government think tank has highlighted in its reports that the lack of a clear definition of civil servants and specification of their duties is one of the obstacles to improving the effectiveness of the UK government. Researchers at this non-profit organisation believe that senior officials, including the Prime Minister, do not

have the necessary powers and time required to lead and manage the civil service.

The Institute for Government identifies several controversial issues within the regulation of the British civil service:

- The absence of a clear definition of the civil service institution, comprising its role, goal, the powers and responsibilities;
- Inconsistent allocation of responsibilities between ministers, senior civil servants in central government, and permanent department secretaries;
- Lack of coordination and alignment between ministries and departments;
- A weak system for monitoring the achievement of key performance indicators and priorities.
- Low level of risk management (Institute for Government, n.d.).

In their opinion, despite several serious reforms in the UK civil service system, they have not resolved the fundamental issue of the legislative and constitutional basis of the civil service, as well as the above-mentioned main problems of public administration.

In recent years, several signs of the incorporation of New Public Management (NPM) principles have emerged within Kazakhstan's civil service, although the full implementation of these principles is still in progress. Key aspects include:

Results-oriented governance: As part of reforms aimed at enhancing governmental efficiency, there has been a growing emphasis on achieving concrete outcomes and performance indicators. The introduction of a performance evaluation system for government bodies marks a significant step in this direction.

Citizen participation: Increasing attention is being paid to involving citizens in the decision-making process through various forms of public engagement, aligning with NPM's principle of creating more open and accountable governance.

Decentralization: Reforms in local self-government and the devolution of powers to local authorities reflect NPM's focus on decentralization, allowing services to be better tailored to the needs of local communities.

Technological innovations: The integration of information technologies into governance processes, including the implementation of e-services and platforms for public interaction, contributes to greater efficiency and transparency.

Despite these advancements, significant challenges remain. These include the need to improve coordination between government agencies, reduce bureaucracy, and enhance accountability among civil servants. Meeting these challenges requires the

development of professional skills, mastery of new communication methods, and stronger engagement with civil society.

The effectiveness of civil service and public administration is largely determined by the professionalism of public managers. In this regard, OECD countries pay great attention to the training of future leaders at specialized educational institutions. Examples include the National School of Administration in France, the School of Public Administration in Italy, the Federal Academy of Public Administration in Germany, and others. Lithuania, as a member of the OECD, has adopted a State Program for 2020-2024 aimed at centrally strengthening its corps of public managers in order to enhance the professionalization of its civil service. This initiative, along with other reforms, is part of the Lithuanian government's plans to establish a Higher Civil Service. It is anticipated that the institution of the Higher Civil Service will help reduce the level of politicization in decision-making and improve the overall quality of public administration. One of the notable innovations in the professionalization of civil servants in Lithuania is the government's plans to amend legislation related to public service. These amendments aim to legally enshrine the development of competencies for senior leaders, focusing on enhancing leadership qualities, communication skills, change management, and strategic planning (Statneckytė, 2023).

In the Republic of Kazakhstan, the principles of enhancing civil servant professionalism are defined through training and retraining tools, as outlined in the Law on Public Service (Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Public Service, Article 34). Furthermore, there are regulations that stipulate various procedures for the training, retraining, and professional development of civil servants in the "A" and "B" corps. The specialized organization responsible for developing training programs is the Academy of Public Administration. Given the similarities between Kazakhstan's approaches and those of OECD countries in this area, it is prudent to consider both successful experiences and less effective practices from abroad. Specifically, drawing on Lithuania's experience, the specialized organization should incorporate the development of the competencies identified by Statneckytė (2023) into its training programs.

One of the critical criteria for enhancing the professionalization of civil servants is the encouragement of diligent employees and the promotion of career motivation. In the history of the US civil service, the first legal act prescribing the selection of

positions on the basis of merit and examination results, rather than political patronage, was the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act of 1883 (National Archives, n.d.). Initially covering around 10% of federal employees, the system now encompasses the majority of the federal workforce. These principles were further reinforced by the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978. Today, each US agency has an assessment system developed with the active involvement of employees themselves. Based on these assessments, decisions are made on personnel transfers, training and retraining, and incentives for employees (Salikov, 2017). The Canadian civil service is one of the largest employers, with the total number of people employed in this sector exceeding 350 thousand people. Similar to the American system, the Canadian civil service system has adhered to the principles of meritocracy since about the beginning of the last century, which replaced the originally existing patronage system. One of the major steps towards changing the human resources management procedure in the public sector of Canada was the adoption of the Public Service Modernization Act in 2003 and the updated Public Service Employment Act in 2005, which clearly defined the concept of “merit”. This made it possible to select qualified personnel based on their “best fit” with the goals of the organization. Independent monitoring of compliance with these principles is carried out by a specially created organization under the government – the Public Service Commission of Canada, which, among other things, develops personnel policies, conducts audits of the effectiveness of individual divisions and hired managers (Public Service Commission of Canada, n.d.).

Since gaining independence, Kazakhstan has been building a civil service system where the principles of meritocracy are one of the key aspects. Significant reforms in this area include the legislative establishment of competitive procedures for filling positions in 1999 under the Law on Public Service, as well as the subsequent introduction of the concept of meritocracy, which recognizes the personal merits and achievements of civil servants and promotes them based on their abilities and professional qualifications.

Meritocracy is one of the fundamental principles of the civil service in the Republic of Kazakhstan; however, its practical implementation faces a number of challenges. In reality, there is a lack of regulatory mechanisms to effectively enforce the principle of meritocracy during staff appointments and

promotions. A valuable lesson for Kazakhstan from North American countries could be the development of a principle for evaluating candidates’ qualities through peer assessments, as well as clearly defining which personal merits serve as a basis for the advancement of civil servants.

One of the most notable examples of successfully implementing civil servant training programs, along with the private sector, is Japan. In the land of the rising sun, a special body was created, which is part of the system of central executive bodies – the National Personnel Authority (Personnel Chamber) (National Personnel Authority, n.d.). The functions of the Personnel Chamber include the formation of personnel policies and improving the professionalism of civil servants. The organization’s activities in this area are regulated by special rules (10-3), which provide for classification and distribute responsibilities for on-the-job training. In addition, each ministry in Japan organizes work to improve the skills and professional knowledge of public sector employees.

The Agency for Civil Service Affairs in Kazakhstan can be considered an analogue to Japan’s National Personnel Authority (NPA). Adapting best practices from the NPA, such as transparency in competitive procedures, a system of rotation and career advancement, legal protection, and regular evaluation and training of civil servants, could significantly enhance the effectiveness of the civil service in Kazakhstan. These measures would not only improve the professionalism of personnel but also strengthen public trust in the governance system.

The best practices for enhancing the professionalization of civil servants in OECD countries, compared to the existing mechanisms in Kazakhstan, are outlined schematically below:

The analysis conducted highlights several aspects from the OECD experience that are of interest for further enhancing the professionalization of the civil service in the Republic of Kazakhstan (Figure 1). Many of the aforementioned practices from OECD countries are currently being implemented to varying degrees within Kazakhstan’s civil service. However, the effectiveness of their implementation may depend on factors such as cultural characteristics, the level of corruption, and financial capabilities. In this context, adopting foreign practices presents a promising yet challenging task, necessitating a balanced approach that takes into account local specifics and the objectives facing public administration.

Gender equality	Senior Sivil Service		Meritocracy	Coordinating Organization for Human Resource Management
Australia	Great Britain	Lithuanua	USA, Canada	Japan
Flexible work schedule Creating a positive work environment	Improvement of the selection system for corps 'A' officials	Training corps 'A' officials in specialized skills (leadership, communication, change management)	Evaluation of candidate qualities by colleagues Defining criteria for personal merits	Improvement of the activities of the authorized body for public service in key areas

Figure 1 – OECD Practices Recommended for Enhancing the Professionalization of Civil Servants in Kazakhstan
Note – compiled by the authors based on an analysis of the experiences of OECD countries

Conclusion

In the context of human capital development, the analysis of OECD textual documents indicates that education plays a key role as a conduit for developing the necessary skills and competencies that help job seekers find their place in the global labor market. The further advancement of the civil service involves ensuring the strategic orientation of the government apparatus, followed by a transition to an innovative framework that is based on forward-looking perspectives, proactive development of digital technologies, the implementation of strategic human resources practices, the cultivation of leadership, and the encouragement of effective performance. The goal of this research was to formulate recommendations for enhancing the professionalization of the civil service in Kazakhstan.

The study revealed that a number of practices from OECD countries could be implemented or re-

fined within the context of the Kazakh civil service, focusing on areas such as gender equality, the activities of the senior civil service institute, principles of meritocracy, and the coordination of human resources management within the civil service by the authorized government body.

It is worth noting that many of the reforms currently underway in the country are similar to those being implemented in OECD nations. The further development of these reforms, taking into account leading global practices and national characteristics, will facilitate significant progress in this area.

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