



'Top Civil Service development programme'

Case study of an Estonian ESF-funded project under the study 'Progress Assessment of ESF Support to Public Administration' (PAPA)

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PROJECT BACKGROUND

Top civil service development programme

Operational Programme	The project is supported under Operational Programme for EU Cohesion Policy Funds for 2014-2020 (CCI 2014EE16M3OP001), Priority Axis 12 'Administrative capacity', Specific Objective 12.1 'Professional competence and management of general government has improved.
Beneficiary organisation	Government Office of Estonia (GO)
Target groups	Top civil servants within central government
Project duration	01/01/2014 – 31/12/2020
Budget	EUR 3,713,956 (EU contribution: EUR 3,156,863)
Project manager (email address)	Eve Limbach-Pirn, Head of the Top Civil Service Excellence Centre of the Government Office of Estonia, Eve.limbach-pirn@riigikantselei.ee
Partners	N/A
Project/ organisation website	https://www.riigikantselei.ee/en/top-executives-civil-service

This case study was produced as part of the project 'Progress Assessment of ESF Support to Public Administration' project, contracted by DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion of the European Commission. The purpose of this project is to present specific cases of ESF-funded public administration reform and capacity building initiatives, as well as to show the role of ESF financial support to public administration, for the purposes of accountability. This report recounts the story of the project '**Top Civil Service development programme**'. This account discusses the context and purpose of the project; the characteristics of the team implementing it; the main challenges faced and the difficulties encountered during its implementation; key developments during the implementation process; the results and impacts achieved; as well as lessons learnt and the contribution of the ESF.

TOP CIVIL SERVICE DEVELOPMENT IN ESTONIA

Introduction: the history of top civil service development in Estonia

When the study group met Mr. Heiki Loot, Estonia's longest-serving Secretary of State, he had recently concluded his final five-year term of office, and was leaving to become an administrative judge in the Supreme Court. Mr. Loot was awarded the Order of the National Coat of Arms III class in 2019¹ by the President of the Republic for his long and committed service to the country. The story of Estonia's top civil service development programme begins 16 years earlier, when Mr. Loot first entered office in 2003 – but fortunately, the story does not end with his departure. The programme is a team effort that has developed against the backdrop of the steady, organic evolution of state institutions. This evolution has enabled the top civil service to become a *corps* with a distinct identity, aware of its role as a key layer of managers and policy-makers within the state administration, and committed to its own development as much as the development of the entire administration.

In 2003 the newly elected Government committed to more professional governance and initiated the preparation of a Concept Paper on Civil Service Development which was finalised in 2003. As part of the paper, the new Justice Minister, Mr. Ken-Marti Vaher, asked Mr. Loot, at that time the Rector of the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences, to contribute thinking into how to eliminate long-standing discrepancies within the country's Civil Service Law, which had created various tensions since the Law's enactment in 1996. In agreeing to lead the discussions, Mr. Loot's ambition was not simply to rectify the deficiencies of the Law, but to lay the foundations of a performance-oriented civil service culture. In his own words, he had two intentions: 1) to begin tackling the development of top civil servants; and 2) to develop a system of self-regulation in order to contribute to the creation of a professional and honest civil service. His reasoning with regard to the former objective was clear: as well as shaping the quality of the rest of the civil service, the top civil service is the part of the administration upon which the success of reforms depends the most.

Later in 2003, when Mr. Loot became the Secretary of State, the most senior civil servant serving the Prime Minister and the Cabinet of Ministers and managing the Government Office, he also became responsible for managing the development of the civil service. Since the civil service system in Estonia is position-based, also the top civil servants can be recruited from outside the civil service or even public sector. Even if the candidates have served at a senior position in the civil service before, they still need to be assessed in the recruitment process as any other candidate would be. Thus, when Mr. Loot took on this function, he inherited the mechanism by which top civil servants were assessed, recruited and selected. Part of his portfolio of responsibilities was to chair the Top Civil Service Competition and Attestation Committee, which dealt with recruitment to senior positions in the civil service, such as secretaries-general, deputies and ministerial department heads. In addition, the Civil Service Law required the formal assessment on a regular basis of the knowledge of incumbent senior civil servants. He soon realised that the procedures involved were formal, and the group of the civil servants to be assessed was too large. The first thing he did was to delegate the recruitment of department heads to individual ministries. Second, the selection criteria used in recruiting senior civil

¹ The Order of the National Coat of Arms is bestowed upon Estonian citizens as a decoration of the highest honour for services to the state. The Order of the National Coat of Arms comprises six classes, I class being the highest.

servants were ambiguous. Combined with pressure from ministers to ensure their favoured candidates were selected, this situation resulted in less than optimal results.

Mr. Loot needed someone to support him in getting the selection and development of top civil servants on to a more systematic and performance-oriented track. He turned to his former colleague, Mrs. Eve Limbach-Pirn, Pro-rector of the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences, to join the Government Office as Deputy Head of the Civil Service Development Department. When Mrs. Limbach-Pirn joined the Government Office in 2004, it was agreed that the system that should be employed was a competency model, similar to the one the pair had seen on a study trip to the Dutch police while both were still working at the EASS. Such a model would provide the framework required to support the transition from input-based qualifications towards a more performance-related assessment. The pair also agreed on another thing – that such a system would only be valuable if the top civil servants themselves were involved in its development. Consequently, a group of 22 carefully selected top managers, secretaries-general and directors of government agencies were personally invited by Mr. Loot to contribute. The question raised was this: 'What distinguishes a successful top manager from less successful one?' As Mrs. Limbach-Pirn acknowledged, Mr. Loot's personal leadership was vital to setting the work in motion. Upon completion of the process in 2005, the members of the working group became ambassadors for its implementation.

The situation was nevertheless awkward: the Government Office had to select, assess the competences of and develop top civil servants, but on a voluntary basis. Luckily, this is where Estonia's recent accession to the European Union (EU) came to help: administrative capacity could now be enhanced using EU structural funds. The first development activities targeting top civil servants could be designed using additional funding made available for civil service development. The primary target group were the secretaries-general of ministries – those civil servants at the top of the administrative hierarchy who already convened on a regular basis to discuss cross-cutting matters, such as at weekly meetings to discuss items from the Government's agenda, or to discuss intended reforms prior to their launch. After EU accession, Mr. Loot had already taken these civil servants as a group to Brussels and Finland. Nevertheless, Mr. Loot had to personally convince the secretaries-general to participate in the carefully crafted development programme – designed with the example of Finland's similar SITRA² programme in mind – which envisaged a series of study trips abroad (to the Netherlands, the US and Iceland) to learn together from others' experience. As Mr. Loot notes, one of the crucial turning points was a dinner hosted by the Dutch secretaries-general, and attended by all but one of their Estonian counterparts. Over the course of the evening, the two groups developed a courteous, friendly and collegial relationship, leaving the Estonian delegation in awe of the high standards of professionalism both in domestic, as well as EU policy matters, they witnessed. The event prompted a new format for collaboration between the Estonian secretaries-general: each month, one out of the group of 11 took the rest of the group out to present something from her or his ministry from which the others could learn, followed by a dinner.

In 2009, the Civil Service Law was amended to enact a strategic separation between the development of the civil service in general, and that of its top tier. Responsibility for the former was given to the Ministry of Finance, while the latter remained with the Government Office. It had become clear that if the Government Office were to properly support the development of the top civil service, it would not have enough resources to deal equally well with the rest of the civil service. The Secretary of State issued an order creating the Top Civil Service Excellence

² SITRA is the Finnish Innovation Fund that contributes to the creation of a fair and sustainable future. See: <https://www.sitra.fi/en/>.

Centre (TCSEC), with Mrs. Limbach-Pirn as its head. Two additional staff members were retained to undertake the challenge.

In 2013 a new Civil Service Law was enacted. This legislation created a solid legal basis for the top civil service and formalised the process of merit-based recruitment and selection, eliminating several grey areas that provided opportunities for direct political influence³. Open competition was introduced as a general rule for almost all top civil service positions, civil service itself continuing being the position-based system. All top civil service positions became subject to a five-year term of office (renewable). Participation in appraisals and development activities became compulsory. These rules apply to the 100 top civil servants as indicated below.

Table 1. Top civil service positions in Estonia, 2019

POSITION	INSTITUTION	NUMBER OF INCUMBENTS
Secretary of State	Government Office	1
Director	Government Office	3
Secretary-general	Ministry	11
Deputy secretary-general	Ministry	52
Director of agency	Agency with executive powers	29
Director of Emergency Calls Centre, Director of State Archive, Commander of Defence Forces, State Prosecutor	Emergency Calls Centre, State Archive, Defence Forces, Prosecution Office	4
Total		100

Source: TCSEC

In 2008, according to a study on top public managers in Europe⁴, Estonia was classified into the group of top public management (TPM) models with 'special conditions for senior civil service (SCS)', but with 'no formal TPM status'. Based on the update to the Civil Service Law, the Estonian TPM in the same follow-up study of 2016⁵ was classified into group No. 1, where formal TPM status applies and a central TPM office exists to manage most aspects relating to that group, such as recruitment, management, evaluation, development and rotation, but not remuneration and promotion.

³ Uudelepp, A. (2017), *Country Paper on the Estonian Senior Civil Service*. OECD SIGMA internal document.

⁴ Kuperus H., Rode A. (2008), *Top Public Managers in Europe. Management and Employment in Central Public Administrations*.

⁵ Kuperus H., Rode A. (2016), *Top Public Managers in Europe. Management and Employment in Central Public Administrations*. See: <https://www.algemenebestuursdienst.nl/documenten/publicatie/2016/12/21/top-public-managers-in-europe>.

Table 2. Grouping of EU Member States by typology of TPM models in 2015

	FORMAL TPM STATUS	NO FORMAL TPM STATUS
SPECIAL CONDITIONS FOR TPM	GROUP NO. 1: with central TPM office: EE, NL, UK, GROUP NO. 2: BE, CZ, IE, FR (Level 1) ⁶ , IT, LU, MT, PL, PT, RO, FI	GROUP NO. 4: DE, ES, FR, (Level 2), SL, CY, LV, LT, HU, AT, SK, SE, EC
NO SPECIAL CONDITIONS FOR TPM	GROUP NO. 3: BG	GROUP NO. 5: HRV

Source: Kuperus, H. and Rode, A. Top Public Managers in Europe: Management and working conditions of the senior civil servants in the European Union Member States, 2016.

Design and execution of the European Social Fund-funded projects

Design of main programmes of top civil service development with European Social Fund support

The European Social Fund (ESF) has played a vital role from the very beginning of the launch of activities to support the development of top civil servants in Estonia. The ESF programme consists of training and development-related activities (sometimes also called programmes) and other supportive activities (for a complete list of activities, see Table 3 below). In 2007, the Government Office created the first dedicated Top Civil Service Development Programme for 2008-09. Two ESF-funded programmes (2004-05 and 2006-07) had previously conducted central training of Estonia's civil service as a whole, with top civil servants being just one of the target groups. Initial development programmes were launched during this period, and a competency model for top civil servants was launched, together with a plan for its implementation. As Mrs. Limbach-Pirn recalls: 'In 2005, I did not have a clear vision what a centre that deals with the top civil service should look like'⁷. She began with the team of two as part of the Civil Service Department at the Government Office, with Mrs. Limbach-Pirn herself fulfilling the position of Deputy Head of the department.

The dedicated programme necessitated the setting of clear objectives for the first time: the creation of a body of committed and professional top civil servants – both existing ones, as well as incoming ones – supported by high-quality development activities. The intended activities were and still are discussed with secretaries-general, but the course is constantly corrected on the basis of experience. By 2008, only 65% of the target group had participated in any of the development activities, which demonstrated the limitations of voluntary participation⁸. A panel of top civil servants was formed to take stock of the successes, and to identify pitfalls. As a result, a new competency model was developed, this time with the intention of linking the assessment of both competences and performance. Past experiences of recruitment contests for top civil service posts had taught the team at the Government Office that it requires hard work to attract good candidates – both from within the civil service, and from outside. It was also observed that due to the varying quality of candidates, it was necessary to ensure that every recruitment contest attracted at least a minimum number of candidates without any serious

⁶ In France, there is a clear division of two groups of TPM that differ in the way of recruitment. Level 1 and level 2 have fundamentally different procedures for selecting TPM.

⁷ Interview with Eve Limbach-Pirn (2016), Available at: <https://eneseteostus.wordpress.com/2017/02/15/tippjuhtimise-asjatundja-eve-lugu/>.

⁸ Programme Document on Development of Top Civil Servants, ordinance of the Secretary of State No. 128-H from 28.10-2008.

deficiencies in their competencies. A new target group of existing middle managers with senior management potential was therefore defined, and in 2008 a dedicated development programme was created, entitled Newton.

This programme was set up as a highly selective, elaborate and multi-dimensional development programme with a clear aspiration to enhance co-operation. The current secretary-general of the Ministry of the Interior, Mr. Lauri Lugna, recalls that as a department head, he had to take a test and write an essay in order to eventually gain selection from among 30-40 candidates. He further explained the objective of the programme: to introduce middle managers who had progressed organically to their position from that of specialists, to an environment in which they would become better aware of the policy areas and instruments of other ministries, and learn to solve real-life issues as part of cross-sectoral teams. The programme was implemented by a series of partners from outside the government, such as the Estonian Business School Executive Education Centre⁹ and the Civil Service Development Centre in 2010-11; the Policy Think Tank Praxis¹⁰ in 2012-13; and the Estonian Design Centre¹¹ and Praxis in 2016-17. Each iteration of the programme lasted one year, with the best of 20 participants being invited to participate in a follow-up programme, more individualised than the previous one, for another 6-7 months. The Newton programme has been so successful at bonding its participants that Mr. Lugna acknowledges that the team that was formed more than 10 years ago still convenes a couple of times a year to learn and experience something new together. Currently, the fifth iteration of the programme is about to be launched.

In 2012, the Government Office launched another initiative, Top Manager Talent, the objective of which was to attract highly qualified university MA graduates to take part in an extensive 'fast-track' programme of on- and off-the-job training over a period of 21 months, in order to gain promotion to top managerial positions within the civil service. Out of 146 applicants, 7 were selected. Successful applicants were assigned a 'parent ministry' at which they were given a specific policy-relevant challenge to undertake. Each was mentored by a senior manager and participated in a number of group-based development activities. In addition, they had a chance to visit other government agencies, shadowing top civil servants at work, and received coaching and mentoring. A successful participant in the programme, Ms. Gerli Aavik who joined the Ministry of Social Affairs, recalls that the demanding selection process involved five rounds of testing. The second iteration of the Top Manager Talent programme was launched in 2017, with 8 participants being selected. Experience from the first iteration of the programme had indicated that its duration may have been too long, so this was reduced. The target of the programme is that in seven years, at least one participant should become a top civil servant. As yet, the target has not been reached.

One criticism of the programme is that it does not guarantee that graduates will continue in the public sector, since no strings are attached to their participation. Experience suggests that in the case of the Top Manager Talent programme this is a valid argument, as a number have since left the public sector.

By the end of 2014, the team managing the ESF programme had grown to five persons. This growth was organic, reflecting the increasing workload and the needs of the target group. Out of five staff members, four deal directly with advising and supporting top civil servants and other target groups, but also participate in the preparation of public recruitment competitions and other activities relating to the Selection Commission for Top Civil Servants. One assists the team,

⁹ See: <https://ebs.ee/en/executive-education>.

¹⁰ See: <http://www.praxis.ee/en/>.

¹¹ See: <https://disainikeskus.ee>.

including with technical work relating to ESF-related processes, such as monitoring and reporting, submitting payment orders, etc.

Table 3. Key elements of ESF-funded programmes, 2005-2020

TIME PERIOD	KEY ACTIVITIES	BUDGET IN EURO
2005-2007	Centrally organised training 2005-2007: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of top civil service, organised as part of civil service training activities • First competency model and implementation plan developed • Development programme for secretaries-general elaborated • Programme for policy development created • Masterclasses launched • Electronic system created for management of competencies (e-competence centre) 	607,000
2008-2009	I Top Civil Service Development Programme 2008-2009 (first dedicated programme exclusively for top civil servants): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elaboration of development programmes for top civil servants such as economic competitiveness programme, sustainable development programme and public service delivery programme • Engaging the target group in various individual (such as coaching and mentoring) and group activities • Developing recruitment and selection practices • Elaborating and executing development programme for future top civil servants (Newton I) • Developing and supporting the implementation of a competency framework 	325,500
2010-2011	II Top Civil Service Development Programme 2010-2011: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Target group slimmed down (county governors were sidelined) • First top civil service conference • Second version of the competency model developed • First study of top civil servants' commitment • Newton II 	495,000
2012-2013	III Top Civil Service Development Programme 2012-2013: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting the development of innovation and co-operation capabilities among top civil servants • Development and execution of a new, fast-track programme for MA graduates with the potential to become top managers ('Top Manager Talent'). • Newton III 	805,000
2014-2020	IV Top Civil Service Development Programme 2014-2020: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on management, innovation and co-operation capacity • Third renewal of the competency model • Initiation of seven-year programme, the longest period so far • Newton IV and V • Top Management Talent II and III • Emphasis on promoting the 'State as Employer' brand 	3,714,000

Purpose of the ESF-supported project(s)

The use of ESF funds to develop the top civil service development began in 2004, and has continued ever since. The objectives and sub-objectives have remained similar throughout this period, and have been mirrored in the Government Office's strategic plans¹², tracked through the methodology of a 'balanced scorecard'.

The three objectives of the ESF-funded Top Civil Service Development programme reflect a systematic approach to the management of the top civil service. First, in order to improve the **management and cooperation capacities of top civil servants**, individual development support is provided in the form of coaching, mentoring, work shadowing, going to internship or consulting, as well as various kinds of training. These activities support the strengthening of common values, cooperation models and the sharing of good practice. Second, to **ensure candidates' succession to top civil service positions**, recruitment and development activities are carried out. These include activities aimed at improving the image of the state as an employer; development programmes for middle-level managers with top management potential (the Newton programme); and the fast-tracking of entrants from outside the public sector (Top Management Talent). Third, in order to **renew the system for top civil service recruitment and selection, appraisal and development**, a number of activities are carried out including the analysis and renewal of the competency framework; the development of an information system and user interface for the management of information relating to recruitment and selection, appraisal and development (the E-competence centre); the commissioning of necessary studies (such as the survey on commitment); the development of methods and guidelines; and the sharing of experience and contacts in the field.

The ESF-funded Top Civil Service Development programme for years 2014-2020 covers the longest period ever planned in this area. The programme falls under the Priority axis 12 of Administrative capacity (Thematic Objective No. 11) 'Enhancing institutional capacity and efficient public administration'. Its specific objective aims at increased professional competence and management of general government (12.1)¹³. It addresses the challenges identified in the 2011 OECD Public Governance Review of Estonia¹³, such as: 1) fragmented governance; 2) insufficient coherence between the state budget and strategies; 3) low policy-making capacity; 4) inadequate coordination of public services and e-governance; 5) disparities in the capacities of local authorities; and 6) the need to develop the civil service, given that its expertise, including management capacity, would contribute to resolving the above issues.

The 2014-2020 period took up from where the previous one left off. Because the major sources of information used to design development programmes are regular review sessions with top civil servants themselves, as well as the deficiencies and gaps identified during the process of recruiting top civil servants, these two inputs were major building blocks for the development of the 2014-2020 period programme. In addition, a number of documents were taken into consideration when designing the programme. These included the four-year Government Programme, the action plan for developing administrative capacity and implementing the recommendations of the 2011 OECD Public Governance Review (see above), the national reform programme 'Estonia 2020'¹⁴, the national strategy for sustainable development 'Sustainable

¹² 3-year document of a ministry and Government Office, updated annually.

¹³ OECD (2011), Public Governance Reviews. Estonia. Towards a Single Government Approach. See https://www.riigikantselei.ee/sites/default/files/content-editors/Failid/oezd_public_governance_review_estonia_full_report.pdf.

¹⁴ See: <https://www.riigikantselei.ee/en/supporting-government/national-reform-programme-estonia-2020>.

Estonia 21¹⁵, and several others. The purpose of the programme is to support the achievement of government's horizontal policy objectives, for example by selecting the topics for development programmes or regular top civil service conferences. Once a year, the Prime Minister addresses this target group with a speech in which he communicates the policy challenges facing his Government and his expectations in relation to them.

In terms of the indicators used in the Operational Programme, the Top Civil Service development programme contributes to the number of instances of participation in training (i.e. those members of the target group who have been part of any kind of development activity organised by the TCSEC). In 2016, the number of instances recorded was 360 – slightly below the target of 384¹⁶. The cumulative number of instances expected by 2023 is 2,100. As the TCSEC acknowledges, they cannot judge their success based on such an indicator, so their own performance indicators are somewhat different (see the section on main results below).

Implementation of the ESF project: main additions for 2014-2020

Implementation of the 2014-20 programme has gone smoothly. The TCSEC team consists of five members, of whom three have been in the office for at least five years. Between them, they have plenty of experience in carrying out the activities of the programme. This has resulted in a more rational use of resources. For example, Mrs. Limbach-Pirn recalls that when the team started 10 years ago, the GO procured each coach for a top civil servant individually. Now they tender a framework contract, under which the services of several coaches are available for three or more years. One of the factors contributing to the smoother functioning noted by Mrs. Limbach-Pirn is that the application of ESF rules has become less burdensome.

In essence, the managing authority has become less rigorous than it was during the previous period in tracking every euro spent on every individual item (such as the cost per dessert, not just lunch, if a meal was offered during a training event) in payment requests submitted by the Government Office. This has allowed the team to free up resources from administrative work, in order to contribute to a model whereby each top civil servant (as well as participants in other programmes) enjoys personal assistance from the TCSEC, which is available to respond to their specific development needs or requests. As Mrs. Limbach-Pirn points out, 'Knowing your target group is the main success factor.'

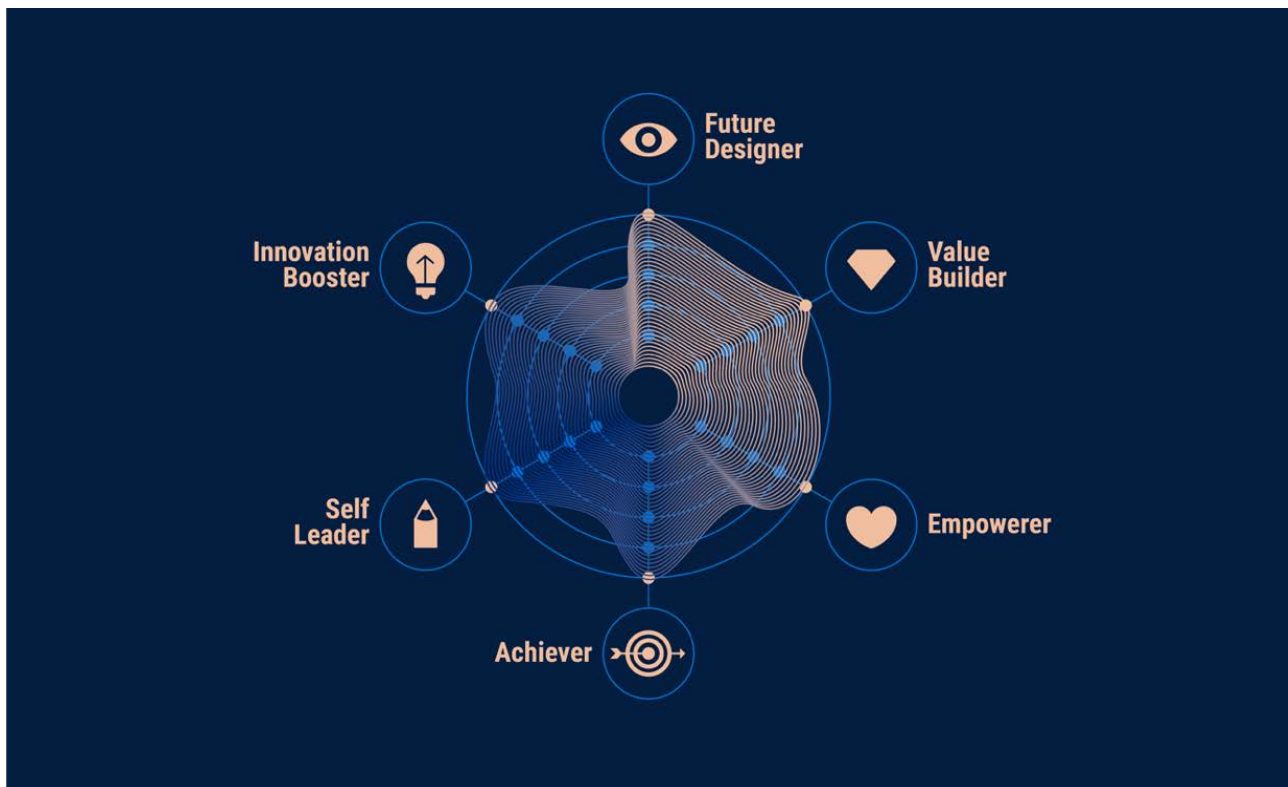
One major objective for the new period has been to develop the third iteration of the competency model (see Figure 1). The idea was to take stock of the experience gained from applying the existing model, and to fine-tune the model, linking it to the assessment of performance among top civil servants. As Mr. Loot explained, the assessment framework would consist of three components: 1) linking the performance of top civil servants to results at Government level; 2) linking performance to results in the ministry's area of governance (both the ministry and its subordinate institutions) or policy sector; and 3) contribution to personal development. It was envisaged that the secretaries-general of the ministries would begin to explore opportunities to enter into performance contracts with their immediate subordinates, in which key objectives and targets would be highlighted. Currently, three ministries are in the preparatory phase of launching such performance contracts on a pilot basis. However, secretaries-general have been resistant to allowing themselves to be assessed by outside stakeholders. As Mr. Loot acknowledges, scepticism towards the assessment framework remains strong.

¹⁵ See: <https://www.riigikantselei.ee/en/sustainable-development>.

¹⁶ Monitoring Report of priority axis 'Administrative Capacity', 2016.

One new activity that was added for the 2014-20 period relates to the objective of improving the image of the state as an employer. Its goal is to increase the number of candidates who are attracted to top civil service recruitment competitions, but also to contribute to the motivation of existing top civil servants. The team has participated in a number of job fairs and commissioned several articles, both in professional and mainstream media.

Figure 1. Third iteration of the top civil service competency model



Source: the TCSEC

For the first time, a development programme has also been prepared internationally. The innovation programme was launched to allow the participation of top civil servants from several countries – Finland, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Luxemburg. Initially, the intention was to involve only participants from Finland and Estonia, but when the Government Office introduced the idea at an OECD event, other countries took an interest and joined the development programme. The programme is about a series of training events in several countries prepared specifically according to the needs of the target group. One component of the programme aims to provide a 'culture shock' – managing an assignment in a completely new context in a non-native country in which the participants' everyday assumptions may be challenged, such as providing training for local entrepreneurs or civil servants in Kenya or India. To implementing this project, a tender was launched to acquire the services of an international company.

One of the ever-present challenges for the project relates to the difficulty of designing public tenders that allow sufficient room for vendors to be creative, while still complying with public procurement rules. The TCSEC team feels that it's sometimes necessary to describe the final product – such as a training and development programme – in advance, in order to be able to

set the evaluation criteria for a tender. However, this may allow less opportunity to procure innovative services, or to allow the tenderer to suggest ways to design the most interesting and appropriate programme. Given that the target group of 100 is relatively small, large bidders with lots of experience may not be tempted to participate, while smaller bidders may lack the resources to invest a lot of work into a bidding process from which, inevitably, only one will emerge as the winner. The team notes that in a small market like Estonia, situations frequently occur in which tenders may receive only one or two bids, which is not good for service quality.

Conclusion

Main results

Estonia's civil service has been found to be one of the best-performing in the world. A study¹⁷ from 2017 ranked it seventh in terms of overall effectiveness. However, the level of professionalism within the civil service may not yet be as high, scoring only 4.6 points out of 7 in 2015 to rank 11th among EU countries¹⁸. Nevertheless, according to this study, based on expert opinion, professionalism had improved slightly (by two places) between 2012 and 2015. Unfortunately, no studies exist that specifically compare the professionalism of top civil servants between countries. It is difficult to estimate how well this correlates with the professionalism of the civil service as a whole.

The Top Civil Service Excellence Centre has periodically commissioned studies to assess the commitment of top civil servants to their work. Such surveys were carried out by a private contractor in 2011, 2014 and 2017, to take stock of progress made. Along with various other components, these surveys assess central measure – the commitment of top civil servants to their work (see Figure 2). The most recent survey was conducted in 2017. These assessments demonstrate that the general level of commitment among top civil servants working in the public sector is much higher than among managers in general (public and private sector combined) – 81 vs 66, according to the TRI*M index¹⁹. Commitment does not vary significantly between different groups of top civil servants: the score for secretaries-general and the Secretary of State is 82; for deputy secretaries-general, 75; and for the directors of agencies, 87. The change in commitment over the last three years has been highest among the last group, from 78 to 87. An important change has also taken place in the quality of top managers: the share of top managers who can be described as 'initiators'²⁰ has increased steadily: from 19% (2011) to 24% (2014) to 30% (2017)²¹.

¹⁷ The International Civil Service Effectiveness Index 2017. Blavatnik School of Government, Oxford University and the Institute of Government. Available at: <https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/about/partnerships/international-civil-service-effectiveness-index-2017>.

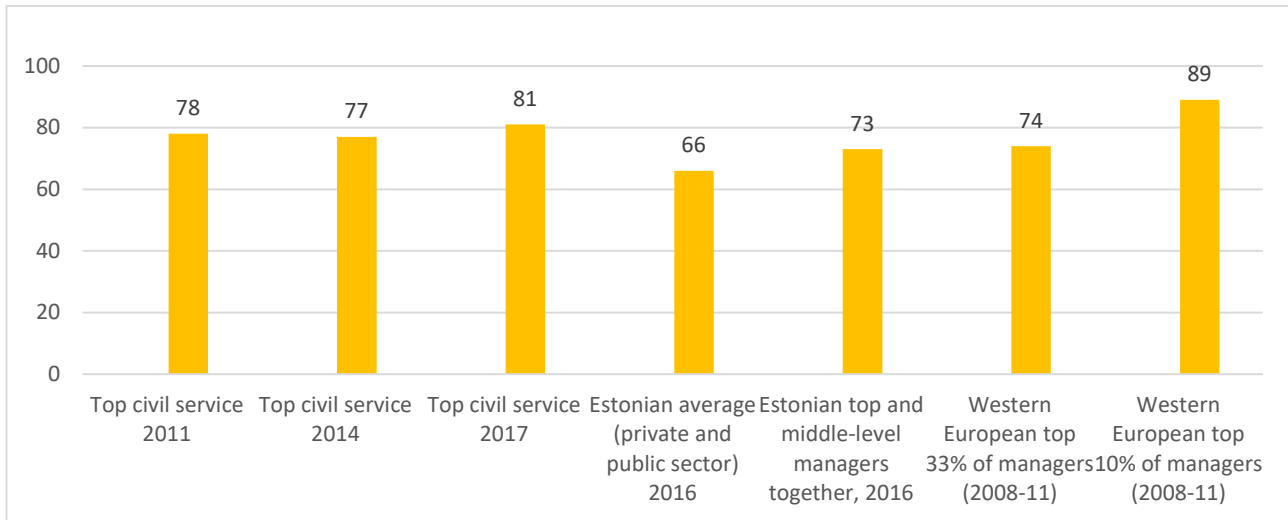
¹⁸ A comparative overview of public administration characteristics and performance in EU28 (2017). EIPA, The Hertie School of Government, Rambol. Available at: <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/3e89d981-48fc-11e8-be1d-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>.

¹⁹ TRI*M is a proprietary management information system of Kantar research agency that measures, analyses and estimates the level of user satisfaction as well as the attributes of quality that contribute to that satisfaction and is about a system of three integrated functions: measuring, managing and monitoring. The TRI*M index expresses a numerical value of customer satisfaction. See: <http://www.tnsglobal.com/what-we-do/by-expertise/customer-strategies/trim-customer-relationship-assessment>

²⁰ The study identifies four categories of top managers: initiators, critics, indifferents and stabilisers.

²¹ According to the study, there are four types of managers. These are defined according to their level of satisfaction with their work (low or high) and their satisfaction with work environment (little motivating or very motivating). 'On-pushers' are the ones who feel they are satisfied with work and feel motivated by the work environment.

Figure 2. Commitment of top civil servants with their work (tri*m index)



Source: Kantar-Emor, Commitment of Top Civil Servants 2017.

Finally, another key performance indicator has been the number of candidates per recruitment contest for top civil service positions. This has increased from a low level of 4.3 in 2013, to a very good level of 11 in 2018. This can be attributed to the success of activities led by the TCSEC, aimed at improving the image of the state as an employer. Nevertheless, this figure does not reflect the quality of candidates, which on occasions remains below the desired level.

Another major intangible result of the project, perceived both by the project team and by top civil servants themselves, is the sense of collegiality. This greatly facilitates cooperation and helps to resolve conflict. Another notable result is that top civil servants take much greater responsibility, both for their own development and for the development of their organisation. For secretaries-general, this often means not just the ministry, but also the subordinate agencies that contribute to policy implementation. Some, such as the Ministry of the Interior, have copied development programmes of the Top Civil Service Excellence Centre and launched their own programmes within the organisation of the ministry. As Mr. Lugna pointed out during his interview, 'Excellent and practice-tested programmes should not be put on the shelf. It saves us time and money to try the same things with our own senior managers in the ministry.'

As Mrs. Limbach-Pirn puts it, 'The level of professionalism the Top Civil Service Excellence Centre puts into the management of the programmes, it is like night and day comparing 2005 to 2015. The terms of reference, on which we base the procurement of programme implementation activities, are so much more specific than they used to be.'

In terms of the wider impact of the programme on society, the most consistent thread has been the emphasis on service delivery. The process began in 2009 with a Programme on the Quality of Public Services. It continued in 2011 with another programme on Service Design, which was a combination of training and consultancy in which three top civil servants chose the services they wished to redesign (submitting of company statistics to the Statistics Office; issuance of residence permits; and social services for people with severe disabilities). Individual consultants were available to assist during the redesign process. In parallel, the Ministry of Economy and Communications, responsible for the development of public service with an emphasis on digital services, has supported government agencies by setting requirements, providing guidelines and

otherwise supporting the agencies in their goal of developing better-quality services for citizens and businesses.

Although no immediately relevant measurement has been carried out to measure the satisfaction of users with public services, a periodical survey commissioned by the Ministry of Economy and Communications on satisfaction with e-Services concluded that between 2012 and 2014 there was a 4-percentage-point increase in satisfied respondents, from 71% to 75%²². In addition, the Government Office handed the service delivery programme over to the Ministry of Finance, which from this year has launched a training and development programme for service managers (i.e. the officials responsible for the services within their own government agency).

Another example of a direct impact of the programme has been the unification of the two units dealing with career planning; one under the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES), the other under the Ministry of Social Affairs. As a result of a practical exercise during the Pathfinder programme run by the Top Civil Service Excellence Centre, the secretaries-general of the two ministries came to the conclusion that their two separate units deal with the same function. Together, they proposed a merger of the two under the MoES, and the decision was taken by the Government soon after.

Despite the length of the programme that is running continuously with the ESF support since 2008, the team of the Top Civil Service Excellence Centre feels that understanding remains relatively modest as to what the development of top civil servants (and, more broadly, all civil servants) means – and what it takes to achieve it systematically. In this context, a critical comment was made in relation to the Thematic Commission on Administrative Capacity, led by the Secretary of State and accompanied by the secretaries-general of the Ministry of Finance, Justice, Economic Affairs and Communications, and Internal Affairs. The remark concerns their lack of willingness to ask tough questions, such as: 'What value is brought about by spending money on increasing administrative capacity?' and 'What are the links between different programmes, and how can they be made more effective by better coordinating different streams of activity?'

One critical remark that has been voiced from early days of the programme is that its participants have been invested in heavily ('gold plating') while the middle-level managers and the rest of the civil service have not been taken such a good care of. Indeed, since there is a difference in the policy responsibility and management of these target groups (Government Office for top civil service and Ministry of Finance for the rest of the civil service), this is also reflected in the difference in prioritisation, as well as the availability of funds per participant. However, the counterargument has always been that the top civil servants are the most critical resource whose quality determines the overall quality of public administration, therefore worth the investment.

Lessons learnt

The long-term evolution of the system for top civil service selection and recruitment, appraisal and development has demonstrated that any reform requires strong leadership at the outset to get it going. 'When you try something new, there will inevitably be resistance, or at least indifference', says Mr. Loot. 'Which top civil servants have so little work that they can afford to be away regularly on training?', he adds rhetorically. Personal commitment of the Secretary of State, particularly during its early days and at other critical junctures, as well as a clear vision about what a professional senior civil service should look like, accompanied by highly professional team to manage the change helped to navigate between many obstacles and

²² Citizen Satisfaction with Public e-Services Provided by the State, 2014. TNS Emor.

unknowns on the course. Of course, this journey has taken place in unique circumstances: the Secretary of State, Mr. Loot, and the Head of the Top Civil Service Excellence Centre, Mrs. Limbach-Pirn, have remained key figures throughout the period. The political stability allowing the same Prime Minister to stay in power for more than nine years also facilitated the development of the programme, as it created a stable environment conducive to (self-) development being considered as part of everyday work for the top managers.

Another long-term lesson learnt by the programme team is that changing laws are not necessarily the starting point for launching 'soft' policy programmes. Instead, a 'pack of different tricks' was employed to attract interest and achieve engagement among top civil servants on a voluntarily basis. Mrs. Limbach-Pirn calls it the 'Tom Sawyer effect': those who have been part of something fun – such as a night-time visit to a jazz club during a development course abroad – provoke a feeling among others of being left out, and thus the desire to participate on future occasions. Ultimately, however, the role of supporting legislation cannot be disregarded. In order to avoid the risk of things happening only out of enthusiasm, the Civil Service Law of 2013 set out a framework under which the activities could be designed more systematically and with an element of obligation. Even if this compulsion is never applied, it helps to set the tone for greater participation. As with other undertakings managed by the Government Office, all of the elements to be introduced into law were presented, discussed, debated – and, to a large extent, decided – by the top civil servants themselves.

Thus, it is hard to overstate the role of communication and the client-oriented attitude on the part of the Top Civil Service Excellence Centre towards its target group. From the early days of the project, every major step has been agreed with the top civil servants, whose engagement with the project's design has been vital to getting results.

Role of ESF support

It has been obvious ever since the ESF began financing the programme for top civil service development that without ESF support, the programme would probably not exist. The continuity and predictability of ESF funding have also contributed to the success of the changes that have taken place over recent years. This has allowed the team to take a longer-term view when asking strategic questions, such as what it takes to bring about a change in the mentality of top civil servants with regard to their personal development or willingness to cooperate with each other.

Every government that has been in office since 2003, under three different prime ministers, has supported the development of the top civil service, because the funds allocated to this activity could not be easily diverted elsewhere. This would not be the case with funds from the regular state budget, from which funds for training and development get cut whenever there is a need to reprioritise funding. Perhaps it has also helped that Estonia's prime ministers have been invited each year to address this top echelon of the civil service, in order to address its expectations, explain the Government's priorities, and discuss the contribution that top civil servants and their administrations can make to addressing challenges and improving the life of the country.

Shortfalls described above in relation to the understanding of the need for human resource development represent the greatest looming threat to the programme's achievements in the post-2020 period, when the EU may decide not to continue contributing to the enhancement of administrative capacity in the same way as it has so far. As the former Secretary of State Mr. Heiki Loot explains: 'There is a different appetite among politicians to spend budget money on high-profile training depending whether the funds come from the 'Estonian tax-payers' pocket' vs 'EU tax-payers' pocket'. It was very visible during the period of fiscal crisis of 2008-

2009 when the overall central government budget was reduced by 6 and 1% respectively²³, while the Top Civil Service Excellence programme was left financially intact. 'If ESF funding stops, so will likely come to end the activities – which will inevitably lead to the departure of core staff of the Top Civil Service Excellence Centre. It will be hard to win that uphill struggle', concludes Mr. Loot.

²³ Statistics Estonia, see: andmebaas.stat.ee

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