



ReSPA

Regional School
of Public Administration

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Discussion Paper

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Background

ReSPA member countries face serious challenges in building their public administrations to serve their new democracies and market economies. All of them have generally weak governance systems, according to most assessments by various international organisations, including the European Commission. Weak public governance systems equals to weak states.

A weak state is thought to have little capacity to carry out some or many of its core functions and encounters great difficulties in building constructive relations with the society. A weak state also shows little resilience in front of failures, such as corruption, which tend to become systemic. State capture is not exceptional in ReSPA member countries. In some cases states do not control the whole of their territory and are prone to outbursts of political violence.

The first more pressing issue in Western Balkan countries is to make government institutions more legitimate in the eyes of their populations. Most of them are the result of the implosion of a pre-existing state, sometimes through violence. Under those circumstances, strengthening the state can be achieved almost only through making public institutions more credible. This quest for credibility is at the core of any effort to build better public institutions to govern the countries.

Making public governance institutions more credible requires, at least, convincing the population that:

- ✓ Government institutions are genuinely pursuing the general interest;
- ✓ They are predictable and their decisions contestable before an independent judiciary whose redress is respected by governmental institutions;

- ✓ Public officials are effectively held accountable for their behaviour (transparency is a pre-condition for accountability);
- ✓ Institutions are reliable: they will respond appropriately when required to address human induced failure, solve social problems or recover from natural disasters;
- ✓ Institutions are resilient: they will recover in a reasonable time span when, inevitably, failures will occur.

Civil Services in none of the countries are fit for the purpose of making public governance institutions credible. Nevertheless, Civil Services are, along with the judicial system, key institutions to ensure the credibility of public policies and public institutions.

How can ReSPA help address this dismal situation of civil services in its member countries?

ReSPA is first and foremost a training centre. Training is a necessary and very valuable instrument to promote good governance, but training only cannot solve major governance failures.

Training is insufficient to solve the many illnesses of the civil services in the Western Balkan countries, which are mostly due to inadequate administrative legal frameworks and structural flaws in the building of their public administrations.

ReSPA defines itself as an ‘international organisation’¹ which has been entrusted with the mission of boosting regional cooperation in the field of public administration in the Western Balkans. As such, ReSPA is a unique historical endeavour, established to support the creation of accountable, effective and professional public administration systems for the Western Balkans on their way to EU accession.

ReSPA seeks to achieve this mission through the organisation and delivery of training activities, high level conferences, networking events, mobility schemes, summer schools, study tours and publications, the overall objectives of which are to transfer new knowledge and skills as well as to facilitate the exchange of experiences both within the region and between the region and the EU Member States”.

Given the limitations of training, and training-like operations, to ensure effective reforms of the governance systems, ReSPA intends to promote additional instruments to achieve its mission of supporting “the creation of accountable, effective and professional public administration systems”, as well as to facilitate EU accession preparedness of its member countries.

To do so ReSPA could establish additional cooperation mechanisms and working methods endowing the Organisation with capabilities to boost a better governance agenda specific for the Western Balkans, which would include all the components mentioned above.

¹ See ReSPA website: <http://www.respaweb.eu/16/pages/2/mission-vision-values>

The better governance and good administration agendas are major policies, still with uncertain contours, promoted by international organisations around the world. ReSPA is in a good position to contribute to shaping the good governance agenda with regard to its member countries. International experience shows that integrated regional programmes are useful to spread cross-border positive influence on national leaders.

ReSPA is well placed to contribute usefully both to the strategic and operational dimensions of public governance reform in the Western Balkans, provided that some key working methods are developed and adapted to the ReSPA institutional characteristics.

Working Methods

Multidisciplinary approaches are needed that support evidence-based policy proposals, which should rely on comparative data, analyses and principles and propose practical tools for policy implementation. The focus areas should be the result of comprehensive consultation processes with ReSPA member countries.

Thematic policy dialogue is a well tested method in the workings of international organisations around the world. A ReSPA-led policy dialogue could be structured at different levels, ranging from more politico-strategic to more operational. Policy dialogue would bring together practitioners to analyse public governance reform policies, successful initiatives and also setbacks, with an aim to learn from experience, and to setting international standards on the policy area under discussion, which are adapted to the specific Western Balkan context. In practice, this policy dialogue may function as a peer pressure forum. Peer reviews and open method of coordination are different denominations of pretty similar instruments used by international organisations.

The work could be organised in several “communities of practitioners” and structured through their respective committees and working groups. Committees should bring together more senior officials and play a strategic and decision making role by establishing, among others, multiannual work programmes on a given theme. Working groups should act at a more practitioner or expert level, bringing together the brains in the region, and elsewhere, working on public governance reform issues.

Working methods should guarantee that policy-makers are able to monitor developments, or the lack thereof, on a chosen set of themes deemed relevant for advancing the better governance agenda in the Western Balkans. This is also a process whereby policy-makers can learn from each other and can make evidence-based policy choices by relying on the work of the working groups and a reinforced ReSPA secretariat.

In long-standing international organisations, such as the OECD, the country peer review has established itself as a working method par excellence. It is an intergovernmental country-specific process whereby policy makers inform their counterparts of their policies. Peer influencing is used by policy makers of other countries to underline areas where reform is needed. This method is resource intensive by nature and requires adequate funding if the peer review process is to produce policy inputs of quality.

Themes

Themes should be identified on which the policy-dialogue should deal and priorities should be established. Some themes are already identified by the ReSPA steering committee and have been worked out for the past few years. Setting priorities entails a strategic approach able to justify the choices made and the allocation of funds.

Products-Outputs

An enhanced international cooperation in such politically sensitive areas as public governance reforms requires strengthening trust among RESPA member countries.

Without a sufficient degree of trust, international cooperation is impossible in areas entailing limitations to the exercise of political power. Establishing systems of checks and balances, of which the civil service, as an institution of the state, is a part, is especially arduous.

ReSPA should determinedly embrace its role as an international standard-setter in the field of public administration and public governance reform for regional integration in the Western Balkans and future EU accession.

This role of ReSPA entails developing its capacities as a multilateral rule-making. In general terms, that role basically consists of a co-operative approach to the development of legally binding decisions and non-binding recommendations containing “good practice” principles and standards to which member countries agree to adhere to.

ReSPA should perhaps confine itself principally to produce non-binding recommendations, as a choice fitting better with its mandate. However, nothing is against RESPA proposing international treaties among its member countries to help better fulfil its own mandate.

ReSPA standard setting recommendations should generally be accompanied with practical guidelines to help in their implementation.

Target Group

Governing Board Members or their substitutes and one representative from the central HRM agency from each country (with managerial responsibilities). Ideally, the representatives should be HRM practitioners responsible for the general HRM policies. Two representatives from each ReSPA member country and Kosovo* (14 in total).

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and it is in line with UNSCR and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration on Independence.