

MINISTERIAL DECLARATION OF THE ReSPA ANNUAL MINISTERIAL MEETING

“On the affirmation of commitment to increase policy dialogue, regional cooperation and political attention to Public Administration Reform in the Western Balkans”

9 November 2021

We, the Ministers and high representatives of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, as Members of the Regional School of Public Administration (ReSPA) in charge for Public Administration Reform;

And, high representatives of the European Commission;

And, the representatives of the SIGMA/OECD Programme;

On the occasion of the 13th ReSPA Governing Board meeting at Ministerial Level held on 9 November 2021,

Preamble

- *Recalling* the 1993 Copenhagen criteria which define that a state which wants to join the European Union shall have *the institutions* to preserve democratic governance and human rights, have a functioning market economy, and accept the obligations and intent of the EU;
- *Recalling* the 2000 Zagreb Summit Declaration, which institutionalized the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP), and emphasis the necessity to implement democratic, economic and *institutional reforms*;
- *Recalling* the 2000 Communication from the Commission to the Council on operational conclusions – EU stabilization and association process, which require to the enlargement countries to intensify the ongoing reform process, *including public administration reform*;
- *Recalling* the conclusions of the first EU-Western Balkans Summit, held in Thessaloniki in 2003, where the Western Balkans countries welcomed and committed, among others, the support for *institution building*;
- *Whereas*, the subsequent EU-Western Balkans summits, organized since 2014 onward under the “Berlin Process”, have continuously emphasized the need to accelerate domestic reform processes, notably in the areas of rule of law, economic governance and *public administration reform*, thereby increasing stability and prosperity in the region;
- *Acknowledging* that under the Instrument of Pre-Accession assistance (IPA) 2007-2013 and 2014-2020, a substantial amount of funds has been dedicated to support Public

Administration Reform in the Western Balkans in order to enable, among others, the modernization of the public administrations in the Region;

- *Considering* that in the 2015 Enlargement Strategy, *public administration reform* is placed as the third pillar of the enlargement process together with rule of law and economic governance (the "fundamentals first" principle). In addition, the Strategy states that core issues of the rule of law, fundamental rights, strengthening democratic institutions, *including public administration reform*, as well as economic development and competitiveness remain key priorities in the enlargement process;
- *Considering* that in the 2018 Enlargement Strategy "A credible enlargement perspective for an enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans", *public administration reform* is considered to be paramount to strengthening governance at all levels;
- *Acknowledging* that the revised enlargement methodology 2020, has placed public administration reform in the first cluster of negotiating chapters, thus proving the substantial importance that this reform has in the accession path;
- *Taking into account* the 2017 SIGMA Principles for EU candidate countries and potential candidates, which support the European Commission's reinforced approach to public administration reform in the EU Enlargement process;
- *Taking into account* the Tallin Declaration on eGovernment of 6 October 2017, which recognizes that a service-oriented, reliable and innovative government is essential to the development of a dynamic, productive and European society;
- *Taking into account* Berlin Declaration on Digital Society and Value-based Digital Government of 08 December 2020, which re-affirms European leaders' strong commitment to fundamental rights and European values and emphasizes the importance of digital public services;
- *Taking into account* the 2021 EU Digital Strategy which proposes a Path to the Digital Decade to deliver the EU's digital transformation by 2030;
- *Taking note* of the findings of the EC Enlargement package 2021 related to public administration reform, as well as the specific EC Country Reports, which confirm achieved reform results, outline unfulfilled objectives and highlight reform areas for each country to be addressed in priority order;
- *Witnessing* the efforts in provision of vital services to citizens and businesses and thus enhancing public trust when tackling the issues of crises caused by Covid-19 pandemic;

The Objectives

- *Convinced* that public administration reform has a specific importance to citizens and businesses, has a positive influence on sectoral reforms and helps to meet the membership criteria for accession;

- *Hereby*, endorse the following objectives, commitments and actions and invite all the administrations in the Region and all actors concerned to undertake specific efforts and measures for their implementation:
 - (a) **To ensure** political leadership for public administration reform and accountability for its implementation, as well as timely prepare, update, revise, substantiate and enforce the necessary Strategic Framework of PAR and to better linkage between policy planning and budgeting processes;
 - (b) **To improve, enhance and make more dynamic** the process of policy development and coordination, through supporting and expanding the role and competences of the Center of Government institutions, aiming to harmonize policy planning with the financial instruments of the Government and make the policy and legislative development more inclusive and evidence-based; Strengthen, improve and further expand the regulatory impact assessment framework, through improving the capacities of RIA Units in Line Ministries and RIA oversight units.
 - (c) **To improve** the policy, legal and institutional frameworks for public service, as well as dedicate more efforts towards the professionalization and de-politization of public service in line with the best human resource management practices. To further improve the implementation of merit-recruitment procedures, developing and strengthening career systems as well as strengthening leadership in the Western Balkans.
 - (d) **To establish** proper mechanisms for ensuring accountability of state administration bodies, including liability and transparency, and continuously improve those mechanisms;
 - (e) **To undertake** further actions, dedicate resources, for improving the legal basis and putting best practices in place to make public administration more citizen-oriented with digitized human-centered services while ensuring the quality and accessibility of public services;
 - (f) **To support** the transition into digital economies and bring benefits of the digital transformation, such as faster economic growth, more jobs and better services,
 - (g) **To dedicate** specific attention and allocate the necessary human and financial resources for proper implementation of the Public Financial Management (PFM) Strategies, with specific focus on budget management, internal control and audit, public procurement as well as external audit. Strengthening strategic planning and budget management at Local Government level as well as gender budgeting shall also be taken into account;
 - (h) **To enhance** regional cooperation, networking and exchange of best practices among the administrations in the region and beyond, with the support of ReSPA, OECD/SIGMA and other relevant actors in the Region;

Implementation

- **Ministers encourage** countries and administrations in the Region to maintain policy dialogue and political commitment in the domain of PAR as well as embed the priorities of this Declaration into the internal PAR Strategies and/or Action plans, as well as measure the implementation of the Objectives;

- **Ministers invite** countries to allocate the necessary financial resources for the implementation of these objectives and to utilize ReSPA resources and expertise, including the “in-country support mechanism” to implement some of the objectives and strategic actions;
- **Ministers invite** countries to cooperate with available programmes, including ReSPA and SIGMA and take advantage of instruments established by the EC and other stakeholders and donors;
- **Ministers invite** countries to inter-institutional and inter-sectoral engagement on policy making, civil service and HRMD, accountability, service delivery and public financial management in creating positive environment for obtaining more trust by citizens and businesses;
- **Ministers urge** ReSPA and SIGMA to assess all the possibilities to extend their activities and support targeting sub-national level;
- **Ministers invite** ReSPA to inform during each annual meeting of the GB at Ministerial Level, on the progress made for the implementation of the actions foreseen under this Section.