

Joint Statement on the Occasion of High-Level Policy Dialogue "Next-Gen Governance: Driving Public Service Innovation in the Western Balkans"

WE, the Ministers and High-Level representatives responsible for public administrations in the Western Balkan, on the occasion of the 16th meeting of the ReSPA Governing Board at the Ministerial Level and the High Level Policy Dialogue "Next-Gen Governance: Driving Public Service Fit for the Future", held in Skopje, North Macedonia, on 26 and 27 November 2024:

UNITED in our resolve to advance public administration reforms (PAR) and enhance institutional and administrative capacities and COMMITTED to leverage on the regional cooperation and knowledge and good practices' exchange within the Western Balkans region and between the region and the European Union, GUIDED by the Principles of Public Administration, developed by SIGMA at the request of the European Commission, as a comprehensive framework of standards and values of a modern public administration;

RECOGNIZING that the quality, capacity and performance of public administration is fundamental to deliver and implement EU-aligned policies and legislation; ACKNOWLEDGING that governance reforms constitute one of the "fundamentals" of the accession process and RECOGNIZING the pivotal role of public administrations in underpinning sustainable growth and advancing the Western Balkans' path toward EU integration and our COMMITMENT to a strategic and financially sustainable approach in driving public administration reform processes, relying on continuous monitoring;

COMMENDING the significant achievements of preparing and adopting Reform Agendas that will accelerate necessary public administration and digitization reforms, and TAKING INTO ACCOUNT the increase in volume and complexity of tasks that civil servants will have to deliver to implement EU-aligned policies and more substantive EU funding attached to the successful implementation of specified steps;

RECALLING the Declaration from the EU-Western Balkans Summit held in Brussels in December 2023, in which the EU reconfirmed: "its continued support to the reforming and capacity-building of public administrations in the Western Balkans, provided notably through grants, twinning as well as through the Regional School of Public Administration (ReSPA)";

WELCOMING the European Commission's CompAct Initiative and prospects of accelerated and progressive integration and phasing in of our region, we remain COMMITTED to contributing to the shared European Administrative Space and joining the relevant European networks and frameworks and to participation in initiatives and instruments such as the Public Administration Cooperation Exchange (PACE) and Technical Support Instrument (TSI) so that Western Balkans civil servants can participate in relevant policy discussions on equal footing with their European peers even ahead of accession;

COMMITTED to advancing public sector recruitment and talent management practices, ensuring a fair and transparent selection process based on merit, and steered by ethical leadership and governance excellence;

DEDICATED to advancing inclusive and evidence-informed policy-making and quality management in public administration to promote effective governance; EMBRACING technology as a catalyst for change, and the importance of integrating digital solutions to enhance efficiency and improve citizen engagement, we ACKNOWLEDGE the values and possibilities provided by the emerging technologies, and especially the ethical use of Artificial Intelligence in enabling seamless, interoperable, citizen-oriented, and secured service delivery based on the needs of citizens to promote enhanced user experience and to strengthen workforce digital competence and innovation;

ACKNOWLEDGING that public trust in institutions is bolstered through promoted transparency, accountability, and responsiveness in public administration; AWARE of the pressing demographic challenges that significantly impact our public administrations and of the necessity for identifying and putting in practice the solutions for more prominent cross-generational collaborations in civil services;

RECOGNIZING the need to capacitate and strengthen the public sector to make it agile, resilient and adaptable in times of crises and EMPHASISING the importance of well-being in building a resilient public workforce;

TAKING INTO ACCOUNT the imminent and unrelenting changes in work trends and the necessity to adjust to these changes, we remain COMMITTED to a more prominent focus on a results-oriented performance management system and to paying due considerations to possibilities of embedding automation and remote work within the public administration functioning;

STRESSING the necessity to make our public administrations greener and to lead by example, contributing in this way to sustainability and climate change, and to prompting innovation, cost savings, and efficiency of our civil service;

EMPHASIZING the importance of gender equality and equal opportunity and integration of gender perspective, transparency, and citizen participation in informed decision and policy-making;

RECALLING the importance of strategic partnerships with universities, research institutions, and private-sector entities to co-create innovative public service solutions;

INSPIRED by the values, principles, and instruments of the European Administrative Space, HAVE today agreed on this Joint Statement, by which WE:

- ✦ COMMIT to embedding the principles of good governance across all levels of administration, aiming to make significant strides toward greater alignment with EU standards, improving the quality of public services for our citizens, and bolstering the region's readiness for EU membership;
- ✦ COMMIT to effectively implement PAR measures specified in the Reform Agendas and Roadmaps for PAR, including by timely and adequately responding to the capacity development needs of civil servants to implement successfully the reform commitments;
- ✦ COMMIT to foster Public-Private Partnerships and collaboration with the private sector as important impulse for driving innovation, through partnerships that leverage expertise and resources to enhance the quality and efficiency of public services;
- ✦ UNDERTAKE to jointly advocate that Western Balkan civil servants participate in relevant EU forums, working groups, expert networks, and CompAct initiatives (such as PACE and TSI), which are of vital importance in ensuring the region's administrations meet the standards necessary for EU accession and enhancing exchanges and interaction with EU Member state administrations and EU institutions that can greatly facilitate the absorption of the EU acquis;
- ✦ COMMIT to developing result-oriented performance management frameworks within the public sector, where clear targets and measurable outcomes are established for public servants, and to deploying a quality management approach in the public sector;
- ✦ EMBOLDEN transparent career progression pathways with clearly defined skills, performance benchmarks, and professional development plans for all public servants;
- ✦ ENCOURAGE the development of national and regional well-being initiatives that provide resources, training, and policies to foster a healthier work environments for public servants and EXPRESS our support for sharing insights and practices regionally to enhance mental health and job satisfaction of civil servants across the Western Balkans;
- ✦ ENCOURAGE the design and implementation of leadership development programs that emphasize ethical governance, strategic foresight, and decision-making capacity to navigate complex public challenges;
- ✦ PLEDGE to advance efforts towards greening Western Balkan public administrations, including via green public procurement, green budgeting, minimizing carbon and environmental footprint of running and managing public administration;
- ✦ WELCOME the opportunities of further bolstering human capacities and mobility among Western Balkans civil servants through mutual learning and sharing of experience and COMMIT to host incoming peers for a job shadowing for a symbolic period of time in our institutions on a reciprocal basis;
- ✦ COMMIT to fostering a culture of innovation, continuous learning, and more collaborative working structures and methods by investing in digital literacy, emerging technologies, and innovation-led professional development programs for public servants across all levels, including through the Knowledge Management Platform.
- ✦ CALL upon ReSPA to continue acting as a unique regional platform for facilitating regional high-level policy dialogue, catalyzing public administration excellence through the sharing of knowledge and best practice examples, strengthening of civil servants' capacities, boosting leadership development, enhancing regional mobility and exchanges between peers and practitioners in the region and in the EU, and to implementing strategic objectives as defined in the ReSPA Strategic Orientation Document 2025-2030. We also call upon ReSPA to further explore avenues of cooperation with EU Member States and EU bodies to enhance the participation of public servants in initiatives and platforms dealing with public administration at the EU level.