



ReSPA

Regional School
of Public Administration

BUILDING TOGETHER
GOVERNANCE FOR THE FUTURE

STRATEGIC ORIENTATION OF RESPA 2025 – 2030

FROM PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION REFORM
TO PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION EXCELLENCE



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INTRODUCTION



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ReSPA Director

It is my pleasure to introduce this draft Strategic Orientation of ReSPA for the period 2025-2030. The purpose of the document – produced by the Secretariat and under the guidance of the Governing Board, after consultation with our key partners – is to guide the planning of ReSPA future work. Based on the evaluation of the progress and achievements already made, and of our potential, it is a bridge towards a realistic vision of a Western Balkan public sector that moves beyond the humbling rhetoric of never-ending reform, and aspires to recognition into the ranks of European excellence.

In embracing this forward-looking strategic orientation, ReSPA aligns with the region's dynamic and evolving outlook. Our commitment is to leverage on the regional approach to foster a professional, accountable, resilient, transparent, citizen-focused and innovative public sector that is a catalyst for responsive governance and sustainable development. We recognize the pivotal role that strong administrations play in shaping the future, extending our commitment to support their mutual collaboration, and their full inclusion into the European Administrative Space.

ReSPA works therefore for a region where collaborative governance transcends borders. By 2030, we anticipate a resilient network of cooperation, where governments can address common challenges through shared platforms and joint initiatives, and contribute to regional stability and prosperity by exchanging practices, networks and knowledge. We are dedicated to make this a reality - also through the organization of high-level Policy Dialogues, the facilitation of institutional and peer networking and learning, and joint capacity development initiatives.

ReSPA strongly contributes also towards 2030 becoming a crucial moment in our journey toward EU accession. Professional, accountable, resilient, and effective administration is paramount to navigating the complexities of this transformative process. We are fully invested in enhancing strong institutions and capacities to meet the rigorous requirements, by a meaningful negotiation trajectory and full *acquis* and standards' implementation. We inspire and catalyse governance reforms, boost leadership and competencies, promote merit, and enhance accountability and transparency to fortify our administrations and align them with EU values.

ReSPA delivers clear value for the public sector in the region, witnessed not only by the unwavering support of the European Union and of the WB Governments' strong regional ownership. The heightened interest for ReSPA civil servants' mobility exchange schemes, on-demand tailored technical assistance support for reforms and eGov pilots, or the enthusiasm for the regional PA Awards propel us to do even more and unlock as many learning, networking, empowering and growth opportunities for civil servants as possible. And that is what the next pages are for: agile and responsive programming, contextualized in the region's state of play and reform aspirations; innovative activities; keeping abreast with new themes and challenges in public governance; unlocking productive partnerships; leveraging additional funding opportunities; further integrating the region in all relevant EU platforms and programmes for public administration. Aspiring to be an even more relevant reform lever and regional cooperation and excellence hub, we hope to soon work more with all of you on all these fronts, as we put in the spotlight the importance of bolstering human capital in the public sector. It would be an honour to serve the public sector excellence in the region.

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1. STRATEGIC FOCUS



LIST OF ACRONYMS

CAF	Common Assessment Framework
ComPAct	EU Initiative Enhancing the European Administrative Space
DG	Directorate-General
DISPA	Directors of Institutes and Schools of Public Administration
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
EUPAN	European Public Administration Network
GB	Governing Board
HR	Human Resources
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance
KMP	Knowledge Management Platform
LMS	Learning Management System
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OGP	Open Government Partnership
PAR	Public Administration Reform
PA	Public Administration
PACE	Public Administration Cooperation Exchange
PFM	Public Financial Management
PoW	Programme of Work
QM	Quality Management
ReSPA	Regional School of Public Administration
RIA	Regulatory Impact Assessment
RQMC	Regional Quality Management Center
RYCO	Regional Youth Cooperation Office
SIGMA	Support for Improvement in Governance and Management
TAIEX	Technical Assistance and Information Exchange
TSI	Technical Support Instrument
WB	Western Balkans

Creating and executing initiatives to modernize and digitalize public administrations, enhance management systems, improve civil servants' competencies, and attract new talent with relevant expertise is and will continue to be crucial for the Western Balkans in the upcoming years, especially in light of the rapid pace of digital and green transformations, the EU integration process and the overall objectives for sustainable and inclusive growth. Additionally, these efforts could serve as a tool for implementing in the region the measures and priorities envisaged in the EC Communication on Strengthening the European Administrative Space. The ultimate objective of these efforts should be to improve not only the efficiency of public administrations but also the quality of services provided to citizens and businesses.

Based on art. 15.1.a) of the Agreement Establishing the Regional School of Public Administration (ReSPA) the Governing Board issues this document as general guidelines for the planning of work between January 2025 and December 2030. This introductory chapter concisely analyses the current landscape of Public Administration Reform across the region, outlines ReSPA's mission and objectives, and identifies potential future directions that will guide its efforts over the next six years.

1.1. Current state of art in the region

Despite overall positive progress in the public administration reforms over the last decades, the region still faces the challenge of implementation gaps and adequate technical and administrative capacity within public administrations (PAs). In recent years, these administrations have had to confront increasingly complex challenges, while simultaneously navigating significant transformations, including adapting to digital and green transitions. Budgetary limitations have significantly impeded public administrations' modernization efforts and their ability to attract and retain skilled staff, weakening their capacity to handle more demanding tasks. However, European integration has accelerated Public Administration Reform (PAR) in the Western Balkans (WBs) for over two decades. The vision for the future is now shaped by the **Principles of Public Administration**, constituting the blueprint for good governance, which are a reference in the cluster of "fundamentals" determining the length of accession negotiations. The Principles of Public Administration provide crucial guidance for all public administration reform efforts in EU candidates and potential candidates. They are the main policy and assessment framework for public administration reforms developed by SIGMA and endorsed by both the EC and the OECD. EU-funded budget support and technical assistance, expanding most recently with the Growth Plan and gradual integration opportunities previously reserved to EU Member States only, provide essential backing to the governments of the region in their reform efforts.

Relying on this European partnership, all Western Balkans administrations have by now implemented multiple Public Administration Reform cycles, achieving overall marks between "some level of preparation" and "moderately prepared" for EU accession. Regardless of obvious differences in performance, this leaves the WBs administrations with significant improvements to make, especially as progress is focused mostly on policy instruments and legislation, while implementation is uneven across government sectors and levels. Common issues to address include: *challenges in political and administrative culture, limitations in human resources, need for enhanced evidence-informed policy making, uneven progress in service delivery and digitization, fragmented accountability frameworks, due regard for oversight institutions and their recommendations, need for bolstered transparency and accountability in PFM and public procurement, as well as challenges in practical application of multi-level governance frameworks.*

¹ This summary is jointly developed with SIGMA and is based on the latest SIGMA findings about the functioning of public administrations in the Western Balkans in 2024. The insights provided here are generally aligned with SIGMA's assessment and reflect on the shared challenges and opportunities for public administration reform in the region.

Namely, despite clear ministerial accountability and credible plans for public administration reform and public financial management (PFM), a range of challenges within the political and administrative culture in the Western Balkans impedes accelerated progress, including the gap between policy and practice, with a limited focus on implementing reforms to achieve measurable outcomes and the frequent shifts in political leadership that can impact the continuity in reform efforts and the sustained momentum among senior civil service management. Public access to information, while generally supported by legal frameworks, also faces implementation challenges.

With public administration outcomes greatly influenced by the capacity and quality of its personnel, challenges remain in establishing a professional and stable top management layer within public institutions. Recruitment processes are at times characterized by low competitiveness, and inadequate strategies for attracting and retaining qualified candidates and political influence. Furthermore, HR analysis and planning remain generally underdeveloped, reducing the effectiveness of efforts to build a merit-based recruitment system. Performance management practices can be further improved, and a broader performance-oriented culture is yet to be consolidated. Other challenges that can be highlighted are the limited salary competitiveness, the absence of flexible working arrangements, and the lack of modern HR management information systems.

While there have been successful reforms in policy development, the quality and outcomes of policymaking across the region remain inconsistent. Transparency in decision-making can be advanced, with public consultation and stakeholder engagement still underutilized by institutions. Challenges related to consistent policy planning and harmonization with budget allocations can impact the legislature's ability to scrutinize effectively. Impact assessments, though present, are often completed in a formalistic manner, undermining the potential for meaningful evidence-based decisions, while the practice of monitoring and evaluating policies can be further improved. Legislative processes can also often benefit from a more substantial consultation between parliaments and governments, especially in utilizing evidence for effective lawmaking.

Though ambitious reform plans for service delivery and digital transformation exist across the region, implementation is still inconsistent and can be further advanced, while coordination of service delivery policies at times lacks clear lead institution in some administrations. While there have been positive strides in certain areas, challenges persist in ensuring citizens need to provide information to the administration only once, structuring services around key life events, and monitoring service performance. Some administrations have made progress in digital infrastructure, such as registries and digital identity systems, others need yet to address these aspects. Additionally, measuring and disclosing service performance remains uncommon, and the region generally lags behind EU countries in terms of digital public services. This gap in service digitalization reflects the broader need for a stronger focus on user-centric service principles and consistent digital advancement.

Some of the challenges of the organizational structure of public administrations across the Western Balkans has included a proliferation of state bodies that at times operate without consistent logic or policy direction. The lack of a standardized typology for administrative bodies and inconsistent implementation of standards when establishing new institutions complicates governance. Challenges relate also to fragmented accountability frameworks, weaker performance management and accountability structures between implementing agencies and respective ministries, delegation of responsibility, and empowerment of middle and senior management – which can have a bearing on the capacity of public administration to adapt and implement reforms effectively.

Advancement needs relate also to oversight institutions, which play a critical role in holding the executive accountable, and the follow-through and acting upon the recommendations from institutions such as Ombudsman and Supreme Audit Institutions, as well as to enhanced parliamentary engagement with oversight bodies.

There is a need for improved transparency and accountability in public financial management and public procurement at all government levels, including improved linkages between the

management of public funds and policy. This is particularly the case in areas like assets management and public procurement, which despite regulatory efforts continue to be perceived as prone to potential corruption. Though procurement laws in many Western Balkan administrations are increasingly aligned with EU standards, there is still room for strengthening the legislative and procedural aspects.

With multi-level governance frameworks formally established and respected, challenges remain in their practical application, with prospects for improving inter-municipal cooperation and collaborative governance potential, financial discipline at the municipal level, and need for advancing the capacities of public servants working at the regional or local level.

In addition, according to the **2024 Enlargement Package**², in the area of PAR, the biggest challenge relates to the functioning of the civil service and the management of human resources, including politicization, with the lack of reforms continuing to drive a high turnover of staff. This has been generally affecting the design and implementation of reform policies, including under the Reform and Growth Facility, and remains a key obstacle to taking on EU membership obligations. More action is needed on the institutional coordination of PAR and the strengthening of the oversight institutions to ensure proper accountability. In the area of public finance management (PFM), the main challenges are related to: public investment management; monitoring fiscal risks; improving fiscal discipline; linking strategic planning to the medium-term budgetary frameworks and improving their credibility; further strengthening public internal financial controls; and improving budget transparency. Additionally, the provision of reliable and timely official statistics by national statistical authorities is essential. Therefore, further strengthening of the capacity of national statistical systems remains a key element of the reform process.

Addressing these complex issues requires both political motivation and technical capacity. On the political side, recent developments in the EU Enlargement Policy, after twenty years, offer fresh incentives, though fully capitalizing on these opportunities remains to be fully operationalized. On the technical side, robust EU-funded assistance to Public Administration Reform is spearheaded by the SIGMA programme, as well as projects from the national IPA III envelopes (paired with generous budget support), as well Twinning projects, Technical Assistance and Information Exchange (TAIEX) inputs, and substantive support by ReSPA. Additional bilateral assistance is also provided by various EU Member States, and other development partners, offering valuable support alongside the available EU-funded programs.

1.2 ReSPA's objectives

The new ReSPA Strategic Orientation 2025-2030 builds upon the achievements of the ReSPA Strategy 2019-2024 (key highlights entailed in numbers):

ReSPA's Strategy 2019-2024:

As of May 2019, until October 2024, ReSPA has:

- Implemented **6 consecutive Annual Programmes of Work**, crafted under the strategic guidance of the Governing Board;
- Implemented **250+ regional activities** and initiatives;
- Strengthened the capacities of **5.580+ participants** from **110+ institutions** from across the Region;
- A total of **12.000+ participant days**;
- Implemented **70+ on-demand** technical assistance reform projects;
- Implemented **30+ short-term mobility schemes** among public servants;
- Provided **50+ scholarships** to top public servants for attending international conferences and executive training programmes in EU member states and institutes;
- Developed **20+ research papers and comparative analysis**, thematic snapshots and policy briefs;
- Organized **3 cycles of the WBs Public Administration Awards**.
- In a highly welcomed recognition, the Leaders of all EU MS and WB Leaders acknowledged the importance of the role of ReSPA and the importance of public administration reform for the enlargement process were in the **Declaration of the EU-Western Balkan Summit** held in Brussels in December 2023, the EU recalled: *"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)"*. ReSPA's role in strengthening the public institutions was likewise recognized at the last WB Growth Summit held in May 2024 in Kotor.

Furthermore, the **external independent evaluation of ReSPA impact 2019-2022** noted that:

- ✦ ReSPA has expanded its capacity development approach and included modes of interventions designed to further support the specific and individual needs of the administrations, including seasonal schools and mobility schemes. This approach is grounded in the exchange of knowledge and peer-to-peer learning approach between administrations or exchange with specific experts from the EU.
- ✦ ReSPA's interventions - at various levels - have directly contributed in *developing, assessing and supporting the implementation of the PAR strategies* in the administrations.
- ✦ The strengthened *networking and cooperation in PAR at the regional level* is considered to be one of the biggest contributions of ReSPA. Networking and cooperation take place in a particular way. Thematic Working Groups present a network or community of practitioners who both discuss, plan and participate in the implementation of joint activities and are at the same time their beneficiaries.
- ✦ Promotion of advanced skills and tools in the different fields of intervention – for ReSPA Members, one of the main ReSPA's added-values is *providing access to knowledge on the global or European trends* and innovations in PAR and the EU integration process. *On-demand support has been found extremely useful*, but the level of ownership and pro-activeness on the part of the beneficiary institution determined the quality and the benefits of the outputs and the ultimate effect of the support.

In this respect, the **ReSPA Strategic Orientation 2025-2030** builds on the successes of the 2019-2024 Strategy, leveraging its achievements to drive further advancements. It is the responsibility of the ReSPA Members and the ReSPA Secretariat, under the guidance of the Governing Board, to build upon these accomplishments and advance the strategic goals of the organization. By capitalizing on the strong foundation laid through comprehensive regional initiatives, capacity-building efforts, and impactful research, the new strategic orientation aims to deepen its commitment to enhancing public sector effectiveness and regional cooperation. This forward-looking approach will ensure that ReSPA continues to meet the evolving needs of its member institutions and contribute meaningfully to the overall progress of public administration in the region.

The Vision, Mission, and Motto of ReSPA 2030 are briefly described below:

VISION: ReSPA serves as a regional innovation hub dedicated to supporting the transformation of public institutions in the Western Balkans into modern, resilient, and human-centered entities, by driving excellence and fostering regional growth and cooperation, propelling a joint European future.

MISSION: ReSPA bolsters regional collaboration and partnership with EU Member States, elevating the expertise of public administrators to transform public institutions into modern and resilient ones that benefit its people and propel their European future. ReSPA believes that strengthening administrative capacity will lead to greater impact on quality of life.

MOTTO: Building together Governance for the Future!

The contribution of ReSPA to the regions' progress during the next phase of its European integration process, depends on its positioning within this complex landscape of reform needs and assistance opportunities. The objectives in ReSPA's establishing Agreement, assigned by its member governments in 2010, remain valid to this day and are the necessary starting point. Laid out in article 4, they can be summarized into two strategic directives:

Objective 1. Strengthening capacity

ReSPA is to strengthen capacity and develop the human resources of the administrations of the region, in line with European integration requirements (and the Principles of PA).

• The first objective, concerning ReSPA's role as a provider of know-how and learning opportunities, is deployed in line with the Principles of Public Administration and the various shared multi-faceted governance challenges. In prioritizing this objective, due attention is made to the proactive interest from members` and beneficiary administrations (preferably, of multiple administrations), on the type of activity, the thematic area, and the synergy of similar assistance from other organizations. In the past period, ReSPA reduced high-volume training (especially by traditional frontal means) to make space and support the growth of national public service training systems. To this end, the capacity-strengthening work focused more on support to the centre of government, the regional thematic platforms, applied research, mobility and exchange, regional policy dialogue, peer-to-peer networking and hands-on advice. Within this trend, thematic emphasis moved to high-impact topics less well-covered by traditional development partners. Nevertheless, ReSPA continued with *strong learning and capacity building activities* via a regional approach, including through ReSPA Academies, Seasonal Schools, executive trainings in collaboration with renowned partners, etc. Banking on region's success stories and leapfrogging potential, ReSPA often worked on practices that even some EU Members regard as cutting-edge.

• The second objective is to improve cooperation in the region and with EU Members in the area of public governance and European Integration. Cooperation is a channel to access know-how, but also a separate objective that expresses the determination of ReSPA Members and Beneficiary to embrace a collaborative narrative of public authority, to overcome the region's past. It gives ReSPA a parallel, near-diplomatic role that brings in original added value cultivated through dedicated activities like the high-level policy dialogues, but also through joint participation in other activities. The latter are not limited to those that ReSPA directly leads within its intentionally *niche* capacity-strengthening programmes. In recent years, in fact, ReSPA also performed an increasing number of interventions based on *partnerships* with actors based in EU Members or within the region that were already offering interesting learning opportunities, research services or technical assistance. In such cases, ReSPA acts as a multiplier widening access to beneficiaries in the WB administrations, supporting scaled-up design, and assisting with follow-up. ReSPA will serve as a vital vehicle and platform for sharing best practices across the Western Balkans, inspiring and empowering public servants to implement effective reforms. By facilitating knowledge exchange and collaboration, ReSPA aims to create a culture of continuous learning and improvement in public administration. This approach will not only enhance regional cooperation but also strengthen the capacity of institutions to respond to the challenges of governance. Measuring success of the ReSPA 2025-2030 interventions will clearly depend on twofold measurements: the quality of the ReSPA's capacity-building, and cooperation initiatives. These will focus on different aspects of programmes and activities. The monitoring framework that will be separately developed along with the Programme of Work(see 3.1.3. below) will more precisely define one indicator per objective, with targets to stimulate performance improvements across successive operational planning cycles.

Objective 2. Improving cooperation

ReSPA is to improve cooperation among the administrations of the region in Public Administration Reform, and strengthen similar exchanges with European Union's Member States.

1.3 Evolving counterparts

Throughout the period, the central public administrations in the Western Balkans will continue to be the core of ReSPA's primary beneficiaries – with the possibility of attaining all-inclusive Western Balkans coverage in line with the ReSPA Governing Board 2013 Resolution, remaining open and actively pursued.

Additionally, in view of the changed enlargement context, the Governing Board recognizes the potential for other EU-aspiring countries, particularly those within the Eastern Partnership Trio, to engage with and benefit from ReSPA's initiatives in public administration reform and EU integration. Adopting a cautious and phased approach, public servants from the Trio can initially be invited to participate remotely in ReSPA activities. As this engagement model potentially evolves, also depending on their EU accession trajectory, opportunities for deeper collaboration and exchange will be evaluated to enhance mutual benefits and integration, under the close guidance of the Governing Board, and upon budget availability through grants or programmes funded by various development partners.

To date, ReSPA primarily dealt with central level public administrations (Ministries, Agencies and Government Offices), but under the 2025-2030 programming period the Secretariat shall consider targeting regional and local level public administrations as secondary beneficiaries in activities dealing with the coordination, organizational and budgetary issues for which they are now covered in the 2023 edition of the Principles of Public Administration. Due to their large number, their inclusion will be considered on a pilot basis and will follow up on the current ReSPA instruments open for local level (eg. PA award, quality management at local level, or the commenced dialogue with local partners on building capacities for EU integration). ReSPA will actively support **multi-level governance** by fostering collaboration among local, regional, and national public administrations within the Western Balkans. Through targeted initiatives, ReSPA aims to enhance the coordination mechanisms and capacities across these levels, enabling more effective and integrated policy responses. This focus will empower administrations to address complex challenges with cohesive strategies that align local actions with national and regional goals.

Similarly, ReSPA collaborated with actors other than public administrations - like business, scientific, academic, and civil society organizations in a more limited capacity. Enhancing cooperation of the public administrations with these actors may be essential to foster a stronger contribution to policy development and the monitoring of implementation.



2. DELIVERY APPROACH

With the *raison d'être*, counterparts and objectives defined, ReSPA's approach to delivery will take an agile approach. Building on ReSPA's experience with different planning methods, this Strategic Orientation will not prescribe fixed programmes, aggregating activities in manners unlikely to remain relevant across the long 6-year run in the current poly-crises context. Programme design, under the strategic guidance of the GB, will instead be left to the annually updated Programme of Work and Budget, based on indications in this Strategic Orientation on the key components that they should contribute to. These are essentially three:

- ✦ **Activity types** – i.e., forms of interaction a programme will use
- ✦ **Thematic areas** – i.e., PAR subjects a programme will cover
- ✦ **Partnerships** – i.e., teaming up with other relevant and development actors

Additionally, the Programmes submitted under the EC funded Action Grants, will entail 3-4 years programme.

The sections below provide indicative catalogues for each of these components. Most of the entries and considerations are not entirely new, as they are based on the rationalization of past successful practices and concepts – especially in the final period of the previous work cycle (from the 2022 last Strategy update to date). The formal requirements for presenting programmes to the Governing Board and their coordination and monitoring as part of the Programme of Work and Budget are dealt with later, in the final chapter.

2.1 Types of activities

The catalogue of activity types follows a simple sequence: ReSPA can act as a regional forum to build reform commitment and provide assistance. It can carry out limited applied research to identify and codify relevant good practices, including from the region; and it can arrange learning opportunities about them, in a range of formats. Finally, it can offer hands-on technical assistance to a specific reform, based on all the above. A programme can go through the full range of inputs, or be limited to some (e.g., when building on previous work).

2.1.1. Regional fora – ReSPA's institutional position is at the same time close to the ReSPA Members and Beneficiary, to the European Commission (key funder of activities), as well as other development partners that approach it seeking a channel to the region. Occupying this spot provides ReSPA with ideal regional convening potential as a facilitator and a broker, which can be used in the interest of all parties. Activities listed below amount essentially to “sectorial diplomacy”, and can be broken down into four main streams:

- ✦ **High-level policy dialogues** - This well-established stream brings ministers and senior officials of the WB administrations together with representatives of the EC and other partners, including businesses, civil society and academia. The main format - on PAR in EU integration – aims to keep high political commitment to the governance reform process and agendas, supporting voicing and follow-up to political declarations/statements, in close coordination with EC. Beside it, ReSPA will continue to hold, often in collaboration with EU Member States, specialized High-level/Ministerial dialogues with greater technical detail;
- ✦ **Workshops and Trainings** - ReSPA will continue to design and deliver targeted workshops and training sessions, building on its extensive expertise in Public Administration Reform and EU integration. These capacity-building activities will be tailored to the needs of ReSPA Members, beneficiary and other stakeholders, focusing on enhancing skills, knowledge, and competencies required for effective public administration as well as, present best use cases, allowing other administrations to learn about strengths, weaknesses, challenges, and solutions through in-depth knowledge transfer. Capacity-building actions and initiatives will cover a wide range of topics, including digital transformation, civil service reform, and EU integration processes, ensuring alignment with regional and EU standards. Innovative

training will be delivered through a combination of in-person, online, and hybrid formats, utilizing, among other, ReSPA's training facilities and digital platforms. This stream will also explore opportunities for collaboration with EU institutions and other development partners, ensuring that training content remains highly engaging, relevant and up-to-date with the latest developments in public administration and governance;

- ✧ **Regional outreach** – Especially in the last two years, ReSPA has more and more frequently cooperated within reform partnerships (e.g., regional organizations, SIGMA, but also bilateral donors, national schools of PA, implementing Agencies of EU Member States). These actors can benefit from better access to ReSPA's regional networking, expertise, logistic and local follow-up capabilities. ReSPA will therefore continue to engage in selected activities and initiatives extending the regional outreach of partners' initiatives, compatibly with its own agenda;
- ✧ **Donors' forum**- Development cooperation in PAR, PFM and Good Governance underwent a transformation in recent years, with several donors re-sizing their portfolios and increasingly looking for regional level opportunities. ReSPA's regional convening capacity in the area of PAR can contribute to facilitating donor coordination in its speciality area. The central activity will be a prospective donors' conference (with development partners and national administrations), integrated by acting as a contact point for sharing information on an ongoing basis;
- ✧ **Collaboration and progressive integration in relevant EU networks, platforms and instruments** – The possible inclusion of EU Candidates in bodies and programs in principle designed for EU Members is a welcome novelty in Enlargement policy, in need of operationalization in the PAR area. ReSPA has a specific mandate from its Agreement, to facilitate cooperation with European administrations, which is relevant. It will therefore work with the EC to explore and facilitate opportunities related to networks (DISPA, EUPAN, EC Expert Group on Public Administration and Governance), as well as programs (e.g., ComPAct), including the possible channelling of resources to support these endeavours: in the advent of WB participating in ComPActs' and, in case the Technical Support Instrument (TSI) operationalizes in future also towards the WBs, ReSPA can be the vehicle supporting such efforts. ReSPA aims to be a strong advocate for the region, actively representing and amplifying the voices of its member and beneficiary administrations in all relevant discussions on public administration. By facilitating their participation in key European and international forums, ReSPA will ensure that the region's interests and perspectives are effectively communicated and considered. This proactive approach will help foster closer cooperation with EU peers and align public administration practices with European standards. ReSPA's commitment to being the region's voice will not only enhance its influence but also support the region's integration into broader European public administration networks. The possibility to host meetings of EU platforms in the region will be also considered;
- ✧ **Citizens' perception surveys** – To further guide these efforts, ReSPA can seek to organize citizen perception surveys, labelled as PARoMETER, in close consultation with key partners, to gather insights on public administration performance. These surveys can offer valuable feedback, helping administrations align their strategies more closely with citizens' expectations and needs.

2.1.2. Applied research – Over two decades of public administration reform in the region have resulted in a wealth of experience in the practical design and implementation of reforms based on European standards and practices. The lessons that can be drawn from successes - and from failures – have been at the centre of ReSPA's research activities, and may represent an important source for peer-level knowledge transfers. With this in mind, work planning shall provide for improvements to existing research activities:

- ✧ **Policy papers** – ReSPA carried out over 30 comparative studies with recommendations based on regional reform experiences, touching on most areas of the Principles. They are developed with independent experts under the direction of ReSPA's thematic Working Groups (comprising of mid-level to senior specialists from institutions of the region). Moving forward, ReSPA will focus on producing briefer outputs, such as policy briefs and knowledge bites, which will distil key insights and recommendations into more accessible formats;
- ✧ **Policy Briefs and Knowledge Bites** will seek to address specific challenges and emerging issues in public administration reform. These short, focused publications and videos will distil key insights, best practices, and actionable recommendations into easy-to-follow formats,

making them accessible to a wider audience of policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders. These shorter documents will facilitate easier digestion by public servants, enabling them to quickly grasp essential information and apply it effectively in their reform efforts. Policy Briefs will target high-level decision-makers, offering strategic guidance on pressing policy issues, while Knowledge Bites will cater to a broader audience by providing practical tips and summaries of key reform experiences, new trends and emerging topics. This initiative will enhance ReSPA's role as a "knowledge broker", ensuring that valuable lessons from the region are quickly and effectively disseminated, supporting continuous learning and informed decision-making across the Western Balkans;

- ✧ **Public Administration Awards and other Regional Challenges**– The Secretariat is scouting good practices from the region through quality awards and challenges. Since 2020, it runs together with SIGMA the "Western Balkans Public Administration Awards", with multiple selected winners in each edition. For the future, the Secretariat will explore the possibility of structuring award categories so that awarded projects and teams can feed into ReSPA's pool for comparative studies, learning initiatives, and the delivery of on-demand technical assistance. In 2024, for the first time ReSPA organized the "Regional Open Data Challenge", a unique initiative that recognised, awarded, and promoted the innovative reuse of open data for a greener, more inclusive, and digital future. Such inspiring competitions and challenges among public services will be in the ReSPA focus in the upcoming period.

2.1.3. Learning opportunities – During the last working cycle, ReSPA placed a greater emphasis on capacity building through peer learning, networking, and exchange, gradually shifting from its traditional role as predominantly a training provider to a knowledge exchange and networking hub and facilitator of technical assistance. In the upcoming cycle, ReSPA will continue to leverage these modalities to enhance learning opportunities for officials, managers, and selected mid-senior specialists, while also supporting tailor-made learning and mobility schemes for young professionals. The focus will increasingly be on innovative methods such as learning-by-doing, online interaction, and self-instruction, complementing the new strategic direction and enriching the overall learning experience;

- ✧ **Knowledge events** – ReSPA's ministerial-level events and thematic workshops, targeting the communities of decision-makers and lead practitioners, will continue, but only as they support other key activities. The previous, flagship seasonal schools (on European Integration, Digital Transformation) will be supplemented by learning opportunities and materials modules available online through the Knowledge Management platform.
- ✧ **Peer bench-learning** – The mechanism, modelled upon an EU methodology for a similar mechanism, can create a systematic and integrated link between benchmarking and mutual learning activities. It can support public institutions from the region in improving performance by comparing with regional and EU peers and learning from them, via qualitative and quantitative assessments of institutional performance;
- ✧ **Self-learning - ReSPA's Knowledge Management Platform**, aimed to enhance capacities of administrations in the region by knowledge sharing, promoting, and using good practices, tools, and resources, through presentation of research outputs, endorsement of the networking and cooperation among the Western Balkan's civil servants providing information and access to relevant training opportunities will a wide repository of documents, and knowledge products developed by ReSPA and other partners, including information on various training opportunities, pre-recorded and self-paced learning sessions. Individual public servants will also be able to benefit from learning materials, and from knowledge gained through peer discussion groups to be organized as part of the Knowledge Management Platform;
- ✧ **Mobility schemes** - ReSPA's short-term mobility scheme will be further boosted and developed, modelled upon the "Erasmus for civil servants", with delivery upscaled. It will involve public servants from different beneficiary administrations exchanging visits with colleagues from counterpart institutions, to gain insights on successful reforms in another Western Balkan administration, or/and EU Member State. ReSPA will continue to support WB participation in the PA Cooperation Exchange (PACE) - in close coordination with EC and EU Member States concerned. A longer (larger scale) version will also be piloted, tailor-made with elements of executive education and job shadowing implemented with partners from EU and WBs institutions;
- ✧ **Horizontal facility** – The facility supports public servants taking part in regional or international

conferences, training or events organised by Public Administration schools, universities or multilateral bodies located in the EU. It may also be prospectively used to integrate Western Balkan public servants into DG REFORM's projects for public servants of EU Members under its ComPAct initiative. The Horizontal Facility can also support organization of joint activities with relevant partners.

2.1.4. Technical assistance - The fourth type of ReSPA activities consists of the provision of *technical assistance* tailor-made for specific reforms, targeting one or multiple administrations. This support, which has a 10-year history, is demand-driven and is normally triggered by requests that have their basis in high-level national policy frameworks. It can cover any phase in the reform process, from preparation and design to development and implementation, and for the period up to 2030, is expected to comprise of two streams:

- ✦ **ReSPA On-demand support instrument** – Assistance to the implementation of reforms from national PAR and PFM strategic frameworks will be activated by specific requests suited for expert interventions (unless ad hoc donors are found to be available). The scheme will be upgraded with a priority on *multi-country flagships* involving institutions of two or more administrations, and limited earmarked support for *regional/local level* pilots;
- ✦ **ReSPA Innovator** – ReSPA will start a regional innovation lab, prospectively prioritizing requests stemming also from the Reform Agendas in relevance for governance/digitization. The scheme will be evolved starting from the existent GovTech and eGov Pilots initiatives, and will also be extended to the use of social innovation techniques (e.g. public participation) with less central technological support. Partnership with OECD's Observatory for Public Sector Innovation and innovation labs in EU Members will be sought for this purpose.

2.2. Thematic Areas

ReSPA's thematic focus will continue to be open to all areas of the Principles of Public Administration, while ensuring full synergy with efforts and initiatives of other development partners aiming for higher impact and more innovative content. They will be implemented for participants from all administrations, through open activities that create occasions to exchange experiences and to develop informal communities of practice.

2.2.1. European integration - Public administrations play a key role in implementing policies and managing the majority of EU funds to citizens and businesses. Enhancing their capacity to deliver on EU-aligned policies, enforce the alignment with EU legislation, and manage EU funds efficiently, directly contribute to the prospective participation of the WBs in the Single Market. The area builds on previous well-rated work and comprises activities aimed at supporting national administrations with the competences essential to navigate the EU accession process, and later contribute to the making and implementation of EU policies. The selected sub-areas follow the gradual integration approach in the Enlargement Methodology. Main themes include:

- ✦ **Capacity on negotiation and communication skills** – ReSPA will provide tailored capacity-building for the organization of negotiation and negotiating techniques for personnel involved in accession talks, as well as in future negotiations within EU structures and during involvement in the EU decision-making processes. It also covers development of communication skills for conveying complex issues to accession-relevant stakeholders. Capacity building

A "Regional Thematic Group on EU Integration" is established as of 2023, targeting important aspects of the accession process such as the accelerated integration, the phasing-in approach, the revised methodology, the cluster-based approach, transposition of the *acquis*, and the Growth Plan. ReSPA has regularly organized the annual "European Integration" Seasonal School and deployed several executive education programmes crafted in collaboration with renewed schools of governance and colleges in EU Member States to advance skills in EU affairs and governance. Thanks to the strategic partnership with the DG Translation of the EC, a 7-module capacity building programme was designed and delivered targeting "acquis translation" capacities across WBs. The multi-module capacity building programme focused on Clusters of the negotiating chapters has been launched with Cluster 1 and 6 implemented in 2024 and the remaining Clusters in 2025.

Finally, ReSPA has supported the elaboration of a comprehensive training programme "Ready4EU" via which Montenegro will train civil servants aspiring to continue their careers in the EU institutions.

will also aim to enhance the understanding of the EU decision-making process and the role that an administration can play;

- ✦ **Capacity on legal approximation and policy harmonization** - ReSPA will contribute to strengthen in-depth understanding of the EU general legal framework, as well as of sectorial *acquis* in selected areas of accession negotiation. The Policy Harmonization element addresses instead techniques for effective coordination between national and EU policies, and for organizing and managing implementation;
- ✦ **Capacity on project management for EU-funded programs** – Additional capacity building, relevant also to the Growth Plan and future European Structural and Investment Funds, will focus on project design, implementation, and evaluation; financial management and reporting; as well as transparency and accountability standards. A distinctive feature will consist of promoting emphasis on digitalization to streamline the relevant processes;
- ✦ **Support to implementation of the EU integration agenda in the region** – ReSPA will continue to decrypt important processes and concepts, such as the gradual integration, the phasing in approach, though tailor-made programmes. The dedication to the fundamentals and the basics of the European integration process will be complemented with the new developments. Under the guidance of its GB, ReSPA can assist the implementation of the Reform Agendas, in particular in relation to advancing the fundamentals and PAR-related measures. ReSPA may also address horizontal capacity building needs that might stem from the implementation of the Reform Agendas, which can benefit from regional approach. Building on already commenced work, it can also enable dialogue among regional champions, and with EU Members with similar experiences (National Resilience & Recovery Plans). *Institutional strengthening* stands as a fundamental priority, directing efforts towards the establishment of robust and adaptive institutions capable of meeting the stringent requirements set forth by the EU. The focus extends to enhancing organizational capacities to ensure not only effective governance but also compliance with EU standards, fostering a resilient and adaptable administrative infrastructure. Joining forces with other regional actors in supporting the implementation of the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans through strengthening the administrative capacities of the national authorities, will contribute to making reforms sustainable (including public administration reform, good governance, service delivery).

2.2.2. Policy management and better regulation - The area focuses on advancing the effectiveness of policy development processes by enhancing the capacities of national administrations for evidence-informed decision-making. It builds on partnership with EU Members and EUPAN in scaling up best practices to our region, following the principles in the Ghent Declaration of February 2024. Main themes include:

ReSPA's Regional Academy on evidence-informed policymaking aims to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of policymaking in Western Balkan public administrations. By fostering stronger cooperation with academic institutions, it aims to harmonize policy planning approaches across the region, ensuring better problem-solving and preparing ReSPA members for EU integration. The Academy provides participants with the knowledge and skills necessary for evidence-informed policymaking and creates networking opportunities with peers from the region. The Academy's first four modules covered key topics such as using digital tools in the policymaking process, policy monitoring, evaluation, and the connection between policy and budget planning. These modules included practical tools and case studies from national contexts and addressed diverse approaches such as gender budgeting.

- ✦ **Policy coordination** - Advancing EU integration assumes tackling complex issues that need coordinated response from Centre of Government structures. ReSPA will support regional collaboration mechanisms on responses to global challenges including Sustainable Development Goals – contributing to reducing disparities, social justice, and access to basic services and opportunities. Positive actions shall be considered to strengthen the understanding of importance of gender-informed policies and gender diverse teams;
- ✦ **Foresight capacity** – ReSPA will work on capacity to anticipate and respond to emerging trends such as rapid technological advancement, geopolitical shifts, unforeseen global challenges. ReSPA

will foster synergy with scientific institutions, promoting and expanding ComPAct or other initiatives of the EC Joint Research Centre to develop capacity building on Foresight for Future-Oriented Policymaking;

- ✦ *Better regulation* – Continued efforts will focus on transparency and stakeholders' involvement in regulatory processes, strengthening Regulatory Impact Assessment oversight bodies, simplifying regulations to eliminate bureaucratic hurdles and streamlining procedures to reduce compliance costs. ReSPA will empower a regional pool of regulatory experts highly competent in designing and implementing regulations in line with EU standards. The focus will be put on promoting evidence-informed policymaking, strengthening collaboration between policymakers and scientific institutions, and providing accessible data. Together with prioritizing transparency, accountability, and citizen participation, it will contribute to rebuilding and maintaining public trust;
- ✦ *Policy-budget alignment* – Continued efforts will focus on ways to ensure that budgetary allocations reflect government policy objectives and priorities. ReSPA will explore experiences in the seamless integration of strategic planning and budgeting processes, to ensure the ability of public administration to achieve policy goals within available financial resources.

2.2.3. Digitalization and public services

The thematic area promotes a holistic and coordinated approach of improving public services using digital technologies and quality assurance models as important in transforming and modernising service delivery in public administrations.

It builds on the solid work already carried out in the previous period, and follows the approach in the last iteration of the Principles of Public Administration (2023), which widen the understanding and application of digitalisation as the crosscutting tool for all governments' operation. It also caters for the continuation of ReSPA's work on Quality Management in public sector. Main themes include:

ReSPA has extended robust capacity-building support in the area of service delivery, such as service design, interoperability, open data, cyber resilience, and emerging technologies in public services. This support has been delivered through flagship initiatives like the Digital Seasonal School, Interoperability Learning Weeks and Academies and Data Protection Academies, implemented with partners (DG JUST, OECD, SIGMA, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, Regional Cooperation Council). Through tailored support, ReSPA has made significant contributions to the development of the region's Digital Academies, PAR, Digitization and Cyber strategies, and Action Plans, as well as the digitization of public services and HR systems. Additionally, through the Regional Quality Management Centre, ReSPA has actively promoted a culture of Quality Management and strengthened capacities within the public sector.

- ✦ *Digital transformation governance* – To reinforce the coordination of digital transformation, the program will work on digital leadership and leading institutions, as well on horizontal topics like user-friendly interactions, robust security, policy advocacy for regulatory frameworks, strategic technology plans aligned with EU principles, increased awareness of digital public registries and interoperability, promotion of secure and accessible digital identity solutions, and support for citizen-centric technology platforms;
- ✦ *Trust policies and services* - The program will focus on building trust of citizens and business in e-services by promoting digital identity, digital signature, trust services, digital payment, and delivery solutions, making them easily accessible to everyone and emphasizing their security and functionality;
- ✦ *Digital ready policies* - ReSPA will engage in the activities to shape regulatory frameworks that support digital transformation, regularly reviewing and proposing updates to adapt to the evolving digital landscape while assisting members in developing strategic technology plans aligned with EU principles to guide investments, foster innovation, and ensure sustainability;
- ✦ *Data for Knowledge-Based Economy* - ReSPA will advance the knowledge-based economy by promoting open data usage, supporting the improvement of the data portals, fostering regional and international interoperability, and supporting the Open Government Partnership (OGP) to enhance transparency, inclusivity, and collaboration between public administration and civil society;

- ✦ *Digital skills* – An important part of work will focus on supporting the preparation and implementation of comprehensive digital skills development programs to ensure that public sector professionals possess the competencies for the digital era, focusing on digital skills, emerging technologies, and their applications in public administration to ensure that all members receive comprehensive training in digital literacy;
 - ✦ *Innovative services* - ReSPA will assist administrations in developing a dynamic and adaptable approach to enhancing public policies by incorporating innovative elements. This effort will include advocating for a regional framework that ensures the responsible application of technology to policy challenges. The framework will also prioritize safeguards to protect privacy and ensure that the needs and rights of vulnerable and marginalized groups in society are upheld;
 - ✦ *Emerging technologies* - ReSPA will assist administrations in refining regulatory frameworks to address ethical considerations and data privacy related to emerging technologies, while also emphasizing education and training programs to upskill the workforce, organizing workshops for public sector adoption of new tools, and establishing innovation labs for experimenting with these technologies in a controlled environment.
- Total Quality Management* – The Regional Quality Management Centre will continue analyzing the use of Total Quality Management tools (not limited to CAF) in the region, nurturing the network of specialists, including the CAF national contact points and a network of External Feedback Actors with specific training. The Centre is established and will continue its work as the regional hub for implementing CAF and awarding “CAF Excellence Recognition” certificates to institutions in the region.

2.2.4. Human resources management and development - The area focuses on the emerging topics in human resources management and development for the public sector. Activities will build on the work carried out in previous cycles, and takes stock of the specific evolution of public service discourse in the administration of the regions. Main themes include:

The “Regional Thematic Group on Human Resources Management and Professional Development,” established in 2011, is dedicated to advancing the professionalization of the civil service through reforms, best practice exchanges, and capacity-building activities. The group focuses on crucial areas such as recruitment, performance appraisal, future of work, wellbeing, career and leadership development, while also promoting new HR trends to strengthen organizational growth and integrity in public administration across the region. ReSPA has supported the development of e-recruitment systems, Learning Management System (LMS) systems and HR strategies. Several key initiatives have been implemented, including trainings on HR data analysis, surveys on staff satisfaction and well-being, self-assessments on merit-based recruitment and performance appraisal, regional discussions on important topics like talent management, mental well-being. An informal regional network of the Directors of School of PA also meets regularly and identifies joint collaborations to follow up and actively contributes to EU's DISPA network.

- ✦ *Leadership development* – ReSPA will continue its work in this area with development programs nurturing a new generation of effective and ethical public sector leaders. These programs will emphasize the importance of ethics and integrity in leadership (and not only) while addressing the need for strategic vision and management, maintaining public trust through strong people skills, and promoting inclusion and diversity. They will also harness the potential of digital transformation in policymaking, service delivery, and public engagement;
- ✦ *HR departments* – Professional development for the transformation of HR departments will also be a focus, empowering them to proactively act as strategic partners in making evidence-informed decisions. These departments will be equipped to respond effectively to the evolving and diverse needs of the workforce in an increasingly digital and globalized environment, considering

topics such as teleworking, the right to disconnect, and the ethical use of artificial intelligence in HR;

- ✦ *Attractiveness of public service* – ReSPA will seek to address the attractiveness of the public sector for young and skilled professionals, improving the image of Public Administration as an employer of choice. This will be achieved through branding, promoting inclusion and diversity,

and leveraging digital transformation (such as data analytics to streamline recruitment, onboarding, talent management, employee engagement, and workforce planning). Public sector surveys and regular policy reviews will also be employed to ensure ethical practices are maintained;

- ✦ *Performance management* – ReSPA will support new performance management processes, expanding the purpose of evaluation to build skills and create value through individual development plans. Tools to encourage career development, such as career paths and mobility schemes, will be a key theme, alongside fostering a culture of inclusion and diversity. A greater focus on employee well-being and ethical standards will contribute to a more balanced and supportive environment for both personal and professional growth.

2.2.5. Public financial management and green administration – Given the significance of Public Financial Management (PFM), as emphasized in the Growth Plan, ReSPA can provide targeted contributions in several areas, such as public procurement. ReSPA may assist in the implementation of green public procurement and promoting the concept of “greening public policies and services” by supporting capacity-building and networking efforts aimed at promoting policies that address institutional fragmentation and support whole-of-government approaches to achieving green objectives. This includes facilitating cross-sector collaboration and exchanging of good practices from EU Member States.

Under the guidance of the Governing Board, ReSPA’s role can be to facilitate peer learning and exchange in these areas to support the green transition in the public sector. In an effort to contribute to the implementation of the Green Agenda, ReSPA will consider assisting public sector skills in key agendas such as green administration, digital & green innovation, specific measures of the Common Regional Market, etc.

As in the previous programming period, specific PFM measures identified by ReSPA members will be addressed directly with the relevant administrations. This will be achieved using ReSPA’s available tools and resources, such as “on-demand support” to ensure targeted and effective assistance.

2.3. Partnerships

Besides types of activities and thematic areas, the third ingredient of building programmes under this Strategic Orientation is about the partnerships. Carefully nurturing the most important ones, embodied in constant exchange and support provided to public administrations of the Western Balkans, through invaluable and irreplaceable financial and technical support from the EU, ReSPA will continue to pursue all-inclusiveness and will remain open to recognize constantly changing geopolitical environment.

ReSPA is committed to strengthening strategic coordination with SIGMA Programme to ensure that its initiatives align closely with best practices in public administration reform. This partnership will facilitate collaborative efforts on substantive issues, enhancing our collective impact in the region. By working together on specific initiatives, analytical work, and deployed technical assistance (through the instruments), ReSPA and SIGMA will promote sustainable governance and support the reform agendas of EU candidates and potential candidates.

Meanwhile, ReSPA will remain committed to creating and reinforcing partnerships

In addition to continuous cooperation with regional organizations (Regional Cooperation Council, Transport Community Treaty, Regional Youth Cooperation Office, Western Balkan Fund, Centre of Excellence in Finance, Central European Free Trade Agreement, Western Balkans 6 Chamber Investment Forum, Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South-East Europe, National Alliance for Local Economic Development) which resulted in co-creation and co-organization of numerous activities, ReSPA intensified cooperation and exchange with relevant institutions and organizations based in the EU.

Since 2019 ReSPA formalized its cooperation by signing Memoranda of Understanding / Partnership Agreements / Declarations of Intent with relevant organizations and institutions, such as:

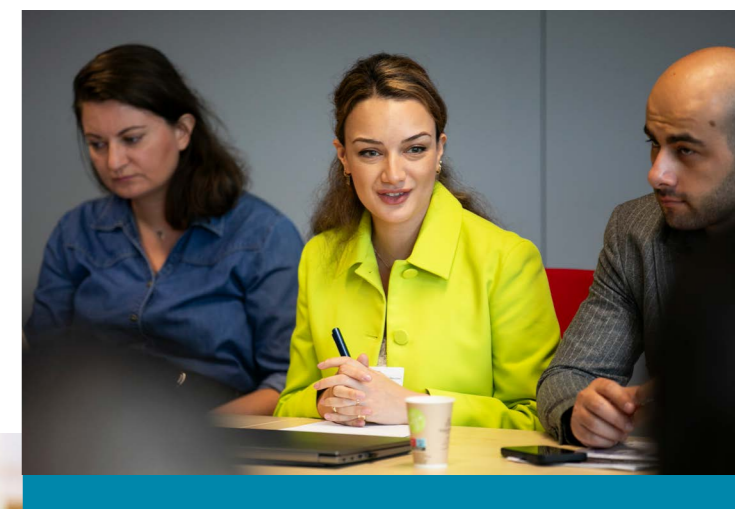
- Italian National School of Public Administration;
- Greece’s National Centre for Public Administration and Local Government;
- Croatian National School of Public Administration;
- Romanian School of Public Administration;
- European University Institute;
- Ministry for Public Transformation and the Civil Service of French Republic,
- Hertie School of Governance.

with pertinent regional and international institutions, organizations, platforms, and initiatives and to the continuous expansion of (peers and experts) networks that could contribute to the further empowerment of civil servants in the Western Balkans. During 2024, ReSPA has strengthened the strategic cooperation with the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which has financially and thematically supported a specific learning and mobility programme for public servants from the Western Balkans, implemented by ReSPA and the Italian National School of Administration (SNA). ReSPA joined a partnership composed of renowned schools of government and colleges from EU Member States, in a joint initiative funded by Horizon Programme and to start in 2025. Finally, stemming from the MoU signed with the Minister for Public Administration and the Civil Service of French Republic, by the end of 2024, for the first time, a French expert deployed by the French administration will be joining ReSPA Secretariat.

Civil servants from the WBs will continue to benefit from capacity-development actions, insights, tools, peer support, exchanges of practice, and cooperation carefully crafted around the identified existing and anticipated needs and guidance provided by the ReSPA Governing Board members and Liaison Officers. Contributions of the Advisory Board will be also welcomed in this regard, while the ReSPA Secretariat will maintain a regular exchange with the Advisory Board, on ReSPA thematic orientation and partnership broadening.

ReSPA will invest additional efforts in mobilizing additional programmes and funds, ensuring greater diversification of funding, including through bilateral financial and technical assistance and through partnering with relevant organization in preparing and implementing project proposals in the area of public administration reform.

Along with strengthening regional peer exchanges, as stressed also in previous sections of this Strategic Orientation, ReSPA will continue to provide a boost to trigger more vivid exchanges and cooperation between its Members and Beneficiary and EU Member States, bringing Western Balkans closer to the European Administrative Space. ReSPA will support a strong regional voice in key EU structures, such as DISPA, EUPAN, and other relevant networks and working groups.



3. OPERATIONAL PLANNING



Based on the needs identified by the stakeholders and in line with the strategic orientation, ReSPA will be utilising **Annual Programme of Work** (PoW) endorsed by the governing bodies. The PoW will be designed to cover the strategic and priority topics of the reforms while the newly emerged or urgent needs will be covered by the available on demand, horizontal facility, regional/EU mobility and other available instruments

In light of the strategic orientation 2025-2030, ReSPA will *adapt the internal processes*, organization, and distribute available resources to meet all the requirements of the strategic orientation and to be ready to address the challenges coming out from the process of PAR.

With the aim to enhance the operational excellence, ReSPA will facilitate access to knowledge and skills to its staff on new and emerging topics and trends, use available secondments from external partners and donors, engage thematic specialists and develop an innovation lab. ReSPA aims to initiate the process towards a prospective future *EU pillar assessed organization* and potentially become eligible for managing additional grants, or potentially undergo business development towards participation in public tendering of consultancy.

Further to this ReSPA will continue to practise the continuous learning concept, always open to improvements in its operations and implementing new and innovative practises, latest digital and AI tools toward operational excellence supporting the strategy and achieving its mission.

Finance wise to maintain its ability to cover the needs of the PAR in the WB region planned in the PoW, ReSPA will constantly work with the EC as its biggest supporter in this process. As a prerequisite of excellent cooperation with the EC, ReSPA will be timely discussing the needs of the stakeholders in the region, the important areas to be addressed and be prompt in the regular reporting on the progress made, challenges faced and results achieved. ReSPA will continue to manage the available Core and Donor funds in a responsible and cost-efficient manner while constantly securing that the beneficiaries receive high quality services and results from ReSPA's work. To secure a future proof and uninterrupted daily operations, ReSPA will use liquidity foresights, and in light of any potential members joining the organization will adapt its sources of finances while constantly looking out for other donor possibility.

From a 2030-onwards perspective where the majority of the current ReSPA beneficiaries can be a part of the joint European Administrative Space, ReSPA can become a self-sustained organization in the ranks of European excellence.

3.1. Programme of Work

In line with the ReSPA Agreement, before the start of every year the Secretariat will submit to the Governing Board for approval a Programme of Work (PoW) with detailed planning for the year ahead, consistent with guidelines in this Strategic Orientation. The Work Programme will also include an indicative calendar of when the planned activities will be implemented during the year as well as a short description (textual part) for the main focus and aim of the proposed activities and initiatives.

Additional activities on internal capacity development as well as communication and visibility can also be included in the Work Programme, through a separate section if relevant.

3.1.1. Internal capacity development

Under the overall guidance of GB, the ReSPA Secretariat, steered by its Director, is organized to efficiently support public administration reform across the Western Balkans. The core staff is structured into two main wings: the programme wing, responsible for developing and coordinating ReSPA's initiatives, and the finance and operations wing, which ensures the smooth functioning of ReSPA's operational and financial management. Complementing the core team is the project staff, hired under various grants to provide specialized support in areas such as communications, digitalization, partnerships, and knowledge management. This cohesive structure enables the Secretariat to implement ReSPA's strategic objectives effectively, driving impactful reforms in the region. ReSPA will ensure that the Secretariat develops and maintains the capacity (directly or through additional mechanisms) that is needed to implement its Work Programme. For this

purpose, the Secretariat will take advantage of its familiarity with the Common Assessment Framework to develop and periodically revise a concise set of measures to be included in the Work Programme itself.

Addressed aspects may include succession planning and training for Secretariat staff, policies on secondments from partners, and on engaging specialists from national administrations; establishment of thematic rolls of regional experts, and development of the innovation lab; EU pillar assessment for managing additional grants, and business development for participation in public tendering of consultancy services.

3.1.2. Visibility and communication

ReSPA's communication efforts will emphasize the impact of the collaborative work of public administration teams, supported by the European Commission, in driving reforms and building modern, resilient, and transparent institutions that deliver citizen-centred services and positively transform societies.

In the lead-up to 2030, communication priorities will focus on promoting good administrative practices from the region to EU Member States, highlighting team quality and societal impact; enhancing ReSPA's reputation among regional governments by demonstrating the added value of high-level dialogues, mobility programs, and new initiatives; and engaging public servants in networking, sharing, and learning as part of a connected regional community.

ReSPA will develop a Communication and Visibility Plan detailing awareness-raising activities using various communication tools to reach both specific and general audiences. ReSPA's Communication and Visibility activities will be reviewed and updated annually to reflect key messages, planned activities, and specific indicators. The effectiveness of these activities will continue to be reported in the ReSPA Secretariat's quarterly reports to the ReSPA Governing Board and the European Commission.

3.1.3. Monitoring and evaluation

To effectively track the impact of our work, ReSPA continuously monitors the outcomes of its initiatives, particularly focusing on the uptake of policy recommendations. These positive results serve as crucial tailwinds, reinforcing our efforts. Participants in these initiatives also play a vital role by identifying potential topics for future work, ensuring that ReSPA's agenda remains relevant and forward-looking.

Each year, ReSPA produces an annual monitoring report and presents it to the Governing Board. These reports reflect ReSPA's commitment to refining processes and maximizing impact, drawing on best practices and typologies from similar partners. This ongoing process will be integrated into a new robust Monitoring and Evaluation toolkit, enhancing the effectiveness of our activities. The objectives, indicators and targets to be used to monitor progress will likewise be updated and included in the view of the next EC Grant contract (post 2025), and utilized in reports to the Governing Board about its implementation. The details of the proposed methodological approach, consistent with this Strategic Orientation, will also be laid out in a revised monitoring toolkit that the Secretariat will provide the Governing Board with along with the proposed Work Programme for 2025.

Given the dense programmatic period ahead, periodic revisits of the Orientation can be foreseen at a par with the dynamic state of play and needs in the region. Therefore, the Secretariat will arrange, at least, **a mid-term evaluation of this Strategic Orientation**, focused on its relevance and suitability, which might identify potential advancements, the guidance of the GB and in close communication with EC. The mid-term evaluation will be completed within 3 years, to advise on improvements during the cycle, while the final evaluation will be completed within 6 years, to advise on guidance for after 2030.

3.2. Budget

ReSPA Agreement links the submission of each proposed PoW to that of a general annual Budget, comprehensive of core contributions and other sources for the financing of activities. On the latter, ReSPA aspires to maintain the invaluable support of the Commission through its IPA III grants, while starting to identify and use additional resources, which can open new avenues and opportunities for public sector and improved governance in region. The full success of new activities with secondary beneficiaries (regional/local governments; private, scientific, and civil society organizations) are provisional on administering grants of a different kind. Meanwhile, starting to explore arrangements to improve long-term sustainability will be also considered. The Secretariat will ensure the costing of each activity in the Budget corresponding to the Annual PoW, while the work on long-term budgetary sustainability of ReSPA will be continuous.



ANNEX 1: THE INTERVENTION LOGIC



Impact	Empowered Governance for Sustainable Development and EU Accession		
Outcomes	Fostered excellence in Public Administration in the Western Balkans	Strengthened regional cooperation and networking, and boosted ties with EU and EU Member States' initiatives, instruments, and programmes	
Short-term outcomes	With a focus on the following thematic areas – European Integration, Policy Management and Better Regulation, Digitalisation and Public Services, Human Resources Management and Professional Development, and to a more limited extent Public Financial Management – ReSPA contributes to:		
	Enhanced skills and institutional capacity, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - New individual skills applied in WBs administrations - Improved communication and methods of work - Improved institutional performance - Application of good practices from the region and/or EU 	Consolidated networking and joint initiatives at regional and EU level, to advance more efficient and effective governance, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Collaboration and joint initiatives between administrations in the region and/or with EU Member States - Consolidated coordination and joint initiatives between public administration in the region and academic and specialised institutes. - Consolidated mobility opportunities at the regional and EU level 	Reform implementation facilitated at national and local level (pilot), including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improved implementation of reforms by administrations according to the needs with the support of ReSPA - Pilot initiatives designed and implemented with the support of ReSPA - Concrete expert guidance and customized assistance deployed to support policy reforms
Outputs	Staff trained on innovative approaches, good practices exchanged, and thematic support provided.	Coordination and networking channels at regional and EU level promoted, adequate expertise provided, follow-up ensured.	On-site qualified policy advice, upon demand of the administrations, provided.
Activities	Regional capacity-building activities, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Workshops - Training courses - Working/Study visits - Capacity Development programmes (single or multiple modules) - WB Knowledge Management Platform 	Regional governance cooperation at policy and technical level, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High-level (Ministerial) dialogues - Regional thematic hubs and networks - Planning, implementation and monitoring of initiatives. 	Direct support instruments: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - On-demand support instrument (one or multiple beneficiaries) - Long and short-term mobility schemes (Erasmus for civil servants) - Gov-Tech initiative and eGov Pilots - ReSPA horizontal facility



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