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SIGMA Conference on Good public administration for better lives in the Western Balkans

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Ladies and gentlemen,

After so many great messages and strong recognition from the opening speeches, it is my pleasure to bring us closer to the discussion on the state of play with good governance in the Western Balkans.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the flexibility and strength of public institutions; but it has also exposed weaknesses. Governments are also facing also other global, regional, and sub-national challenges, including the need to transform their economies to fight climate change and biodiversity loss. This transformation will require high trust from people, which in 2021 was low in most OECD countries with 51% but stood at only 38% across the region in the Western Balkans¹.

The sense of disconnection between people and their public institutions is undermining progress in some of these important challenges. Our long-term research suggests that one of the ways to strengthen trust in government in a sustainable way is to improve the quality of public services and strengthen public institutions. In other words, we need our public administrations to perform well.

Both Secretary-General Cormann and Commissioner Várhelyi referred to the fact that SIGMA will celebrate its 30th anniversary this year. SIGMA was created in the early 90s as a common initiative of the European Union and the OECD to support EU enlargement and strengthen governance in the neighbouring countries. Through this excellent co-operation, we have demonstrated the importance and usefulness to work together for high-quality international analysis, availability of comparable data and for sharing knowledge and competences across our institutions and the countries, we work with.

1 Balkan Barometer 2021

The SIGMA Monitoring Reports published at the end of 2021 meet all those standards for quality international research. A few days ago, we published also the regional overview of the state of play with public administration. I know many of you have studied these already and that in every country many civil servants and experts contributed to this work by providing data, useful insights, feedback and help in disseminating the key findings on strengths and weaknesses in public administrations in your countries. Thank you for that.

The data shows that the performance of Western Balkans administrations has improved since 2017, which is of course excellent news. This progress however still comes mostly from the better quality of legislation and policy documents, and much remains to be done on the implementation and practices of public institutions. To give one example: the quality of the legislation for public procurement is high in the Western Balkans. In other words, Western Balkan administrations are progressing fast in harmonising legislation and meet EU acquis requirements. But practical, operational support of central public procurement institutions to contracting authorities and businesses has not improved in the past years.

As you will hear from the SIGMA team, the same is true for a number of areas of public administration. So future significant gains will not come from improving primary legislation, which in many cases is already comparable with what exists in EU and OECD member countries. Rather than legal drafting, it is policy implementation, change management and improvement of organisational capacities that are needed going forward. My colleagues from SIGMA of course stand ready to support you in this endeavour.

Of course, the goal is to strengthen governments to play a pivotal role in building a prosperous and inclusive society. For that, we cannot underestimate the role and quality of top management in public sector institutions. Capable and accountable managers are at the frontline of implementing legislation, transforming policy into action, safeguarding public finances and integrity, and ensuring continuity of government operations. The Western Balkans have 43% of senior civil servants who are women, better than the OECD average of 37%. However, on some key performance metrics there is clear need for improvement. For example, on average, there were only 5 candidates per senior civil servant vacancy in 2021, which indicates a need for greater attractiveness.

With this, let me pass to the SIGMA team for a more precise overview of the strengths and weaknesses we have observed.

Thank you

