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International Relations

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF KEY PUBLIC SERVICE AREAS IN WESTERN BALKANS: WHERE DO WE STAND?

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ABSTRACT:
THE MAIN AIM OF THIS PAPER IS TO PROVIDE AN OVERVIEW OF THE STATE OF PLAY AND THE MAIN RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE FIELD OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN THE SIX COUNTRIES OF THE WESTERN BALKANS (ALBANIA, BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA, KOSOVO, MACEDONIA, MONTENEGRO, AND SERBIA), HIGHLIGHTING THE SIMILARITIES AND THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THESE COUNTRIES. THE STUDY FOCUSES ON KEY INDICATORS ON HOW GOVERNMENTS IN THIS REGION WORK AND PERFORM, UNDERLINING THE ACHIEVEMENTS AND THE SHORTCOMINGS IN THE FOLLOWING THREE AREAS: POLICY MAKING, PUBLIC SERVICE, AND SERVICE DELIVERY. ALTHOUGH IT IS CLEAR THAT THE COUNTRIES OF THE WESTERN BALKANS FACE CHALLENGES AND SHORTCOMINGS IN IMPLEMENTING PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION REFORMS, THE RESULTS EMPHASIZE THE EXISTENCE OF FORMAL RULES AND THE STEPS MADE TOWARDS COMPLYING WITH THESE STANDARDS.

KEYWORDS: PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION, GOOD GOVERNANCE, WESTERN BALKANS

INTRODUCTION

There are three fundamentals that countries with EU candidate status or potential candidate status need to assure, namely the rule of law (security, fundamental rights), democratic institutions and public administration reform, as well as economic development and competitiveness (economic growth). With regard to these fundamentals, in the *2016 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy*, the European Commission remarked: "A continued commitment to the principle of «fundamentals first» remains essential for the enlargement countries. [...] The governments of the enlargement countries need to embrace the necessary reforms more actively and truly make this their political agenda – not because the EU is asking for it, but because it is in the best interest of their citizens."[2]

Therefore, along with assuring democratic institutions, the public administration reform is one of the fundamental areas of reform on any country's path to EU membership, and Western Balkan countries find themselves (at this moment) in different stages of the EU integration process and, in this process, they need to deliver concrete and sustainable results. Hence, one main objective is to increase good governance and capacity building in these

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[2] European Commission, *2016 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy* (Brussels, COM (2016) 715 final), 2.

countries, to align them with European Union laws and regulations, in order to strengthen the region's stability and economy, to the benefit of the citizens. But good governance cannot be achieved without a good public administration that works not only for citizens but also with citizens, that focuses less on procedural issues and more on substance, that respects the principles of openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness and coherence, the five principles that underpin good governance[3].

Moreover, public administration reform refers to changes that all enlargement countries need to make in their public institutions in order to meet the political criteria for accession, is about guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, the human rights, and the respect for minorities, is about the obligation of these countries to have administrative systems and public institutions capable of adapting and implementing the *acquis* according to the principle of «obligation of result». All candidate countries and potential candidates need to establish a professional civil service, to assure public institutions that perform at all levels, that are, above all, efficient, merit-based, accountable and transparent, capable of taking policy decisions and capable of providing proper public services.

To assess if the countries under evaluation comply with the EU standards, that they have a functional public administration, the European Commission delineates six key reform areas, outlining the main requirements that countries should follow during the European Integration process and featuring a monitoring framework, enabling regular analysis of progress in applying the principles and setting country benchmarks. The key reform areas of public administration monitored by the European Commission are the following: strategic framework, policy making, public service and human resource management, accountability, service delivery and public finance management (public procurement).

Given the complexity of this field, we have chosen to focus our analysis on three of these areas, namely: a) policy making, coordination and implementation, which mainly includes strategic planning, the functioning of the centre of government, policy co-ordination, policy development and analysis; b) public service and human resource management, which includes the organisation and functioning of the public service, depoliticisation, merit-based recruitment and promotion, training and professionalisation; and c) service delivery, which mainly refers to improving services for citizens and businesses, better administrative procedures, and e-government services. In these areas, we tried to underline the key indicators on how governments work and perform, the main achievements, the shortcomings, the differences and similarities.

We based our research and findings mainly on national monitor reports for each country under evaluation, analytical public opinion reports, reviews conducted and published by SIGMA4, European Commission's progress reports of the level of preparedness, publications of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and other official documents. We organized the data by grouping the countries into three levels, Montenegro and Serbia as part of the first one, being the front runners, Albania and North Macedonia as part of the second one, and Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo as part of the latter.

[3] European Commission, "European Governance – A White Paper", in *Official Journal of the European Communities*, C 287, (2001), 7-8.

[4] SIGMA – Support for Improvement in Governance and Management is a joint initiative of the OECD and the EU

A) POLICY MAKING

In this area of research, policy making, coordination and implementation, the first level countries, Serbia and Montenegro, stand out with the following characteristics: "institutions remain in place for central government policy-making system, including for the European integration process, but weaknesses persist due to the continuing focus on formal and procedural issues"5, the law sets out clear rules for developing, monitoring and reporting on sector strategies, but a unified information system has yet to carry out its intended function, namely, all new policy documents and their monitoring indicators will need to be entered in the unified information system. The country reports show that administrative data collection needs to be strengthened, and data need to be used systematically and consistently in practice. There is also a need to improve the public policy process, by using impact assessments and by increasing the coordination among institutions part of the policy-making system.6 The policy planning should be linked with budgeting, and the implementation phase should be controlled and monitored, taking into consideration that the implementation phase is crucial for the public policy process, that it has a major contribution to the success of a public policy. If implementation is not done properly and monitored to adjust and adapt the policy to real needs, the objectives set will not be achieved, the results will not take place and the resources will be wasted.

For countries from the second level, Albania and North Macedonia, the reports mention that "the legal basis and the institutional set-up are partially in place to ensure a consistent policy-making system"7, both countries being moderately prepared with the reform of public administration. Albania registered some progress in the phase of policy planning by developing the legislative package, and improving transparency in data collection, but it shows similar shortcomings as the first level countries, with a need to upgrade administrative capacity on data collection, as well as on defining better policy planning and monitoring functions. These countries should focus more on coherence between policy planning and the related budgeting, should improve the effective internal control of the policy implementation phase and should proceed with the implementation of impact assessments for all policy proposals. Moreover, in North Macedonia, "the quality control of the public consultation process needs to improve", given the fact that in 2019 the number of laws adopted under shortened procedures, which did not undergo a proper public consultation process and were not regularly underpinned by impact assessments, significantly increased, standing at 61.6%, compared to 20% in 2018, which raised concerns8.

The last level countries are ranked at an early stage with public administration reform, mainly because the "insufficient political support hinders the coordinated implementation of reforms by all levels of government"9, but also due to the lack of political ownership and insufficient budgetary resources for implementing reforms. The European Commission annual report mentions the followings: "The policy-making system in Bosnia and Herzegovina remains fragmented. The legislative framework on medium-term policy

[5] European Commission, *Serbia 2020 Report, 2020 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy* (Brussels, SWD(2020) 352 final), 15.
[6] European Commission, *Serbia 2020 Report.*
[7] European Commission, *Albania 2020 Report, 2020 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy* (Brussels, SWD(2020) 354 final), 14; European Commission, *North Macedonia 2020 Report, 2020 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy* (Brussels, SWD(2020) 351 final), 12.
[8] European Commission, *North Macedonia 2020 Report*, 13.
[9] European Commission, *Bosnia and Herzegovina 2020 Report, 2020 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy* (Brussels, SWD(2020) 350 final), 12.

planning is incomplete and uneven. [...] There is still no harmonisation between central planning documents such as the medium-term and annual government programme, framework budget document and action plan for implementation of priorities and no harmonisation of such documents with the sector strategies. Quality review remains insufficient."10 In Kosovo, ad hoc policy-making persists, "monitoring of the public administration reform strategies focused primarily on the implementation of individual activities without a proper analysis of specific results"11, being thus difficult to assess the real progress of implemented strategies. The government has to improve its capacity of ensuring that impact assessments are done properly, that the standards of the EU legislation are followed and achieved, that data collection is used systematically and public consultations are in the view of the government as a tool in the policy-making process.

These recommendations are reinforced by the results of the annual survey of Western Balkans citizen and business perceptions, published by the Regional Cooperation Council in 2020. Thus, in the public sector, across each of the six individual economies, the survey shows that success continues to be linked primarily to personal connections over hard work. 30% of the population of the Western Balkan countries believes that knowing the right people is the key prerequisite for success in life, 26% of it believes that having a good education is the most important one, while working hard has been seen as vital to success by merely a 20% of all participants (table 1). Moreover, the number of respondents prioritising connections has grown from 26% in 2018 to 30% in 2019, while survey participants who feel that working hard will get them furthest has fallen down to 20% from 27%, in the same period of time. Albania, is the "leading advocate of learning" with 52% of the population surveyed espousing the necessity of a good education, while in Montenegro only 26% of the population values hard work above all else. Respondents from Serbia are most likely to attribute success to knowing the right people (39%), registering also the largest group of respondents who subscribed to the belief that being lucky is essential to succeed in life (22%).[12]

Table 1. Comparison 2014-2019
"What do you think is the most important for getting ahead in life?" (Share of total, %)

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Working hard	25	26	25	26	27	20
Having a good education	24	22	19	21	23	26
Knowing the right people	22	27	32	29	26	30

Source: Regional Cooperation Council, *Balkan Barometer 2020: Public Opinion. Analytical Report*, 56, https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/publications

Moreover, Montenegro and Kosovo registered the highest share of respondents who claim not to care about the political developments in their economy (both at 28%), while Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia have the most respondents who feel powerless to influence developments (both at 31%). The highest percentage of respondents that feel confident enough in the work of government not to interfere with is registered in Albania (23%), while the lowest percentage is registered in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo (both

[10] European Commission, *Bosnia and Herzegovina 2020 Report*.
[11] European Commission, *Kosovo 2020 Report, 2020 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy* (Brussels, SWD(2020) 356 final), 14.
[12] Regional Cooperation Council, *Balkan Barometer 2020: Public Opinion. Analytical Report*, 55-56, https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/publications, accessed on December 19, 2020.

at 9%). Hence, in Kosovo is registered the highest percentage of people that don't trust the government (21%), while the lowest one is registered in Montenegro (8%).13

B) PUBLIC SERVICE AND HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT (HRM)

In the second area of our research, public service and HRM, Montenegro has great achievements in reducing the gender gap in leadership positions, with women well represented in high levels of public service, such as in the 42nd Government of Montenegro[14] (elected by Parliament on December 4, 2020) four ministries are headed by women, while other management positions in the administrative bodies within the ministries are also held by women. In Montenegro, the ministries represent the basis of the organization of public administration system, by performing the tasks of proposing policy, conducting normative activities, administrative supervision and other activities with strategic and developmental content in the administrative area for which they are competent, while the operational and executive administrative tasks in the departments (the policy implementation tasks) are performed by other administrative bodies like administrations, secretariats, bureaus, directorates, and agencies.[15] Thus, the Ministry of Public Administration is responsible for the civil service and human resource management in public administration, while the Human Resources Management Authority is the body responsible with monitoring the implementation of laws and regulations, providing opinions and assistance to state bodies in the implementation of personnel policy, training and personnel development. An essential law in this area, the Law on Civil Servants and State Employees, applicable since 2013, regulates the rights, obligations, responsibilities and other issues relating to the status of civil servants and state employees and enables consistent implementation of professionalisation and depoliticisation in the work of state authorities. The law stipulates that a civil servant and a state employee shall perform the tasks in politically neutral and impartial manner, in accordance with public interest, while selection of candidates shall be based on their professional training, knowledge, skills, prior working experience, work performance, and testing results.[16] As a consequence, the merit-based recruitment, medium-term policy planning, human resource management, and the rationalising of the organisation of the state administration advanced well in Montenegro, but there are still issues concerning the partisan employment and political discretion in public employment, especially at the managerial level. Consequently, the role of the Human Resources Management Authority has been enhanced and a competency framework for adequate recruitment procedures in senior civil service positions has been established. Thus, the Public Administration Reform (PAR) Strategy 2016-2020 was adopted in July 2016 by the Government of Montenegro, and Public Administration Optimisation Plan 2018-2020[17] has been implemented. Lately, the law on

[13] Regional Cooperation Council, *Balkan Barometer 2020*, 111-112.

[14]Government of Montenegro, *The 42nd Government of Montenegro elected*, https://www.gov.me/en/News/236848/The-42nd-Government-of-Montenegro-elected.html, accessed on December 11, 2020.

[15]Government of Montenegro, *Public Administration Reform Strategy in Montenegro 2016-2020, https://mju.gov.me/ResourceManager/FileDownload.aspx?rid=268749&rType=2&file=PUBLIC%20ADMINISTRATION%20REFORM%20STRATEGY%20IN%20MONTENEGRO%202016-2020.pdf*, accessed on December 11, 2020.

[16] Government of Montenegro, Ministry of Internal Affairs, *Communication on the application of the Law on Civil Servants and State Employees* (Podgorica, June 2015), https://mup.gov.me

[17]Government of Montenegro, Ministry of Public Administration, *Montenegro's 2018-2020 Public Administration Optimisation Plan: An overview of the impact of short-term actions in 2018*, https://mju.gov.me/ResourceManager/FileDownload.aspx?rid=365618&rType=2&file=An%20overview%20of

wages of public sector employees was amended in May 2019, providing a legal basis for consensual termination of employment in public administration, and the salary scales were made publicly available. But there is still a strong need to introduce an adequate and attractive remuneration system.

Likewise, in Serbia, the civil service legislation provides for merit-based recruitment and dismissal procedures, the public service and human resource management legal framework being enhanced by the 2018 amendments to the Civil Service Law[18], which addressed a number of shortcomings in the recruitment and selection process. As it can be observed in the table below (table 2), in 2019, compared to 2017, five out of seven indicator values increased, while two of them stayed the same. The shortcomings are still present in the area of ensuring merit-based recruitment and selection process for senior civil servants, where "two thirds of all senior civil service positions remain occupied by «acting heads», i.e. personnel that did not undergo a competition procedure"[19].

Table 2. Indicators for Public Service and Human Resource Management in Serbia

Indicators	0	1	2	3	4	5
Adequacy of the scope of public service			□	◆		
Adequacy of the policy, legal framework and institutional set-up for professional human resource management in public service			□	◆		
Meritocracy and effectiveness of recruitment of civil servants			□	◆		
Merit-based termination of employment and demotion of civil servants			□		◆	
Merit-based recruitment and dismissal of senior civil servants			◆			
Fairness and competitiveness of the remuneration system for civil servants		□		◆		
Professional development and training for civil servants				◆		
Legend: □ 2017 indicator value ◆ 2019 indicator value						

Source: OECD, *Monitoring Report: The Principles of Public administration Serbia 2019, SIGMA* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2019), 7, http://www.sigmaweb.org/publications/Monitoring-Report-2019-Serbia.pdf

The main concern with the «acting heads» is that it allows individuals to bypass competitive procedures, to enter the civil service and to take responsibility and decisions in important matters such as policy making, budget, or policy development. On the other hand, it gives ministers the opportunity to appoint in these positions colleagues from their political party or non-performing candidates. Hence, depoliticisation of public administration is

%20the%20impact%20of%20short%20term%20actions%20in%202018%20-%20Optimisation%20plan.pdf, accessed on December 11, 2020.

[18]International Labour Organization, NATLEX ,https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p_lang=en&p_isn=109245&p_country=SRB&p_classification=22.10, accessed on December 2, 2020; National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia, http://www.parlament.gov.rs/akti/doneti-zakoni/doneti-zakoni.1033.html, accessed on January 3, 2021.

[19]OECD, *Monitoring Report: The Principles of Public administration Serbia 2019, SIGMA* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2019), 5, http://www.sigmaweb.org/publications/Monitoring-Report-2019-Serbia.pdf, accessed on December 2, 2020.

essential in order to ensure performance in administration and to serve the interest of the citizens, because only a depoliticized administration could serve the citizens professionally, politically independent, and with competence. In Serbia, this issue has been on the Government agenda of priorities, a tool for achieving this being the use of open, transparent, and fair recruitment procedures, but there are concerns about tight deadlines for completing a competitive procedure and the possibility of extending the status of «acting head» for another three months if the selection procedure does not lead to an appointment[20].

In Albania, the Civil Service Law provides a basis for merit-based recruitment and promotion, while in North Macedonia these principles are ensured through the provisions of the Law on Administrative Servants and the Law on Public Sector Employees, these two countries, part of the second tier, being both ranked as moderately prepared in the reform of the public administration. Among the improvements in the field of recruitment and selection process for the civil service in these countries, the reports highlight the harmonization of job descriptions, the quality of examinations, and the steps taken towards gender equality. At this moment, out of the six countries under evaluation, Albania has the highest representation of women in ministerial positions, a high presence of women in the Parliament and a high percent of senior management positions in public administration occupied by women[21], thus sending the message that gender equality is the norm. Likewise, in North Macedonia, the representation of women in the public service is over 50%, including in middle management[22].

Despite these improvements, these two countries still face nonuniform standards on merit-based recruitment, promotion and dismissal across the whole public administration, not enough willingness and capacity of all involved institutions to ensure a systematically application of the legislation, and inconsistent levels of pay. In North Macedonia, "the number of public employees without a formal assignment, who were recruited years ago and continue to receive a salary without having to show up for work, went down slightly, as a number of them were finally assigned jobs in 2019"[23], so the institutions need to take a decision on the final job assignment for the remainder of them and to apply systematically the principles of merit and effectiveness.

The last two countries, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, made modest steps towards strengthening the public service, the system being formally in place, but lacking a systematically use and implementation across the administration. The system is fragmented, thus ensuring a non-politicised, merit-based and professional civil service remains a major challenge. These facts are also highlighted in public opinion surveys, where an astonishing 88% of the population from Bosnia and Herzegovina totally disagree or tend to disagree with the statement that the government fights corruption successfully, a regional high, while in Kosovo this percentage reached 74%[24].

C) SERVICE DELIVERY

Regarding the third dimension, service delivery, for countries of the first level, Serbia and Montenegro, the indicator values have improved (as can be seen in table 3), mainly based on the fact that the policy framework is in place, and progress has been registered through the

[20] OECD, *Monitoring Report: The Principles of Public administration Serbia 2019*, 22.
[21] OECD, *Government at a Glance: Western Balkans 2020. Country Fact Sheet. Albania*, goverment-at-a-glance-albania.pdf (oecd.org), accessed on October 24, 2020.
[22] European Commission, *North Macedonia 2020 Report*, 14.
[23] European Commission, *North Macedonia 2020 Report*, 14-15.
[24] Regional Cooperation Council, *Balkan Barometer 2020*, 109.

simplification of administrative processes. Unfortunately, implementation has been modest and uneven across the administration, and no progress has been registered in the monitoring system. In Serbia, the focus of the Government was mainly on e-services and digitisation, and, due to the enactment of the Law on e-Government (2018), an advance was registered in the introduction of e-services (e-enrollment to primary schools, e-prescription, ePaper project, eInspector, ePayment) and in the use of a unified information system for local taxes[25], while in Montenegro, the value of the indicators increased based on greater use of digital channels by companies declaring and paying taxes, the decrease in the share of administrative acts repealed or changed by the Administrative Court, and the improvements in the interoperability of state registers. Montenegro is on the first place in the region regarding the satisfaction of citizens with administrative services from central government (mean 3.40), followed by North Macedonia (mean 3.04)[26].

Table 3. Indicators for Service Delivery in Serbia and Montenegro

	Serbia						Montenegro					
Indicators	0	1	2	3	4	5	0	1	2	3	4	5
Citizen-oriented service delivery				◆□					□	◆		
Fairness and efficiency of administrative procedures				□	◆						□	◆
Existence of enablers for public service delivery		□		◆				□	◆			
Legend: □ 2017 indicator value ◆ 2019 indicator value												

Source: OECD, *Monitoring Report: The Principles of Public administration Serbia 2019*, 36, http://www.sigmaweb.org/publications/Monitoring-Report-2019-Serbia.pdf; OECD, *Monitoring Report: The Principles of Public administration Montenegro 2019*, 6, http://www.sigmaweb.org/publications/Monitoring-Report-2019-Montenegro.pdf

In Albania and North Macedonia, countries from the second tier, e-services were also developed, the institutions and laws on public-service delivery are in place, and public information on public services has been made more accessible to citizens, while in third level countries, mainly in Kosovo, limited progress has been registered. Kosovo faces weaknesses in the leadership, lack of clear policy direction, and lack of central governance and coordination of the overall reform process. The adoption of the Law on General Administrative Procedures was an important milestone, by stipulating the key principles of good administrative behaviour, but the harmonisation of special laws with the new legislative standards has been slower than expected, such as 231 laws and approximately 1,000 by-laws with special administrative procedures, that may need to be harmonised, were identified by the Ministry of Public Administration[27].

Overall, the region is still facing many challenges like excessive bureaucracy in administrative service delivery, no consistent practice of collecting data on user satisfaction,

[25] See for details The Office for Information Technologies and Egovernment at https://www.ite.gov.rs, accessed on December 19, 2020.

[26] Regional Cooperation Council, *Balkan Barometer 2019: Public Opinion. Analytical Report,* 28, https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/publications, accessed on November 23, 2020.

[27] OECD, *Monitoring Report: The Principles of Public administration Kosovo 2019, SIGMA,* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2019), 4-5, http://www.sigmaweb.org/publications/Monitoring-Report-2019-Kosovo.pdf, accessed on December 19, 2020.

no use of data in making improvements in the area, low citizen awareness of e-services offered by the Government, no common standards for public service delivery, and no use of quality management tools and techniques. These statements are reinforced by country scores, such as, of the six economies under evaluation, Bosnia and Herzegovina is the country with the lowest score at paying taxes indicator (table 4), which measures, inter alia, the administrative burden of paying taxes and contributions, and in terms of dealing with construction permits score (applying for a construction permit being still a relatively burdensome service), while North Macedonia ranks first in terms of paying taxes and the overall indicator of ease of doing business. Overall, digital transformation of public services is most advanced in the area of tax-related services for businesses.[28]

Table 4. Paying taxes score

Location	Paying Taxes rank	Paying Taxes score	Payments (number per year)	Time (hours per year)
Albania	123	65.2	35	252
Bosnia and Herzegovina	**141**	**60.4**	**33**	**411**
Kosovo	48	81.9	10	154
Montenegro	75	76.7	18	300
North Macedonia	**37**	**84.7**	**7**	**119**
Serbia	85	75.3	33	226

Source: *Doing Business database,* https://www.doingbusiness.org/en/data/exploretopics/paying-taxes

Regarding the access to services, while the legislation on equal access to services is in place, it is not systematically applied, not all the service providers are using electronic channels, and accessibility varies widely, depending on the location. Accessibility for people with special needs remains a problem, even if the standards and specifications are in place, primarily because of the inadequate physical infrastructure. Even in Serbia, despite the one step advancement of the accessibility of public services, this area is still the weakest one compared to the others (the value of the indicator increased in the period 2017-2019 from 1 to 2[29]).

Moreover, public satisfaction with public services, in the region, is low, such as, in 2019 only 52% of citizens were satisfied with the health system, 57% with the education system, and 33% with the justice system, compared to OECD-EU averages of 68% for health and education, and 56% for justice[30]. The low satisfaction with public services in Western Balkan countries can be correlated with studies regarding the payment of bribes in the public sector, such as bribes remain most prevalent in the healthcare sector. 45% of respondents in Albania reported making informal payments to medical professionals, which means that almost half of the population have exchanged bribes for services when seeking medical treatment. This country leads the corruption rankings in all nine sectors under review (the prevalence of bribes is ranging from 7% in educational system to 45% in the medical sector). Similarly, Bosnia and Herzegovina has seen an increase in prevalence of corruptive actions, while Montenegro is at the other end of the scale with fewest registered instances of bribes being paid. As an overview of public satisfaction with public services, the highest ranked

[28] World Bank Group, *Doing Business 2020,* accessed on December 19, 2020.
[29] OECD, *Monitoring Report: The Principles of Public administration Serbia 2019,* 36.
[30] OECD, *Government at a Glance: Western Balkans*, (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020), 13, https://doi.org/10.1787/a8c72f1b-en, accessed on November 30, 2020.

feature of government performance is the treatment of citizens by public service providers, with a mean of 2.8, up from 2.3 in 2014 (on a 1 to 5 scale), while at 2.7 is scored the timeliness in both service delivery and provision of information by government institutions (table 5).[31]

Table 5. How would you grade the following issues? (Overview 2014-2019)
(All respondents – N=6020, scores from 1 to 5, mean)

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Treatment of citizens in public sector	2.3	2.4	2.5	2.7	2.6	2.8
Time required for obtaining public services	2.4	2.5	2.6	2.8	2.6	2.7
Time required for getting information in public sector	2.4	2.4	2.6	2.7	2.5	2.7
Price of public services	2.2	2.2	2.4	2.5	2.4	2.5

Source: Regional Cooperation Council, *Balkan Barometer 2020*, 96, https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/publications

Hence, the results reassert an urgent need for a strong political steer, an increased awareness among public officials and the general public, as well as better coordination, cooperation, and interoperability between government institutions. The governments have to take significant initiatives in the field of implementation, to introduce quality-management tools and frameworks, and to use monitoring in order to improve the overall results in policy-making process. Moreover, they have to implement a consistent practice of collecting data on user satisfaction and to use this information in order to improve service delivery.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, as main findings, data analysis suggests that the six countries under evaluation find themselves at different stages of implementing the European legislation. Based on their achievements in the field of public administration, the countries were distributed in three tiers: Montenegro and Serbia, as part of the first one, being the front-runners and categorized by the European Commission in the 2020 Country Report as being moderately prepared with the reform of public administration; Albania and North Macedonia as part of the second tier, also described as moderately prepared; and Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, as part of the latter, being at an early stage with the public administration reform.

The most important issue, obvious in all countries under evaluation, is the need for strong political will to address the shortcomings, to effectively depoliticise the public service, to ensure the optimisation of the state administration, to effectively implement the managerial accountability, to monitor and evaluate the achievements of public policies.

An essential achievement is registered in the field of legislative package development, but much remains to be done in the field of coordination, implementation, and monitoring. Moreover, legislation should be applied in a way that respects the rule of law, the rights of the citizens, the principles of good administration and good governance, the principles of fairness, effectiveness, and efficiency.

The analysis reveals that these countries tend to manage public affairs in a traditional way, that public institutions in the Western Balkan countries show a tendency towards a

[31] Regional Cooperation Council, *Balkan Barometer 2020*, 96-106.

traditional approach, with a sensed resistance to major shifts in administrative practices, continuing "to do business as usual", without paying attention to performance, nor to the needs and preferences of end-users. Although there is progress in developing the policy framework and in the digitisation process, there are still many examples of bureaucratic and time-consuming procedures in which applicants have to submit information already kept in one of the state registers or are required to access more than one institutional contact, there are multiple examples of excessive bureaucracy in the provision of services, there is no consistent practice of collecting data on user satisfaction, and no full implementation of merit based system in the recruitment process. The Human Resource Management departments in the public administration sector are still concerned with the preparation of legal documents, not being involved in the development of an adequate human resource policy that uses quality management tools and development techniques. So, there is a strong need to transform these bureaucratic and "old fashioned" services into modern and professional ones.

One explanation for such a traditional approach could be that these countries retain the traces of a centralized system, which brought with it a bureaucratic conceptualization and a strong legalistic culture. Countries with such an administrative culture are more concerned with procedures, the provision of legislation and the administration of public services in a formal way. They place more emphasis on the legislative side, rather than the management side, on "what to do", rather than "how to do it". The process of developing public policies, in such countries, is seen primarily as a process of enacting legislation to address the problems, focusing less on specific stages of policy-making process. Frequently, the decision-makers ignore the sound analysis of the problem, the need for continuous consultations, the conceptualization of valid alternatives and the detailed analysis of each, in order to choose the most appropriate one. These phases are carried out, in many cases, in a superficial way, not acknowledging that they determine the achievement of the objectives and the delivery of the outputs.

On the other hand, in addition to this resistance to change in administrative culture and practice, there is also a perceived difficulty for these administrations to assimilate change, even where the changes have been formally introduced; therefore, the data show a slow movement towards learning new roles and attitudes, towards the implementation of these new standards in practice. All these six countries now face huge challenges as they take on difficult reform requirements, so that, beyond the role of adapting their own legislation to the *acquis*, they must make a greater effort to implement it. In the policy-making process, the formulation phase is very important, as already mentioned above, but the implementation is also crucial, because if a policy that has been poorly defined could be modified and adjusted through implementation, a poor implementation (even of a well defined policy) will obviously lead to failure. If implementation fails, there is no quality reform in the end, so the whole effort has been in vain, and the resources have been wasted.

Therefore, a strong recommendation is that the governments of these countries to try to focus more on a substantive engagement, in order to improve coordination between the policies and the decisions that they are taken, to reduce the level of bureaucracy, to involve much effort in implementing reforms and in translating political will into tangible results. The public administration must work with citizens and must take into account their preferences and needs, must be less concerned with administering and more concerned with managing, less concerned with procedural issues and more concerned with the substance, in order to design and deliver public services that are efficient and effective, appropriate, fair, and feasible, in accordance with the established objectives.

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