

Speech of Mario Nava
First meeting
Expert Group on Public Administration and Governance

1. Welcome

Your excellency,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear colleagues,

- Welcome and thank you for your presence today to this inaugural meeting of the Expert Group on Public Administration and Governance.
- This first high-level meeting of the Expert Group, which I chair from DG REFORM's office in Athens, together with other elements, demonstrates the importance which my service and myself attribute to the close cooperation with Member States.

2. DG REFORM in its role of policy lead DG for Public Administration themes at the EC

- The establishment of this Expert Group is an important step for us in our efforts to enhance cooperation with the Member States, with you! It is **unique**, as it aims directly at establishing this very **dialogue** between the Member States and the Commission services that has been missing and offers an opportunity for a more focused discussion in the area of Public Administration.
- The service that I manage has a **leading role** in helping Member States improve their public administration, but also in deepening the Commission's understanding of what works and what can be improved in the Member States and in consolidating the Commission's approach in this area.
- The main mission of DG REFORM is to deliver targeted technical support projects to national public administration of the Member States at central, local and regional level through the Technical Support Instrument (the "TSI"). In fact, several of you are quite acquainted with the TSI as you are already cooperating with our policy officers in the implementation of critical TSI projects.
- In addition, our DG **leads the policy** on public administration. This role means that DG REFORM is in charge of developing Commission's expertise on public administration, it coordinates Commission services' efforts in this area, it encourages synergies between instruments and initiatives and it develops and disseminates thematic and country knowledge.

[Milestones achieved in 2021]

- 2021 was a **seminal year** for the Commission and specifically for DG REFORM from the point of view of public administration! We have met three critical milestones:
 - Firstly, in April, we published a Commission Staff Working Document on “Supporting public administrations in EU Member States to deliver reforms and prepare for the future”¹. The Staff Working Document is the outcome of a collaborative work of 20 Commission services, under the lead of DG REFORM. It presents our view that the adaptation of public administration at all levels is a high priority for the EU in order to attain its objectives. The Commissioner for Reforms, Elisa Ferreira also supports this view and is committed to pay special attention to the topic.
 - Secondly, in November, DG REFORM organised a high-level international conference that brought stronger political attention to systemic issues in public administration. The event was attended by more than 700 participants and brought together high-level public officials and practitioners from the EU institutions and the Member States, academics, and international organisations.
 - Thirdly, in December, the Commission adopted the decision for the Expert Group on Public Administration and Governance, which we inaugurate today. The purpose of establishing this Expert Group is to set the foundations of an open dialogue with the Member States, with you! This **platform for open dialogue** will allow us to create synergies and better focus our support instruments to your actual needs and challenges.

3. Importance of public administration for the functioning of the EU and for the MS

[Importance for EU]

- As I said earlier, the establishment of the Expert Group on Public Administration and Governance is an achievement that we consider truly significant, as the quality of public administration is a topic with an ever increasing importance for the European Commission for several reasons.
 - Throughout my career in the European Commission and having worked in several policy DGs, I can only confirm that **in every policy context** that we deal with in the European Commission - the coordination of the economic policies, the green and digital transition, the implementation of other sectoral policies or the Structural Funds, and lately the reaction to the COVID 19 pandemic - public administration emerges as **a regular underlying factor for success or as a bottleneck**.
 - Almost each and every Commission service recognises the importance of quality of public administration in its area and is doing something to

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/departments/structural-reform-support/supporting-public-administrations-eu-member-states-deliver-reforms-and-prepare-future_en

improve Member States' capacity, to provide guidance on the **application of the EU law** or offer services for obtaining knowledge and **develop policies**, to support the **implementation of specific initiatives** for boosting administrative quality.

- Finally and most important for the post-pandemic phase, institutional and administrative capacity is essential to absorb the unprecedented support under the **NextGenerationEU**, to design and implement reforms and investments, which are necessary to foster resilience and underpin the recovery from the COVID-19 crisis.

[Importance for MS]

- At the same time, the quality of public administration matters *par excellence* for you, the Member States:
 - Quality of public administration is an **important factor for trust**. Governments cannot function effectively without the trust of citizens for the institutions or for their engagement in policy development nor can they successfully carry out public policies, notably more ambitious reform agendas or deploy crisis measures. High trust allows for cooperative behaviour of citizens and compliance. The opposite is also true ...
 - Moreover, from our accumulated experience in DG REFORM, we see every day that **institutional capacity affects the attainment of long-term policy objectives and the ability to implement structural reforms**, which have the potential to boost growth and employment at national level to ensure social justice. Weak administrative capacity diminishes the public administration's ability to invest and carry out policy or enforcement tasks.
 - Furthermore, gaps in institutional capacity may affect the management of key public services and hinder the business environment.
- Therefore, quality of public administration is crucial both in times of crisis and beyond as Member States need to **constantly optimise institutions** for ensuring strength and resilience of national economies and thus lasting prosperity for their people.

4. Importance of a forum for dialogue among the PAs of the MS for building resilience and face common and future challenges

- Because public administration matters for both, the EU and the MS, we believe that **promoting thematic dialogue** on public administration through this forum, the Expert Group on Public Administration and Governance, will help us **jointly**.
- The Expert Group will have an advisory role to the European Commission and it will allow us to better focus and target the support that we offer to the Member States, test the feasibility of our proposals and initiatives and listen and consider your views.

- The main objective of the group will be to offer a platform for **open dialogue on the challenges and opportunities** so that the EU can support better Member States' efforts to transform their administrations, build resilience, and enhance the fitness of national public administrations to tackle future challenges. We aim to focus on challenges which are **common and require coordinated action** or a **comprehensive response** in order to achieve **large-scale** and **long-term** objectives.
- Indeed, a number of common challenges lie ahead of us:
 - the unprecedented speed of technological change,
 - the impact of demographic changes and the increasing skills shortage,
 - the increasing complexity of managing policy issues,
 - the impact and importance of the green transition,
 - the increasing competition for limited public funds and
 - the need to think about sustainable ways in which we can ensure wellbeing and prosperity for the population, in Europe – and worldwide.

And what comes naturally in everybody's mind is that the Commission already supports the Member States.

- It is true that the Commission has worked actively in the past 20 years with the individual Member States to help them modernise their public administration and build capabilities. While the Commission stands with the Member States through various funding and instruments, we need to **collectively innovate on all these factors** that will affect public administration in the future, to make sure that it is up to the challenge and remains effective in the future.
- Our experience in supporting Member States demonstrates that beyond technical support, there are other powerful ways in which we can build skills, promote innovation, nurture collaborative organisational culture that works across silos, promote adaptability and embrace change.
- In this reflection, we consider that **closer cooperation** of the European Commission with the Member States on public administration modernisation is key and that it could support administrative transformation.
- The Expert Group will be a platform to explore common challenges for public administration and **innovative approaches** to address them, so that we can ensure sound implementation of Union legislation, initiatives and policies.

Why did we decide to step up the efforts of collaboration now?

- Given the historical moment now - to recover from the COVID crisis but also to undergo large transformations - we found it necessary to reflect on our experience and pinpoint that administrative modernisation is **not a technical issue, but it has wider repercussions**. Governments need to ensure that their administrative systems are fit for today and for the future, as these systems will define in the end the success in every governance aspect.
- Moreover, the optimal implementation of the **Recovery and Resilience Plans** puts the quality of public administration at the forefront. To make sure that the exceptional funds available to Member States bring the benefits we hope to see in the European Union and the Recovery and Resilience Plans are timely

implemented, good quality public administration in Member States is key. Weaknesses in administrative capacity will mean a **divergence in the strength and speed of recovery**.

[Respect to constitutional traditions of MS]

- What we consider important as part of the support that the Commission can provide to Member States – in whatever form – is to embrace and respect the **variety of models, constitutional traditions, cultures and different organisational and institutional set up** of each Member State. We consider this diversity as an asset that we want to preserve. Through diversity, we expect to address better common challenges, as we believe that “*one size does not fit all*”.

[Articulation with existing thematic networks]

- Finally, I would like to stress that we are respectful and fully conscious of existing networks and efforts in the wide area of Public Administration and Governance. The Expert Group will **complement** the work of existing networks by elaborating on their findings, closing gaps and ensuring mutual feed of knowledge and information.

[Closing]

- Let me finish by wishing us all a successful start of this collaboration. I would like to invite you to **participate actively** in the discussions and reflect on how to better shape the work of the Expert Group for the challenges that matter for the Commission and for your respective Member States.
- I now pass the floor to Director of Directorate B - Support to Member States reforms, Ms Nathalie Berger who will focus on the specific work of DG REFORM on Public Administration and Governance and the essence and tasks of the Expert Group.