OPENING REMARKS

"Strengthening the capacities of watchdogs in the SEE in monitoring and investigation of the use of public funds through open data"

OSCE Coordinator of Economic Environmental Activities and Presence in Albania

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Venue: Tirana International Hotel

Good morning everyone,

Let me start by welcoming you all here in Tirana and thank the Presence of OSCE in Tirana and the Office of the OSCE Coordinator of Economic Environmental Activities in Vienna for the organization of the workshop on such an important topic such as the use of public funds through open data and for giving me the possibility to deliver some opening remarks.

It is my pleasure to address such an important audience of civil society organizations, activists, and journalists, as well as international organizations, and policymakers.

The fight against corruption is one of the essential priorities for the Albanian Government. Achieving concrete results in guaranteeing access, quality, integrity and transparency in the provision of public services is a fundamental criterion for assessing the country's performance on the road to the accession to the European Union.

The implementation and widespread use of **digitalization** public services and electronic data management systems are the tools used by our Government for building a state administration immune to corruption through automated processing, transmission and sharing of information in the public sector.

The scope of these tools is to enhance good governance, ensure better services and policies, more agile, effective and convenient public engagement, greater trust in government, social well-being and inclusive policy outcomes, and economic growth.

Today in Albania, over 1200 services are offered online (1227), this constitutes 95% of all services offered, and excluding those for which physical presence is required

for identification or security reasons. In 2014, this was only 1%; or only 14 services were online. This translates into shorter time and reduced costs in obtaining services, giving our citizens access to these services wherever they are and whenever they may need them. But, most importantly, this has completely removed the interaction between citizens and public officials, eliminating the possibility of corruption in exchange for receiving the service that citizens are entitled to and public officials have a new duty to guarantee, restoring the trust of our citizens in public institutions.

Today we have **2.7 million Albanians registered as users** of these services; 2.7 million Albanians who have immediate access to their personal information.

There are **27.8 million applications** for the use of these services; **55 databases** and electronic registers that interact and exchange information in real time through **215 million transactions. 21 million documents** that are sealed electronically were generated through the e-Albania platform. In total, we have saved our citizens:

- more than **990 years of waiting time** in the queue behind the counters,

- **over 9 million Euro service fees** for electronically printed documents; which are issued free of charge.

The main information technology tools employed by the public administration institutions include e-government services, various electronic admission systems (schools, hospitals etc.); electronic monitoring systems, e-procurement; financial information systems.

Tools of digital government change the form of recording, the practices of attainment and overall availability of data generated from government operations which allows for improved detection, monitoring and investigation of irregularities, as well as increases the effectiveness and efficacy of public service delivery.

Public procurement is particularly susceptible to corruption-related activities given the highly sensitive role of the procurement process in managing public funds. The key digital tool used for conducting procurement procedures and preventing potential breaches and corruption in public procurement in Albania is the Electronic Procurement System (ESP, e-procurement).

Application of the digital tools in the procurement procedures and PPA's commitment to improving the Albanian public procurement system has led to tangible results in terms transparency enhancement and a dramatic reduction of the negotiated procedures without prior publication of the contract award notice. Scaling

back such procedures that, due to their nature, may affect transparency, has significantly restricted the room for abuse and prevention of competition in the procurement system. In this regard, in the last years a positive development has been recorded with the decrease in the number of the above-mentioned procedures.

The most significant drop was recorded in 2018, to 9,4 %, compared to 31.8% against the total number of finalized procedures with bidding winners in 2017.

Overall, the automation of public service delivery reduces red tape and the discretion of public officials.

Through the digitalization process it was also created the so called E-Complaint system of the Public Procurement Commission: the submission of complaints to the KPP through e-Albania. Now any economic operator (domestic or foreign) can submit any complaint/argument at no cost and without any contact with the state offices electronically to the KPP and the contracting authority at the same time. From October of last year until today, over 42% of complaints submitted to the KPP are now submitted electronically. Today the KPP system is connected with the electronic procurement system, with the tax administration. The impact of this transformation brought: (i) cost reduction of services, according to the responses of the economic operators, the hidden costs of submitting complaints to the contracting authority (transportation, accommodation and travel costs) were between 300-1,000 dollars. Today, these costs have been reduced to zero, (ii) accessibility, 42.4% of complaints are submitted electronically, (ii) user satisfaction was improved, as the results of a survey drafted in cooperation with Open Contracting Partnership, 66.6% of the respondents think that it is easy to submit a complaint using the new system, and journalists, are satisfied with the monitoring of the activity of the public institution.

 It is one of the best examples of achieving the best results from the digitalization reform and its highest level of transparency and integrity was recognized and awarded just a few weeks ago, at the Ministerial held in Skopje, North Macedonia organized by RESPA and SIGMA-OECD, with the "**Special recognition for trust in the public administration for the E-Complaint system**", an award which confirms the voluminous work that is being done since October 2021, when the system started, providing real-time information to all interested parties, improving interaction with subjects, increasing transparency and effectiveness, reducing costs, as well as increasing the accountability of the Public Procurement Commission to all parties.

The Public Procurement Commission publishes monthly bulletins and annual reports that present data generated from the System of Electronic Complaints. To increase transparency and raise awareness of the available digital tools and their operation, the monthly bulletins are distributed to all economic operators registered in the database of the PPC and are also openly available on the website. The annual reports comprise statistics regarding the complaints submitted via the online registry, the progress of complaint reviews, as well as Public Procurement Commission decisions on complaints.

A special access engine has been implemented on their official website, a service offered for the first time by a public institution in Albania. It has not only been decided to be transparent, but to translate the level of transparency into the best international standard that exists today in the procurement field, that of Open Contracting Partnership.

The Albanian government is fully committed to continue the path of transformation in the provision of online public services, despite the recent cyber-attacks. The OECD/SIGMA report 'Principles of Public Administration' showed that Albania has made continuous progress in most sectors, despite the pandemic period, positioning itself as a leader in the Western Balkans region in all key areas, with special emphasis on providing services. The use of digital tools and contemporary technologies has shown that digitization is very useful for strengthening efforts to address corruption, as well as for introducing a culture of integrity in the Albanian public administration.

Not only digitalization is our main tool with the purpose to tackle corruption. To achieve transparency and accountability an **open government and open data** are most important to the process of monitoring the work of the public administration and the Government itself.

I just came back from Luxembourg last week where I was invited to attend and address one of the panels of the Global Forum of the OECD "*Building Trust and Reinforcing Democracy*". One of the conclusions of the forum was the enhancing of public participation - the involvement of citizens in politics, public policies and decision-making, public service design and delivery – which will allow citizens and stakeholders to further influence activities and decisions of public authorities at different stages of the policy cycle.

A first priority in strengthening public participation is promoting a vibrant civic space, i.e. the legal, political and social environment that allows people to engage in public debate and to influence politics and society. This includes ensuring respect for fundamental civic freedoms, rule of law and non-discrimination; and creating an enabling environment for civil society.

Albania is part of the Initiative of the Open Government Partnership that includes 77 countries and 106 local governments – representing more than two billion people – and thousands of civil society organizations.

The Open Government Partnership is based on the idea that an open government is more accessible, more responsive, and more accountable to citizens, and that improving the relationship between people and their government has long-term, exponential benefits for everyone.

I have been appointed as **Co-Chair of the Multilateral Forum** established by the Prime Minister where ministers and representatives of the civil society sit as equal in a round table to discuss and decide on the commitments written in a yearly Action Plan. The actual one include commitments such as to prevent corruption in public institutions, introduce beneficial ownership transparency, and improve access to justice. One of the most important commitment is the open data.

Increasing the accessibility of Open Data Portal for the re-use of public data is the key resource for social innovation and economic growth. Open Data provides new opportunities for governments to collaborate with citizens and evaluate public services by giving citizens access to data about those services. Businesses and entrepreneurs will use Open Data to better understand potential markets and build new data-driven products.

Enriching the opendata.gov.al portal with more automatic data being published directly from the state databases via the Governmental Interoperability Platform provides the civil society, students, academics, journalists, businesses and start-ups etc. easier access to various governmental data needed for their research, studies/analysis or building up their businesses and increases government transparency and trust, since the data are published with no human intervention.

At the same time, further developments are planned to improve the features of the portal and the quality of data, thus enabling the users to have more data options and better searching and we will work to increase the quality of our data in parallel with

promoting as much of them as possible to enable civic participation and more engagement between governments and citizens.

As a result, Open Data will make it easier and less costly for government ministries to discover and access their own data or data from other ministries, which reduces acquisition costs, redundancy and overhead.

We are now in the phase of drafting the new action plan for 2022-2024 and I take the opportunity to be here in front of an audience with civil society to call for involvement from all stakeholders. We will gladly receive all ideas and propositions on which commitments to include in the future action plan and all ideas from civil society are welcomed (kindly invite you to go through the website of the Minister of State for service Standards standard.gov.al to receive all information necessary).

Let me once again thank the organizers for the opportunity to give the government prospective to such an important topic and wish you all a very successful and fruitful workshop.

Thank you!