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EGPA Specialized Panel 4

When Reform Matters: Public Administration, Institutional Resilience and Democratic Backsliding

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Public administrations across Europe and beyond are operating in increasingly contested political and institutional environments. Recurrent crises, geopolitical instability and rapid technological transformation are exerting sustained pressure on governance capacity, while simultaneously reshaping the relationship between politics and administration. In this context, administrative reform has re-emerged as a central – yet profoundly ambivalent – instrument of state transformation.

Traditionally associated with efforts to improve the quality of government, administrative reform is now implicated in wider processes of democratic stress. While some reform initiatives reinforce institutional resilience, professionalism and administrative legitimacy, others contribute to the politicisation of the civil service, the weakening of checks and balances, and the erosion of administrative autonomy. Far from being normatively neutral, reform choices may actively reconfigure power relations within the state, with far-reaching implications for the rule of law and the quality of democratic governance.

Contemporary debates on democratic backsliding increasingly recognise that democratic erosion does not necessarily unfold as a slow or linear process. In certain contexts, it may



be accelerated, episodic or concentrated in critical moments of institutional change. Public administrations are not peripheral to these dynamics. They constitute key arenas in which reform designs, implementation practices and professional norms intersect with political strategies, shaping how democratic safeguards are maintained, recalibrated or, in some cases, swiftly reconfigured.

This panel examines administrative reform as a critical nexus linking governance capacity, institutional resilience and democratic quality. Drawing on public governance paradigms – from classical bureaucracy and the Neo-Weberian State to New Public Management and New Public Governance – the panel invites contributions that analyse how reform trajectories shape administrative autonomy, accountability and legitimacy under conditions of political and institutional stress.

Papers may address, among other issues:

- How dominant public governance paradigms shape administrative responses to challenges affecting democratic governance;
- How reform trajectories have contributed to the weakening of bureaucratic institutional resilience, thereby increasing the risk of democratic backsliding;
- Under what conditions reforms facilitate the politicisation of public administrations rather than their professionalisation;
- How reform design and implementation vary across administrative traditions, and with what implications for governance capacity and the rule of law; and
- To what extent digitalisation and algorithmic governance strengthen administrative resilience or, alternatively, generate new risks for democratic oversight, transparency and ethical governance.

The panel welcomes empirically grounded and theoretically informed contributions that combine careful institutional analysis with critical reflection on administrative practices and reform processes. By foregrounding the political and institutional consequences of administrative reform, it aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how and why reform matters for the resilience of public administrations and the sustainability of democratic governance.