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Innovation Network

Strengthening the Strategic Approach and Innovation in the
Civil Service in Bulgaria

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Innovation Network Policy Brief

Key messages

- The Bulgarian Public Sector Innovation Network, with over 70 members, could be developed more systematically, and a formal mandate and investments could be established to fully harness its potential. Findings from research activities carried out in Bulgaria indicate the need for the civil service to foster social capital, skills, and leadership support around innovation in government.
- The OECD suggests the development of a two-tier innovation network: a First-tier open participation network arm, and a Second-tier formal leadership-led network arm, for a more coherent and efficient allocation of resources to strengthen the whole-of-government's innovative capacity. A joint formal mandate as a government programme or initiative is advised to institutionalise the two-tier network. Resources should include staff, a budget for activities and a digital platform.
- The OECD proposes that the two-tier network be piloted for 6 months in 2024 to evaluate and refine the proposal and recommendations based on evidence. The OECD will support this by contributing to four events for prospective members and providing guidance in evaluating the pilot. After implementing and evaluating this pilot phase with OECD support, establishing a formal mandate and a management structure, and allocating resources and funding are advised.
- A background note on innovation networks globally complements the proposal, showcasing the benefits of networks for increasing innovative capacity, key dimensions for the design of networks with international comparisons, and recommendations from this evidence for the Bulgarian case. These recommendations included clarifying purpose and objectives, tailoring membership structures, diversifying the range of activities, establishing a clear mandate and governance, allocating sufficient resources, building staff capacity and support, and creating evaluation and learning mechanisms.

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I. Bulgaria's Innovation Network Proposal

The Modernisation of the Administration Directorate, part of the Council of Ministers Administration (CoMA), is undertaking a project to strengthen the strategic approach and innovation in the Bulgarian civil service. With the support of the European Commission¹, the OECD is currently assessing the innovative capacity of the Government of Bulgaria, identifying enablers, barriers, gaps, and opportunities to build a more innovative and impactful public sector. Based on these findings, the OECD and CoMA will co-create a vision and action plan, including initiatives such as strategically reframing the Government's existing innovation network.

This policy brief aims to guide the strategic upgrading of the Bulgarian Government's Innovation Network, providing a proposal to upgrade the network's design, including the proposal of pilot activities. The document is divided into two sections. The first addresses the country's challenges and proposes a two-tier network to enhance social capital, learning, and leadership around government innovation. This includes a 6-month pilot period with support from the OECD. The second section delves into the benefits of innovation networks, international comparisons on the design of networks, and key recommendations for policymakers in Bulgaria. To develop this policy brief, desk research and interviews with representatives from the Government of Bulgaria and five other government-led networks were conducted.

1. Background of the Current Network

The Bulgarian Public Sector Innovation Network, with over 70 members, could be developed more systematically and a formal mandate and investments could be established to harness its potential fully. Founded in 2022, the initiative is a collaboration between the Institute of Public Administration (IPA) and the Council of Ministers Administration (CoMA). The network seeks to strengthen the knowledge and skills in public sector innovation through the adoption of new approaches and the creation of actionable solutions (See Table 1). The network grew out of a call for essays in public sector innovation in which several innovative public servants participated. However, currently the network is not being developed systematically due to a limited membership and a narrow portfolio of activities. Moreover, a lack of a formal mandate and dedicated budget are hampering the initiative's ability to have a wider impact in the innovative capacity of the government.

Table 1. Current IPA's Innovation Network

Network / Tier	Purpose	Membership	Activities	Mandate and governing body	Resources and funding
Bulgaria: Innovation Network (2022) - Institute of Public Administration and Council of Ministers Administration.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strengthen knowledge and skills in public sector innovation through an active network of experts in public administration. - Initiated through a top-down approach as part of the 2022 Innovation in the Public Sector Forum led by IPA. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Closed membership to civil servants only. The criteria for joining were to write an essay on public sector innovation or participate in an innovation competition. - Currently, there are 75 members. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Forums and events - Innovation Competition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No mandate - Steered jointly by IPA and CoMA. - No Terms of Reference or mission chart. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 2 <50% FTE for coordination and community management. - No dedicated budget - Gov website and library

Note: Table created by author (2024).

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2. Challenges for Innovative Capacity

Findings from research activities carried out in Bulgaria indicate the need to foster social capital, skills, and leadership support around innovation in government to accelerate public sector innovation. These challenges can be addressed to a degree through an upgraded public sector innovation network. However, additional structures are needed to address leadership buy-in. More specifically, these challenges include:

2.1. Lack of social capital and across-government collaboration: Civil servants declared a lack of motivation to engage with other actors in innovative projects, internally or externally, due to inexistent mechanisms and rewards. This leads to siloed reproduction when attempting new approaches or innovative solutions rather than collaborating across government and sectors. Partnerships and networks in academia and the private sector (e.g., the Centre for Creativity and Innovation at Sofia's University, INSAIT) can leverage and support upgrading social capital within the public sector.

2.2 Lack of skills and capacities: Initial findings indicate that only a small group of civil servants have a varying degree of innovation skill in the Bulgarian Government (mainly Innovation Network members). Public servants in general lack competencies for carrying out innovation processes due to a lack of awareness, few government training offers, and limited innovation practice in general. This leads to a limited use of innovative methods in policymaking. At the same time, pre-existing capabilities in academia (e.g., the School of Public Administration at Sofia's University) and the private sector can support strengthening the public sector innovation training more broadly and systematically.

2.3 Lack of leadership support: Findings point out low levels of leadership buy-in or strategic coordination for public sector innovation efforts. In part, this is caused by instability in personal and political priorities. Current leadership willingness (reflected by participants during the OECD Innovation Executive Workshop) could support upgrading leadership capabilities and establishing a strategic coordination mechanism for innovation efforts.

3. Proposal

The OECD suggests the development of a two-tier innovation network: a First-tier open participation network arm, and a Second-tier formal leadership-led network arm, for a more coherent and efficient allocation of resources to strengthen the whole-of-government's innovative capacity. The first-tier will seek to develop a broad base of innovation skills and capabilities at the operational level, while the second will aim to foster an authorising environment conducive to the emergence of innovative leadership for sustained innovative outcomes. This two-tier structure will be an established collaboration between CoMA's Modernisation of the Administration Directorate and IPA. For CoMA, this partnership implies leveraging existing efforts already made while also establishing a formal leadership-led network arm to advise action on public sector innovation and create buy-in among the executives. For IPA, it involves aligning their efforts with the Council's strategic objectives. Table 2 outlines the proposal.

Table 2. Two-tier Innovation Network Proposal

Network / Tier	Purpose	Membership	Activities	Mandate and governing body	Resources and funding
Innovation Network – Tier 1: Public Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Raise innovation awareness and build up innovative skills and behaviours across the public service. - Topics related to innovation methodologies, user research, design thinking, behavioural 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Open membership to the whole public sector. - Potential openness to all society sectors in 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Events - Workshops - Project simulations - Peer exchange sessions - E-learning modules 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Formal mandate as a government programme. - Steered in partnership by IPA and CoMA – Modernisation of the 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 2 50% FTE coordination, community manager, activity design. - Dedicated budget

	sciences, evaluation, digital innovation, etc. - Collaboration with academia and the private sector for content.	the future.	- Community platform and newsletters - E-learning modules	Administration Directorate. - Terms of reference, including innovation principles.	for activities. - Dedicated digital platform and newsletters (gov internal or SaaS).
Innovation Network – Tier 2: Executive Leadership	- Develop innovative leadership capabilities and increase collaboration on strategic innovation initiatives. - Topics related to innovation leadership and governance, adaptive leadership, evidence-based decision-making, public-private partnerships, and talent management. - Collaboration with academia and the private sector for content.	- Open membership to executive leadership level.	- Masterclasses - Conferences - Peer exchange sessions - Working groups		

Note: Table created by author (2024)

3.1. Tier 1: Public Service

The first-tier, open to the whole public service, will aim to raise innovation awareness and build innovative skills and behaviours. Other societal sectors may join in the future. Topics related to innovation methodologies, such as user research, design thinking, behavioural sciences, monitoring and evaluation, change management, digital innovation, and facilitation, could be included.

- **Objectives:**
 - Increase collaboration and capture emerging innovation opportunities for Bulgaria through network building and partnerships (in response to *Challenge 2.1*)
 - Support and encourage the adoption of innovation skills and practices through professional development and capacity-building (in response to *Challenge 2.2*)
 - Spread awareness of innovation and share learnings from innovation projects across government through knowledge sharing and sensemaking (in response to *Challenge 2.3*)
- **Activities:** Workshops, project simulations, peer exchange sessions, community platform and newsletters, and e-learning modules. In-person events with a minimum of 2-3 hours of engagement at least once every four weeks. Support for public servants to get their manager's authorisation and travel approval if needed via formal communication (i.e., letters, emails, participation certificates). Hybrid and virtual events may be held in the future.
- **Expected results Year 1:**
 - 400 members of the Tier 1 network (Currently 70 members).
 - 50 members trained in innovation skills (e.g., design thinking, change management), with 30% using methodologies in practical work.
 - 3 concept notes for emerging innovation opportunities.

3.2. Tier 2: Executive Leadership

The second-tier, open membership to the executive leadership level only, will aim to develop innovative leadership capabilities and increase collaboration on strategic innovation initiatives. This should be focused on leaders from central government organisations and government agencies. This could include targeted topics related to innovation leadership, such as innovation governance, adaptive leadership, evidence-based decision-making, public-private partnerships, and talent management.

- **Objectives:**
 - Spread awareness and build support among leadership for innovation through knowledge sharing and sensemaking (in response to *Challenges 2.1 and 2.3*).
 - Develop strategic innovation opportunities for Bulgaria through network building and partnerships (in response to *Challenge 2.1*).
 - Review and validate the proposed Public Sector Innovation Action Plan (in response to *Challenge 2.3*).
- **Activities:** Activities could include masterclasses, conferences, peer-exchange sessions, and working groups. In-person activities would be preferable.
- **Expected results Year 1:**
 - 40 members of the Tier 2 network (inexistent today).
 - 20 members trained in innovation leadership skills, with 30% using methodologies in practical work.
 - 2 concept notes for strategic innovation projects.

3.3. Mandate and resources

A joint formal mandate as a government programme or initiative is advised to institutionalise the two-tier network effectively. This mandate should clearly outline the objectives, scope, roles, and responsibilities of the network, ensuring alignment with the strategic goals of the Bulgarian Government. The mandate should explicitly designate IPA and CoMA as the lead entities responsible for steering the network, ensuring coordinated decision-making, joint resource allocation, and cohesive implementation of network activities. In combination with the mandate, the development of Terms of Reference (ToR) and Innovation Principles is essential to provide a clear framework for participants to join the network. By co-creating these guiding documents with input from network participants, IPA and CoMA can ensure broad buy-in and ownership of the network's objectives and values.

Dedicated resources are vital to support the successful operation and sustained activities of the network, including staff, budget for activities and a digital platform. To this end, two 50% Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) roles should be designated, one for each tier, to oversee the day-to-day operations, facilitate communication, and coordinate network activities. These roles will play a crucial role in driving engagement, fostering collaboration, and ensuring the smooth functioning of the network. Furthermore, a dedicated budget should be allocated for activities, trainings, and content creation to support the implementation of the network's initiatives. This funding will enable the organisation of workshops, conferences, peer exchange sessions, and the development of learning materials to enhance the innovation capabilities of network members. A dedicated digital platform and newsletters (recommended gov intranet, MS Teams, or SaaS) are essential to facilitate communication, knowledge sharing, and collaboration among network members. This should be functional for event enrolling, sharing information, resources, and collection of members' data.

3.4. Pilot with support of the OECD

The OECD proposes that the two-tier network be piloted during 6 months in 2024 to evaluate and refine the proposal and recommendations based on evidence. The pilot will be carried out by IPA and CoMA. The OECD will support this by contributing to four events for prospective members and providing guidance in evaluating the pilot. As well as the OECD supported activities, the IPA and CoMA are strongly encouraged to carry out at least one activity for each tier every month. 3 outlines the OECD support during the pilot.

Table 3. Pilot Activities supported by the OECD.

Tier	Date	Activity	Aim	Pilot Results
Innovation Network – Tier 1: Civil Service	June – OECD Mission 2	Event: Relaunch of network and innovation capacity-building (2-3 hours).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participants will learn about innovation networks and introductory innovation skills. - Recommendations for network activities and content will be shared. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 200 members of the Tier 1 network. - 50 members trained in innovation skills, with 30% using methodologies in practical work. - 1 collection of ideas for innovation opportunities.
	September – OECD Mission 3	Workshop: Co-designing Innovation in the Public Sector (2-3 hours).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participants will learn about innovation processes and facilitation skills. - Collection of emerging innovation opportunities. 	
Innovation Network – Tier 2: Executive Leadership	June – OECD Mission 2	Masterclass: Leadership and Innovation in the Public Sector (2 hours).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participants will learn about the network and innovative leadership skills. - Recommendations for network activities and content will be shared. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 20 members of the Tier 2 network. - 10 members trained in innovation leadership, with 30% using methodologies in practical work. - 1 collection of ideas for cross-government strategic innovation opportunities.
	September – OECD Mission 3	Workshop: Co-designing strategic, innovative initiatives in the Public Sector (2 hours).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Participants will learn about innovative leadership and innovation processes. - Collection of strategic innovation opportunities. 	

Note: Table created by author (2024).

4. Next steps

Building on the proposed two-tier Innovation Network for the Bulgarian Government, this section outlines the recommended next steps to effectively support the upgrading of its Innovation Network to foster government innovation capacity.

4.1. Implement pilot phase with OECD support:

- Proceed with the proposed six-month pilot phase in 2024, with support from the OECD, to evaluate and refine the proposed network structure and activities.
- Utilise OECD-supported events to relaunch the network, build innovation capacity, and co-design initiatives for both tiers of the network.
- Organise additional activities, at least one per tier per month, to maintain engagement and momentum throughout the pilot phase.
- Evaluate the pilot results and gather feedback from participants to inform adjustments and improvements to the network model.

4.2. Establish a formal mandate and a management structure:

- After the pilot, develop a formal mandate for the two-tier Innovation Network as a government programme or initiative, outlining the roles and responsibilities of IPA and CoMA. This should include Terms of Reference and Innovation Principles co-created with network participants.
- Establish a joint management structure and responsibilities with clear decision-making mechanisms.

4.3. Allocate resources and funding:

- Allocate dedicated resources, including staffing and budget, for the operation and activities of both tiers of the Innovation Network.

- Ensure sufficient resources for coordination, community management, activity design, and content creation, as well as specialised training for the network staff.
- Allocate resources for a dedicated digital platform (Gov internal service or SaaS) and newsletters for communication, event enrolment, resource sharing, and data collection.

II. Background on Innovation Networks Globally

The following section explores the benefits of public sector innovation networks, key design dimensions with international comparability, and recommendations for policymakers in Bulgaria.

1. Background

Innovation networks within government are collaborative social structures involving a spectrum of stakeholders, including primary governmental bodies and, in some cases, the private sector, academic institutions, and civil society organisations. These networks serve as platforms for exchanging knowledge, expertise, and tools, aiming to promote innovation within a safe space for public servants to discuss challenges, failures, and opportunities. Innovation networks support governments in developing capabilities to implement novel solutions that enhance governance effectiveness and legitimacy, ultimately supporting citizen well-being and economic development (Sørensen & Torfing, 2017; Cinar et al., 2024).

Evidence shows the benefits of networks for building a culture of innovation in government and underscores the importance of creating supportive environments for establishing and sustaining these structures (Bekkers et al., 2011; Kaur & Buisman, 2022). Some of the most emphasised mechanisms for building this environment are deliberate mandates, resource allocation, and leadership roles (Voets & De Rynck, 2011; Lewis et al., 2018). However, current evidence fails to address the key design characteristics of networks to support the increase in the innovation capacity of government effectively. (De Vries et al., 2016). As such, the following section has been developed to provide an overview of network benefits and design dimensions based on international cases, including both consolidated and emergent government-led networks from Belgium, Chile, Ireland, Portugal, and Romania.

2. Benefits of Networks for Innovation Capacity

Government-led innovation networks can help to increase innovation capacity across the public sector at system, organisational, and individual levels (Kaur & Buisman, 2022). Some of the benefits of networks can include:

2.1. System level:

- **Increase awareness of government agendas:** These networks facilitate the dissemination of information, and sometimes coordination, regarding global challenges, missions, or public sector reform agendas. They thereby foster a more responsive approach to top-down initiatives. Networks can also influence government agendas by connecting stakeholders and aligning specific efforts (e.g., Ireland's Innovation Network and the support to the Public Sector Reform and other government strategies).
- **Reinforce institutionalisation of innovation:** By promoting ecosystem partnerships, government-led innovation networks contribute to institutionalising innovation within the public sector, fostering a culture where innovation is valued and supported (e.g., Portugal's through their specific Network of Experimentation and Innovation Laboratories).
- **Enhance cross-government evaluation and learning:** They can raise awareness of system-level innovation evaluation and learning mechanisms, enabling governments to assess the effectiveness of their innovation initiatives and share best practices across agencies and jurisdictions (e.g., Chile's Innovators Network and its Innovation Index Community).

2.2. Organisational level:

- **Support new leadership practices:** Innovation networks can help organisations adopt new leadership practices and styles that prioritise innovation, fostering a culture where leaders empower and support their teams to explore new ideas and take calculated risks (e.g., Romania’s Innovation Network and its leadership capacity building initiatives).
- **Adoption of innovation portfolio management:** These networks can promote the adoption of innovation portfolio management and funding approaches, encouraging decision-makers to allocate resources to a diverse range of innovative projects strategically (e.g., Chile’s Innovation Network and its challenge prize initiative).
- **Increase monitoring and evaluation:** They can increase awareness of organisational monitoring and evaluation practices, encouraging organisations to assess the impact of their innovation efforts and make data-driven decisions to drive continuous improvement. (e.g., Chile’s Innovation Network and its capacity building activities in measurement).

2.3. Individual level:

- **Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for innovation:** Government innovation networks support individuals by fostering motivation for innovation and encouraging a mindset shift towards embracing change and experimentation. Individuals can enhance their professional visibility, or that of their initiative, allowing for new collaborations, career advances, and recognition (e.g., Belgium Flanders’s Government Innovation Network and its activities on civil entrepreneurship)
- **Stimulate innovation-friendly work environments:** They cultivate innovation-friendly work environments by connecting individuals with diverse backgrounds and expertise, enabling ideas and knowledge exchanges within safe spaces, ultimately allowing individuals to feel empowered to explore innovative solutions (e.g., Romania’s Innovation Networks and its events to share best practices and resources)
- **Develop practical innovation skills:** These networks support the development of practical innovation skills and abilities among individuals, promoting approaches such as experimentation and iteration, equipping public servants with the tools needed to drive innovative solutions at different scales, including learning from their individual experiences and performance (e.g., Portugal’s Network of Innovators and its workshops on methodologies and tools)

3. Innovation Network Design

Understanding the design dimensions of innovation networks such as purpose, membership, activities, mandate, and resources is crucial for enhancing their effectiveness in driving innovation capacity. Firstly, a network’s *purpose* provides insight into its objectives, ranging from fostering an innovation culture to innovate collectively. *Membership* criteria define the targeted groups, ranging from non-government actors to specific roles within government. *Activities* facilitate understanding the functional engagement needed to achieve network goals. A clear *mandate* and governing body structures establish the necessary authorising environment. Lastly, comprehending *resources* highlights the support required to accomplish the purpose effectively.

Table 4 outlines five government-led innovation networks, including Belgium, Chile, Ireland, Portugal, and Romania along these dimensions. In Belgium’s Flanders region, the Government Innovation Network, established in 2020 by the Flanders Chancellery and Foreign Office, aims to connect and inspire individuals within and around the government to cultivate entrepreneurial skills. With an open membership spanning all society sectors, this network conducts workshops, events, and peer exchange sessions, guided by a formal mandate and supported by a dedicated budget. In Chile, the Public Innovators Network, initiated in 2017 by the Government Lab within the Ministry of Finance, focuses on enhancing

innovation capacities with topics including service and process design, facilitation and convening, and measurement. Formal mandates and dedicated resource allocation have supported an open membership that has reached more than 27,000 members, with a predominant focus on public servants.

Ireland's Innovation Network, established in 2019 by the Department of Public Expenditure NDP Delivery and Reform, aims to foster a culture of innovation across the public service, supported by workshops, events, and training programmes. A formal mandate and cross-referencing to diverse government strategies have supported its relevance in public sector reform. Meanwhile, Portugal has developed two distinct targeted networks: the Network of Experimentation and Innovation Laboratories and the Network of Innovators, both established to promote innovative practices and methodologies within the public sector. Lastly, Romania's Innovation Network, led by the Innovation Laboratory within the Secretariat-General of the Government since 2023, aims to share best practices and resources while supporting collaborative efforts and capacity-building initiatives.

Table 4. Innovation Networks Institutionalisation

Network (Year of creation)	Purpose	Membership	Activities	Mandate and governing body	Resources and funding
Belgium – Flanders: Government Innovation Network (2020), Flanders Chancellery and Foreign Office.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Connect and inspire people in and around the government to learn and experiment to grow as civil entrepreneurs. - Initiated through a top-down approach but working bottom-up exclusively. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Open membership cross-sectorial (500 members). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Workshops - Events - Peer exchange sessions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Formal mandate - Steered by Flanders Chancellery, with Government Advisory bodies. - Body of members offering guidance and reviews. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 2.8 FTE Team (1 Project leader, 2 Policy Advisors). - Annual budget of USD 162M. - Dedicated internal gov website. - Gov venues for activities.
Chile: Public Innovators Network (2017), Government Lab, Ministry of Finance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strengthen public servants' innovation capacities and contribute to developing a culture of innovation in the State. - Topics related to innovation methodologies, facilitation, service and process design, and measurement. - Initiated through a bottom-up approach after a civil servants' innovation learning programme. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Open membership cross-sectorial, focused on public servants (27,000 members). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Workshops - Projects simulations - Events - Training programmes - Community platform and newsletters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Formal mandate as a government programme. - Terms and Conditions - Innovation principles - Steered by the Government Lab. - Initiatives in collaboration with partners. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 5 100% FTE Team (1 Project lead, 2 Project managers, 1 Service designer, 1 full-stack developer). - Annual budget of USD 298M. - Dedicated online platform. - Dedicated spaces for in-person activities.
Ireland: Innovation Network (2019), Department of Public Expenditure NDP Delivery and Reform.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support the development of a culture of innovation across the public service, building skills and enthusiasm and communicating key innovation messages. - Initiated through a top-down approach as part of a PSI project with the OECD but working primarily bottom-up. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Open membership to public civil servants (1,950 members). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Workshops - Events - Training programmes - Community platform and newsletters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Formal mandate as a government programme, cited in several strategies. - Steered by the Department of Public Expenditure as part of the reform agenda. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 2 50% FTE Team. - Dedicated online space.
Portugal: Network of Experimentation and Innovation Laboratories (2021), LabX, Agency for Administrative Modernisation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Share experiences, innovative projects and practices, and case studies and act as a support structure for new members. - Topics related to experimentation and innovation in government, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Closed membership for teams from laboratories or innovation units (10 teams are members) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Meetings and conferences - Peer exchange sessions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Formal mandate within LabX's responsibilities. - Mission chart and innovation principles. - Coordinated by LabX in partnership with members. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 2 part-time roles with the support of members. - Activity costs paid by members.

	innovation learning, tools, and culture. - Created through a bottom-up approach following interest of different labs.	currently).			
Portugal: Network of Innovators (2018), LabX, Agency for Administrative Modernisation.	- Give visibility to cases that are transforming the public sector and share the approaches, methodologies and tools used to innovate. - Topics related to innovation methodology, convening, incubating, and mentoring. - Working primarily bottom-up.	- Open membership to public servants (no available data on membership).	- Workshops - Mentoring - Peer exchange sessions - Community platform and newsletters	- Formal mandate within LabX's responsibilities. - Innovation Principles - Steered by LabX.	- 2 part-time roles with the support of members. - Dedicated gov internal website. - Regular gov venue for activities.
Romania, Innovation Network (2023), Innovation Laboratory – Secretariat-General of the Government.	- Sharing best practices and resources, promoting public sector innovation, providing collaboration and safe spaces, and supporting the Innovation Lab's activities. - Initiated through a top-down approach as part of a PSI project with the OECD but working primarily bottom-up.	- Open cross-sectorial membership (300 members), with some activities for public servants only.	- Workshops - Events - Training sessions - Awards	- Informal mandate as part of the officially established Innovation Lab. - Informal mandate. - Steered by the Innovation Laboratory.	- 5 part-time roles. - Exploring dedicated budget for capacity-building activities. - Dedicated online platform. - Gov venues for activities.

Note: Table created by author (2024).

The international comparison provided shows several trends and patterns in the design of networks across the listed governments. Among them:

- **Purpose:** The purpose of these networks generally revolves around promoting a culture of innovation or strengthening innovation capacity through sharing best practices and resources within a safe space or sense of community. Topics commonly include innovation and experimentation methodologies, service design, or facilitation. There is a mix of top-down and bottom-up approaches in initiating these networks. While some were initiated through government official initiatives, others emerged from the grassroots.
- **Membership:** Membership structures vary across networks and are driven by each network's specific strategy and aim. While most networks embrace an open membership without a specific criterion for their targeted group, a few networks have closed membership by appointment or invitation-only. Some of the networks target cross-sectorial groups spanning from the public to private sector and academia, while others target more specific members such as specific role holders or departments across the administration. Thus, membership numbers vary widely, ranging from thousands of participants to a few hundred to dozens.
- **Activities:** The types of activities vary across networks, spanning from practical approaches such as project simulations to more traditional conferences or masterclasses. Common activities across networks include workshops, events, training sessions, and peer exchange sessions. Less common activities include mentoring and awards. Most networks also offer community platforms and newsletters with news, initiatives, and opportunities.
- **Mandate and governing body:** Networks have predominantly formal mandates, often established as government programmes or initiatives. They are typically steered by government agencies or departments responsible for innovation or public sector reform. The involvement of advisory bodies and members for guidance and reviews is also observed, although for only a few networks. Moreover, many networks collaborate with partners within and outside of the government to enrich their activities and achieve their objectives.

- **Resources and funding:** The allocation of resources and funding varies widely among networks, reflected in team size and budgets. Some networks have large, dedicated teams with full-time roles, while others rely on shared part-time roles, and resources and support from members. Budgets range among networks, with some having significant dedicated budgets while others financing activities through members or supporting institutions. Most networks have online community spaces, ranging from dedicated websites or platforms to government intranets.

4. Recommendations

Based on the previous international evidence, the following recommendations were reached considering Bulgaria's identified challenges and current and potential innovation network. They were subsequently used to develop the two-tier network proposal to enhance social capital, learning, and leadership around government innovation. These recommendations were that the Government of Bulgaria should consider:

1. **Clarifying purpose and objectives:** Clearly define the Innovation Network's purpose and objectives, aligning them with broader government priorities and public sector reform agendas. Ensure that the purpose reflects the need to foster an innovation culture and capabilities, as well as to address Bulgaria's aforementioned challenges on social capital, skills, and leadership for innovation capacity.
2. **Tailoring membership structures:** Establish tailored membership structures that serve the network's purpose by upgrading to a two-tier network. Encourage open membership without specific criteria for people to join so innovation can remain a transversal subject for both public service delivery professionals and policymakers. Foster cross-sectorial participation to leverage diverse perspectives and expertise, enriching the network's discussions and activities.
3. **Diversifying the range of activities:** Design a diverse range of activities that target the needs and interests of network members, including generating safe spaces for purposeful learning and exploration. Incorporate practical approaches for activities within the current government concerns to encourage rapid and incremental skills adoption for Tier 1. For Tier 2, carry out activities that foster dialogue and discussion around government priorities in recognised formats. Test, learn and adapt format as necessary based on results and participants' feedback.
4. **Establishing a clear mandate and governance:** Provide a clear mandate for the innovation network, outlining its responsibilities, decision-making processes, and governance structure. Ensure the network is steered and deployed collaboratively by CoMA's Modernisation of the Administration Directorate and IPA creating synergies and pooling resources to achieve more together.
5. **Allocating sufficient resources:** Allocate adequate resources needed to support the establishment and operation of the network, including funding for staffing roles charged with coordination and community management, and for activity design and implementation. Ensure accountability with precise evaluation mechanisms. Explore partnership opportunities with private sector and academia entities to leverage additional resources and expertise.
6. **Building staff capacity and support:** Provide capacity-building support to the network staff, including specialised training and peer exchanges with other innovation networks. Foster a culture of experimentation, iteration, evaluation, and continuous learning within the team as proposed by the OECD in the 6-month pilot.
7. **Creating evaluation and learning mechanisms:** Establish evaluation mechanisms to assess the impact and effectiveness of the innovation network, including feedback from members and stakeholders to identify areas for improvement and adaptation on a continuous basis.

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