

# Transparency and Anticorruption Reform Agenda of the Municipality of Ruse 2022–2027

## I. Introduction

Vulnerabilities to corruption, manifested in shortcomings in effective transparency, as well as in the ineffective use of integrity mechanisms and low levels of civic engagement, are perils to local democracy and citizens' trust in municipal institutions.

Building upon:

- the principled commitment to work for more transparency, accessibility, anticorruption measures and civic engagement, as stipulated by the Municipal Pact for Anticorruption, signed by the Mayor of the Municipality of Ruse, Mr. Pencho Milkov on 19 July 2022 at the IRI National Conference "Combating Vulnerabilities to Corruption at the Municipal Level", which took place in Sofia, Bulgaria;
- and
- the findings and recommendations in the report "Assessing Municipal Vulnerabilities to Corruption in Bulgaria: An Examination of Ten Bulgarian Municipalities", published by the IRI in July 2022;

this Transparency and Anti-Corruption Reform Agenda has been designed and adopted with consensus by the Working Group in the Municipality of Ruse, which brings together representatives of the municipal administration, the municipal council and civil society.

This is a strategic document that suggests pragmatic short-term and longer-term reforms aimed at increasing effective transparency and citizen participation so as to address vulnerabilities to corruption. Each reform includes an overview of its rationale, objective, timeframe, and implementation process.

This Reform Agenda seeks to inform and stimulate a process of change through reform implementation in the Municipality of Ruse that will ultimately improve the lives of citizens.

## II. Short-term reforms<sup>1</sup>

### Reform 1: Develop an institutional communication strategy

#### **Rationale for the suggested reform:**

Inconsistencies in the municipality's efforts to be transparent and responsive hinder accountability, and the current approach to communication may not always guarantee a response. Ruse Municipality has already introduced a number of improvements in this regard, such as a weekly mayor's report, supplemented by a video presentation by the mayor every Friday, an 'Ask the Mayor' column with questions and answers from citizens in the local newspaper 'Utro', along with video inserts of the mayor from the main repair sites and other construction projects to explain the stages and upcoming activities.

Despite the hard work of the municipality to enhance and improve communication with citizens with a view to increasing transparency and accountability in order to create a sense of institutional approach, strategic planning, predictability and sustainability over time and thus generate additional confidence that the communication actions taken are not momentary and uncoordinated initiatives, Ruse Municipality needs to develop an institutional communication strategy. This strategy will take stock of a range of already existing good practices, complement and refine them, and place them within a broader strategic framework of principles and priorities to ensure the overall organization of communication activities and give predictability, consistency, and comprehensiveness to the approach to content intended for citizens. The development of the strategy will also allow for a comprehensive analysis of communication efforts and needs to identify the possible need for new elements and practices.

#### **Objective:**

Establish clear priorities and guidelines for municipal officials in terms of the content, channels, and audiences they need to connect with.

This will ensure the availability and accessibility of information and enhance citizens' perceptions of municipal openness and responsiveness.

#### **The reform seeks to achieve the following results:**

- Municipal communication products appear more regularly and are more accessible.
- The relationship between municipal officials and the media is more interactive.
- Citizens have a better understanding of what the municipality is doing and why.

#### **Process:**

- Analysis of the municipality's communication needs based on a review of current media and social media presence, branding and image, messaging and audience.
- Development of a strategy including messages, content, channels (e.g. website, Facebook, "Ruse Public Council" Civic Initiative Group), target groups and an action plan, including organization of existing practices within this common framework.

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<sup>1</sup> To be implemented within one year.

- Official adoption of the strategy.
- Training of the municipal staff on the strategy and provision of additional resources as needed.
- Launch of strategy implementation.

**Resources:**

- Expertise in the field of communications, including media relations and social media management.
- IT support.

**Roles and responsibilities:**

- **Municipality:** Public relations/communications officers lead the technical side of implementation, with the mayor formally approving the strategy and senior municipal officials/managers (e.g. deputy mayor) overseeing implementation. If the working group decides that the strategy should involve the municipal council, the document should also be submitted to the Council for adoption, following approval by the mayor.
- **Civil society:** Media representatives should be consulted throughout the entire process, as they are the main intermediaries in the communication strategy; Community members could be part of the communication needs analysis, providing insight into how citizens receive information from the municipality; NGOs or companies with a media focus could provide technical advice.

### III. Medium- and long-term reforms<sup>2</sup>

#### Reform 2: Conduct civic education campaigns

**Rationale for the suggested reform:**

The citizens of Ruse Municipality are largely apathetic about their participation in the municipal decision-making process. Formal participatory mechanisms have failed to increase citizen involvement in decision-making at a municipal level. The reasons for this may be lack of awareness of the existing opportunities for civic engagement and the role and powers of local government institutions, as well as a lack of confidence in the effectiveness of civic participation mechanisms to influence the decisions of the administration and the municipal council. This challenge creates the need for a civic education campaign. The Municipality of Ruse has already taken steps in this regard, such as developing an organigram of all employees of the Municipality with information on their responsibilities and co-ordination, and appointing municipal officers/commissioners in eight districts of the Municipality, responsible for the neighborhoods in the respective districts, who receive signals/reports from citizens about problems and irregularities, with the aim to better monitor the activities of the local administration and increase citizen participation in local governance.

**Objective:**

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<sup>2</sup> To be implemented within two to five years

Informing citizens about their rights and existing opportunities to participate in municipal decision-making, including information about how these opportunities work, what types of input are valuable, and how citizen suggestions are considered.

Such a campaign would increase citizens' confidence in the municipality's willingness to achieve higher levels of civic participation, as well as increase citizens' engagement and participation in issues important to the municipality.

The reform seeks to achieve the following results:

- Increase citizen attendance at municipal council meetings and public discussions.
- Strengthen the legitimacy and credibility of municipal council members and administrative staff.

**Process:**

- Draw up a list of all the opportunities and ways in which citizens can participate in the decision-making process in the municipality.
- Develop a comprehensive, easy-to-understand guide to citizen participation, as well as explanatory materials about the municipality, its functions, responsibilities, employees, contacts, and information about specific policies that affect the daily lives of citizens and create responsibilities and/or opportunities for them.
- Publication of the guide and explanatory materials on the municipality's website (in a separate section or subsection of the website, visible on the municipality's home page) and promotion in the media and social networks.
- Develop an outreach plan that includes a calendar of activities (press conferences, live broadcasts, Q&As, general meetings, etc.). The plan should include planning and implementing an educational programme entitled 'How to live in Ruse', together with the municipal councilors, during class time in schools among older students who will soon come of age and become voting citizens. The programme should provide information on civil rights and duties, taxes, fees, property management, etc., with the municipal administration explaining issues of importance to citizens.
- Implementation of information activities.

**Resources:**

- Legal expertise.
- Expertise in public relations/communications.
- Experience in community mobilization.
- IT support, if necessary.
- Possible use of municipal premises.

**Roles and responsibilities:**

- **Municipality:** The public relations/communications experts develop and implement the outreach plan under the direction of the deputy mayor. The participation of council members should be on a voluntary basis.
- **Civil society:** The media has an important role to play in publicizing events. Facebook groups and local associations can further promote the calendar to their members.

Community leaders can act as intermediaries in outreach activities, alongside municipal officials.

### **Reform 3: Continuing the policy to support citizens**

#### **Rationale for the suggested reform:**

Ruse Municipality has a system for submitting and tracking notifications and correspondence as a tool to assist citizens, which serves as an example of a good practice. At the same time, this has not made the citizens think that the municipality is responding to their queries in an open and responsive manner. In order to use the full potential of its existing tools and staff to support citizens and identify the need for new structures and mechanisms in this direction, the municipality needs to develop a citizen support policy. This policy will send a signal to citizens and increase their confidence in the municipality's willingness to work for them.

#### **Objective:**

Strengthen the capacity of the administration to handle requests and provide customer service, and inform citizens about the platforms and procedures available to them.

This will increase the citizens' perception of openness and responsiveness of the municipality.

The reform seeks to achieve the following results:

- Inquiries are directed to the appropriate staff in an efficient manner.
- Citizens perceive the municipality as open and responsive.
- Citizens no longer rely solely on the mayor as the primary point of contact.
- Citizens are better aware of where to direct their queries, opinions or requests.
- Citizens have more confidence in the response they will receive from the municipality through official communication channels.

#### **Process:**

- An analysis of the current citizen support system, including the contact mechanisms available to citizens (telephone numbers, e-mail addresses, online forms and systems) and any existing guidance on who to contact for what issues. As part of the analysis citizens should be asked about their experiences of what works and what does not.
- Develop a citizen support policy that identifies current gaps and describes the process for receiving, prioritizing, and responding to citizen inquiries. The policy should integrate the operation of the online communication submission and tracking system with the operation of neighborhood representatives, and explain to citizens the process for distributing their communication and the deadlines for response.
- Official adoption of the policy.
- Identify contact persons for the different areas of the most frequent signals/complaints/communication and train them to apply the new processes.
- Update the website and other forms of online presence to direct citizens to the right contacts.
- Prepare a press release on the municipality's systematized process for supporting citizens and focal points.

**Resources:**

- IT support for online information updates.

**Roles and responsibilities:**

- **Municipality:** Municipal experts lead the analysis and development of the citizen support policy to lead to the designation of coordination centers within the administration (and the municipal council). Following approval by the mayor, if necessary, the policy is submitted to the municipal council for adoption.
- **Civil society:** Consultation with citizens could be part of the analysis phase.

**Reform 4: Develop a municipal transparency policy for large infrastructure projects****Rationale for the suggested reform:**

Transparency and openness are a key priority for the administration of the Municipality of Ruse. There is an explicit commitment by the administration to try to use different channels to provide more information to citizens. Most key documents are available on the municipality's website, including regulations, procedural rules and decisions; public procurement has become more transparent in recent years; and a weekly activity report is also produced. Other channels, such as Facebook, are also used to share information about major procurement and construction projects. At the same time, these efforts need to be systematized and placed in the framework of a common transparency policy that guarantees citizens an institutional approach, accountability, predictability, and sustainability. This will also increase the effectiveness of current practices by coordinating and combining them, and complementing and/or building upon them when deficiencies are identified.

**Objective:**

Establish clear guidelines and expectations for the type of information the municipality should publish, and the timing and format of the publication. This reform will be applied to major infrastructure projects and the municipality will develop a definition of 'major infrastructure project' within the policy in line with the Information System for Management and Monitoring.

This reform will improve the availability and accessibility of information, add a sustainable element of predictability and systematicity, and thereby enhance citizens' perceptions of the openness and responsiveness of the municipal administration and the municipal council.

The reform seeks to achieve the following results:

- Decrease in citizen suspicion of municipal opacity or selective transparency.
- Fewer gaps and delays in the provision of public information.
- Fewer access to information requests.

**Process:**

- Review current practices for providing information on major infrastructure projects.
- Identify areas where current practices can be improved.

- Develop preliminary guidelines on content, timing, format, and responsibilities.
- Draft a policy document and seek formal approval.
- Designate officials responsible for overseeing implementation.
- Ensure that the necessary resources are available.

**Resources:**

- Expertise in the area of communication.
- Legal expertise.
- Publishing and possibly audio-visual software.

**Roles and responsibilities:**

- **Municipality:** Public relations/communications experts in charge of technical design. The mayor formally approves the transparency policy and submits it to the municipal council for adoption.
- **Civil society:** Citizens, relevant community groups and local business groups can participate in the review of current practices. Transparency-oriented NGOs can provide advice and technical support.

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