

Transparency and Anticorruption Reform Agenda of the Municipality of Stara Zagora 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 citizen engagement as stipulated in the Municipal Pact for Anticorruption, signed by the Mayor of the Municipality of Stara Zagora, Mr. Zhivko Todorov on 19 July 2022 at the IRI National Conference "Combatting 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 IRI in July 2022;

this Transparency and Anticorruption Reform Agenda has been designed and adopted with consensus by the Working Group in the Municipality of Stara Zagora, 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 Stara Zagora that will ultimately improve the lives of citizens.

II. Short-term reforms¹

Reform 1: Campaign to raise awareness and encourage the use of e-services of the municipality by citizens

Rationale for the suggested reform:

Citizens in the Municipality of Stara Zagora are more likely to seek a solution to their issues through informal channels or by filing complaints directly with the mayor than through formal mechanisms. The focus on informal channels creates a risk of discrimination based on citizens' access to the mayor or other officials, which makes traceability and accountability difficult, thereby hampering the municipal efforts to demonstrate what has been done. The significant role of unofficial ad-hoc mechanisms shows that official communication platforms are not popular with citizens. This may be due to the feeling that they are less effective and more difficult to use. It is also possible that citizens simply do not know about them or how easily they can be used.

Objective:

The purpose of the measure is to raise citizens' awareness of the existing e-services and tools in the Municipality of Stara Zagora and to encourage their use.

The reform should achieve the following results:

- Raise citizens' awareness of the advantages and ease of use of e-services.
- Increase citizens' trust in e-services, as well as the desire and aspiration of municipal leaders to develop and service these effectively.
- Reduce the sense of selectivity in the response by the municipality.

Process:

- Identify and categorize of electronic services and available official communication channels provided to citizens by the municipality.
- Develop an information action plan with roles and calendar to raise citizens' awareness of the identified e-services and channels of communication.

The plan should also include the following specific elements:

- Advertising banner on the website of the municipality and short, clear, and visible information about the services that can be used electronically;
- Development of video materials and a demo-video for the electronic services of the municipality, preparing advertising leaflets and distributing them in key public places;
- Introduction of a self-service desk in the Center for Administrative Services and appointment of an employee to inform citizens about the opportunity to use electronic services and to assist them in their first use of e-services;
- The focus of the campaign should also be on the security of use of electronic services and the guaranteed protection of users' data;

¹ With a performance horizon of one year.

- The municipality should interact proactively with civil society organizations and local media to involve them in the campaign;
- Divide activities, roles, and responsibilities among municipal employees and representatives of civil society organizations.
- Implement the plan.

Resources:

- Communications expertise.
- IT support for the production of video materials.
- Possible use of municipal premises for in-person activities.

Roles and responsibilities:

- **Municipality:** The PR/communications officers shall manage the technical side of the implementation and the senior municipal officials and/or representatives of the Municipal Council shall organise, participate, coordinate, and supervise the implementation of the information campaign plan.
- **Civil society:** Civil society organizations can partner with the municipality and encourage citizens to use the electronic services of the municipality.

Reform 2: Improving coordination and interaction between the municipality and civil society organizations

Rationale for the suggested reform:

Civil society organisations are not sufficiently involved in strategic planning processes. Despite the existing good relations with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the field of services and daily activities, and despite renewed sectoral consultative councils with the participation of NGOs, the municipality could seek more actively and more systematically to cooperate with civil society organizations in the formation of policies and strategies or the development of projects. The municipality should renew its efforts for strategic cooperation (Public Forum for Partnership) with NGOs.

Objective:

Creating a mechanism for more effective involvement of civil society organizations in the processes of discussing the challenges that the municipality is facing, the proposals for dealing with them and the planning and implementation of municipal policies and strategies. After its development, the mechanism should be announced on the municipal website. This will help to strengthen the partnership with civil society organisations.

The reform should achieve the following results:

- Greater engagement by civil society groups and associations with the municipality.
- Municipality benefits from technical expertise existing in civil society while solving municipal problems.

Process:

- Review what works well and not so well in existing consultative mechanisms with civil society groups.
- Develop a mechanism for regular consultation with civil society organizations. The process should include the following elements:
 - Creating a structure in the municipality to coordinate communication and to interact between the municipality and the civil sector;
 - Restoration of the activities of the Public Forum for Partnership with local authorities;
 - Updating the Ordinance on funding NGOs;
 - The municipality should develop a program for funding NGO projects that address significant problems for the municipality, with clear criteria for eligibility and selection of project proposals.
 - Optimization and simplification of the procedure for reporting on the implementation of project proposals.
- Designate public officials who will represent the municipality in the implementation of the mechanism.
- Consult the mechanism with community members and organizations.
- Formally announce the mechanism.

Resources:

- Time resources of representatives of the municipal administration and civil society organizations.
- Use of municipal premises.

Roles and responsibilities:

- **Municipality:** The effort to revamp consultative mechanisms should be overseen by the mayor or a deputy mayor, in collaboration with representatives of the Municipal Council. Designated officials will be responsible for convening and chairing the consultation format and the mechanisms for relations with civil society organizations.
- **Civil society:** Representatives of civil society organizations will be consulted in the process of developing the mechanism.

III. Medium- and long-term reforms ²

Reform 3: Strengthening the role and increasing the activity of the public mediator

Rationale for the suggested reform:

Citizens in the Municipality of Stara Zagora could take advantage of the existing figure of public mediator (ombudsman) by strengthening this role and increasing its visibility .

² With a performance horizon of two to five years..

Objective:

Increasing the visibility, activeness, and effectiveness, as well as strengthening the role of the institution of the ombudsman in the process of coordinating, resolving, and following up on actions taken in relation to citizens' concerns and complaints.

This will increase the perception for openness and responsiveness by the administration, will lead to a more effective response to citizens' signals and complaints, and will subsequently increase civic trust and engagement.

The reform should achieve the following results:

- Citizens recognize the ombudsman institution as a clear recipient for their signals and complaints.
- Citizens feel safe in raising issues without fear of being singled out by the authorities.
- The municipality has a more efficient mechanism for receiving and organizing complaints.

Process:

- Discuss ideas to enhance the visibility and the role, as well as increase the activeness of the ombudsman institution.
- Consult citizens on the proposed ideas.
- Announce the new elements of the position and the envisaged initiatives and campaigns in the local media.

Resources:

- Budget for the new elements that would strengthen the role and visibility of the ombudsman.
- Possible use of municipal premises.

Roles and responsibilities:

- **Municipality:** Legal experts within the municipality can develop the initial proposal, with the mayor and council having the responsibility to consult citizens and then adopt and ensure funding for the reform.
- **Civil society:** Participate in consultations to increase the effectiveness of the institution of the ombudsman.

Reform 4: Strengthening the public consultation process by adopting a municipal ordinance and orienting the process towards real and concrete results**Rationale for the suggested reform:**

Citizens perceive opportunities for participation as too formalistic. There is a lack of serious interest in public consultations and discussions, as well as in the municipal decision-making process in general.

Objective:

The reform aims to develop and implement a more inclusive and deliberative approach to public consultations, involving citizens in the process of formulating priorities, adopting policies, and monitoring their impact.

This measure will increase civic trust, engagement, and participation.

The reform should achieve the following results:

- Increased citizen participation in public consultations.
- Increased role of citizen contributions in municipal policymaking.
- Enhanced citizen trust in municipal institutions.

Process:

- Analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the current approach to public consultations and municipal council meetings, thereby identifying opportunities for improvement.
- Formulate an enhanced approach that creates multiple stages of citizen involvement, as well as a clear feedback mechanism between citizen proposals/reactions and municipal proposals/actions, including at an earlier stage of the process of formulating policies and decisions.

The new approach should include the following aspects:

- Surveys among citizens in connection with current problems of the municipality.
- More active involvement of professional (sectoral) organizations in the process of public discussions, thereby replicating the experience of the Chamber of Architects in Stara Zagora and its work with the municipality in relation to other sectoral organizations and NGOs.
- Specifying the level of representation of NGOs; identifying the most active NGOs who contribute and work effectively with the municipality; utilizing the specific expertise of different NGOs; issuing references for contributions by NGOs by the municipality, thus encouraging their participation in solving local problems.
- Adopt an Ordinance on Public Consultations with a clear formulation of the new approach.
- Train relevant staff for the implementation of the newly adopted Ordinance on Public Consultations.
- Develop media materials to disseminate information about the new consultation process.
- Roll out the new approach.

Resources:

- Legal expertise.
- Facilitation/community mobilization expertise and training.
- PR/communications support, as needed.

Roles and responsibilities:

- **Municipality:** Legal experts and public officials in charge of consultations will develop the technical approach, with the explicit support by the mayor and the council. Municipal staff will have to be trained in the new approach for successful implementation. Public relations/communications must be carried out throughout the process.
- **Civil society:** The municipality could consult citizens on the new approach, as well as work with local or national NGOs with expertise in facilitation and community mobilization.

Reform 5: Adopting a participatory budgeting process**Rationale for the suggested reform:**

Citizens in the Municipality of Stara Zagora do not actively participate in public consultation processes. Creating an opportunity for participatory budgeting will demonstrate the direct effect of citizens' feedback on municipal decisions.

Objective:

The reform objective is to create a well-structured and accessible process for citizens to contribute to the shaping and execution of the municipal budget. This will increase civic participation and will demonstrate the impact that participatory mechanisms can have in municipal decision-making.

The reform should achieve the following results:

- More active citizen participation when determining the municipal budget.
- Citizens see tangible benefits from engaging with the municipality.

Process:

- Designate a task force (administration, council, civil society) for exploring potential participatory budgeting methodologies.
- Develop a technical proposal that includes budget ceiling, participatory approach, and responsibilities.
- Consult citizen organizations on the proposal.
- Formally adopt the proposal.
- Designate public officials in charge of participatory budgeting.
- Develop media materials for raising citizens' awareness about the new approach.
- Roll out the participatory budgeting approach before the next budget cycle.

Resources:

- Expertise on participatory budgeting.
- Facilitation/community mobilization expertise.
- Financial planning/budget expertise.

Roles and responsibilities:

- **Municipality:** Members of the task force (finance officials, council members, etc.) will be responsible for familiarizing themselves with participatory budgeting and developing a sound proposal. The mayor will endorse, and the council will adopt the approach. Designated officials will oversee implementation, supported by PR and administrative experts as needed.
- **Civil society:** For this approach to work, civil society must be involved all the way throughout the reform process; national or international NGOs' technical expertise on participatory budgeting is needed.

Reform 6: Adopting a digital platform for citizen participation**Rationale for the suggested reform:**

Civic participation in Stara Zagora in respect to municipal policies, decisions and investment projects needs to be increased so that the municipality receives more and better feedback from citizens. At the same time, citizen participation should be facilitated and the municipality should demonstrate readiness to listen to citizens' opinions and suggestions.

Objective:

Establishing an online platform (accessible via computer or smartphone) where citizens can easily share proposals, discuss municipal initiatives, and participate in consultative processes. This will contribute to an increased citizen perception about the openness and responsiveness of municipal institutions, as well as to more civic engagement and participation.

The reform should achieve the following results:

- Active citizen engagement with municipal proposals.
- Citizens submit their own initiatives.
- Closer alignment between citizen needs and municipal actions.

Process:

- Review available open-source software solutions for citizen participation that would allow discussion of any issue of community importance and can host the formal process of public consultations.
- Develop a technical proposal for the platform, including objectives, resourcing, and implications for existing consultative processes, as well as deciding whether an application (app) will be developed to compliment the platform.
- Secure the technical expertise required for developing a tailored platform.
- Design the administrative process for managing the platform and processing citizen inputs.
- Roll out the platform for a test period and make adjustments as needed.
- Develop a media campaign to publicize the platform.
- Roll out the platform.

Resources:

- IT expertise, particularly in app development.

- PR/communications expertise.
- Budget for technical support.

Roles and responsibilities:

- **Municipality:** The reform should be led by a senior official (deputy mayor) overseeing a task force including PR, customer support, and IT roles. The mayor is to formally approve the technical proposal. The council is to adopt the proposal submitted by the mayor.
- **Civil society:** NGOs can provide technical advice on the selection and tailoring of the app and should be involved in validating the technical proposal; media will play an important role in disseminating information about the platform.

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