

Transparency and Anticorruption Reform Agenda of the Municipality of Veliko Tarnovo 2022–2027

I. Introduction

Vulnerabilities to corruption, manifesting 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 Mrs. Rositsa Dimitrova, Director of the Directorate for Social Activities and Health of the Municipality of Veliko Tarnovo, on behalf of the Mayor of Veliko Tarnovo, Mr. Daniel Panov 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 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 Veliko Tarnovo, which brings together representatives of 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 Veliko Tarnovo that will ultimately improve the lives of its citizens.

II. Short-term reforms¹

Reform 1: Strengthen the public consultation process

Rationale for the suggested reform:

The public hearings are usually held during working hours and are attended by municipal employees, members of the Veliko Tarnovo Municipal Council, and journalists. Stakeholders are not always well informed about discussions. Citizens rarely attend them.

Objective:

The aim of the reform is to improve citizens' participation in public discussions, thereby increasing their sense of involvement in decision-making, which will lead to increased civic trust and commitment to the municipal administration and the Veliko Tarnovo Municipal Council.

This will be done by developing and implementing a more inclusive and deliberative approach to public consultation, involving citizens in the process of setting priorities, adopting policies, and monitoring their impact.

Process:

- An analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the current approach to public consultation and the Veliko Tarnovo Municipal Council's meetings, identifying opportunities for improvement.
- Formulate a streamlined approach that creates several stages of citizen participation, as well as a clear feedback mechanism regarding citizen suggestions/reactions and municipal administration suggestions/actions.

This approach should address the following specific elements needed to engage citizens more effectively:

- Hold public discussion at a time that is convenient for people, for example after 5:00 pm.
- Prior to public discussions, the municipality should organise a presentation and explanation of the issues to be discussed with citizens. This would provide an opportunity for further reflection and give citizens time to prepare for the discussions, so that they can make their own proposals to be reflected in the minutes of the meetings and find a place in the final outcome.
- Announcing the public consultations through more communication channels, e.g. Facebook page of the mayor and the municipality, local media, etc.
- Sending media and civil society organisations information about the public consultations.
- Organizing regular meetings with experts and municipal administration in the neighborhoods, including the assistance of a lawyer on key issues. Study of the experience of Polish local authorities with the expert meeting day on topics – construction, social activities, education, etc. – announced one month in advance.

¹ To be implemented within one year.

- NGOs can be involved by helping to facilitate meetings and disseminating information about the public hearings. This would be a step towards greater citizen participation.
- Formal adoption of the new approach (e.g. by an ordinance).
- Training the relevant officials on the new approach.
- Develop media materials to publicize the new consultation process.
- Roll out of the new approach.

Links to good practices and resources:

Sofia Municipality partnered with the Bulgarian Center for Not-for-Profit Law and Forum Civic Participation to develop jointly an ordinance on public consultations that increased participation. In fact, there are two ordinances on public consultation in Sofia Municipality, one of which applies only to construction projects. The municipality of Kardzhali and other municipalities have also adopted similar ordinances.

Resources:

- Legal experience.
- Expert knowledge and training in community moderation/mobilization.
- Public relations/communications support as needed.

Roles and responsibilities:

- **Municipality:** The legal experts and municipal staff responsible for the consultation are developing the technical approach with the explicit support by the mayor and the Municipal Council of Veliko Tarnovo; municipal staff will need to be trained to successfully implement the new approach. Public relations/communication should take place throughout the process.
- **Civil society:** The municipal administration could consult with citizens on the new approach, as well as work with local or national NGOs with experience in moderation and community mobilization.

III. Medium- and long-term reforms²

Reform 2: Update the municipal website from a user experience perspective to ensure more accessible information for citizens by the municipal administration

Rationale for the suggested reform:

The information provided by the municipal administration on its website is difficult to navigate, sometimes incomplete and selectively presented. There is also outdated information that hinders citizens and unnecessarily clutters the website. The information about the public discussions is not visible on the website of the Municipality of Veliko Tarnovo, as well as other information that from the citizens' point of view is important to be easily accessible, visible and well organized.

² To be implemented within two to five years.

Objective:

The aim of the reform is to analyze how citizens use the council's website and to update it to maximize accessibility, relevance, and user-friendliness.

The reform seeks to provide quick access to and better organisation of published notices and announcements, upcoming events and discussions to increase citizen interest and participation.

The reform seeks to provide the following results:

- The municipal website is perceived as more user-friendly and accessible to citizens.
- The ease of use of the website reduces the number of telephone or in-person inquiries to municipal officials.
- Citizens are increasingly aware of the openness and responsiveness of the municipal administration.

Process:

- Develop a user experience analysis methodology with appropriate tools (e.g. survey, focus groups, usability testing).
- Implementation of usability tools and evidence gathering, including a digital survey for citizens to indicate what they would like to see shared as information on the website.
- Analyzing the results of user experience measurement and analysis tools.
- Design website updates in line with the analysis.

The focus of this design should be on the issues and themes that are key to improving citizens' understanding of local governance, not just meeting the requirements of national legislation.

The design and preparation of the new website will require more IT capacity and should be preceded or accompanied by strengthening the IT team in the municipality. The design of the website should be divided into two parts – administration and communication with citizens.

- Launch of the updated website.

Resources:

- Methods of measuring user experience.
- Website development skills.
- IT infrastructure and software packages.

Roles and responsibilities:

- **Municipality:** Public relations/communications experts lead the analysis of the user experience and the process of developing recommendations. IT staff is responsible for monitoring the website's update and deployment.
- **Civil society:** The usability analysis should be oriented towards citizens. Skills could also be contributed by community groups or local businesses with an IT focus.

Reform 3: Develop an institutional communication strategy

Rationale for the suggested reform:

The administration is perceived by citizens as distant and unresponsive. Citizens often do not know who to turn to when they have a problem and/or do not understand the structure and functioning of municipal institutions.

Objective:

Establish clear priorities and guidelines for municipal officials on the content, channels, and audiences they should engage with to improve communication between the municipal administration and citizens.

The reform will seek 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 communication needs of the municipality and the Veliko Tarnovo Municipal Council, based on a review of the current media and social media presence, branding and image, messaging and audience.
- Study of the experience of the Municipality of Ruse in working with local communities through municipal representatives in districts.
- Develop a strategy including messages, content, channels (e.g. website, Facebook, press conferences, interviews, etc.), target groups, and an action plan with specific roles for the administration and members of the Veliko Tarnovo Municipal Council.
- Official adoption of the strategy.
- Organize trainings for the municipal administration and councilors on the strategy and provide additional resources and training on communication skills and tools as needed.
- Launch of strategy implementation.

Resources:

- Expert knowledge in 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 strategy includes the Veliko Tarnovo Municipal Council, the document must 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.

Reform 4: Develop a municipal platform for signals and complaints with real-time traceability by citizens

Rationale for the suggested reform:

Citizens can submit signals, but they have no way of tracking where their signals are in real time, leading to a perception of a lack of transparency and responsiveness of the municipal administration.

Objective:

Provide a platform for submitting and tracking signals and complaints that is clear, accessible and effective (website and/or mobile app).

The reform seeks to achieve the following results:

- Improved integration between user experience and administrative procedures.
- More effective response to alerts and complaints.
- Citizens feel heard and see the results of their complaints.

Process:

- An overview of available open source software solutions for signals reporting, allowing citizens to track the processing of their signals by the administration.
- Development of a technical proposal for a platform, including objectives, resources and impact on current government processes.
- Ensuring that the technical know-how needed to develop a customized platform is available.
- Design of the administrative process for receiving and responding to reports and signals.
- Roll out the platform for a trial period and incorporate any necessary adjustments.
- Development of a media campaign to promote the platform.
- Roll out the platform.

Resources:

- Expert knowledge in IT, especially application development.
- Expert knowledge in public relations/communications.
- Technical maintenance budget.

Roles and responsibilities:

- **Municipality:** The reform should be led by a senior official (deputy mayor) to oversee a working group including roles for public relations, customer service, and IT. The official proposal is formally approved by the mayor. If necessary, it should be presented to the municipal council for adoption.

- **Civil society:** NGOs can provide technical advice on the selection and adaptation of the platform/application and should be involved in the validation of the technical proposal; the media have an important role to play in promoting the platform.

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