Transparency and Anticorruption Reform Agenda of the Municipality of Blagoevgrad 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 Blagoevgrad, Mr. Ilko Stoyanov on 19 July 2022, at the IRI National Conference "Combating Vulnerabilities to Corruption at the Municipal Level" in 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 of Blagoevgrad Municipality, 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 to overcome 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 Blagoevgrad that will ultimately improve the lives of citizens.

II.   Short-term reforms[1]

Reform 1: Update the municipal website from a user experience perspective

Rationale for the suggested reform:
The municipality's website is difficult for citizens to use. More specifically, citizens find it difficult to find the information they are looking for. The poor organisation of the website also creates a perception of a lack of information and hinders access to key details, the easy access to which would increase citizen participation. The website has not been updated for a very long time and there is a general consensus that it is in need of updating and that the information on the website should be better organized.

Objective:
- Analysis of the citizens' user experience on the municipal website and updating it to maximize its accessibility, relevance, and user-friendliness.
- Creation of a more efficient mobile version of the municipality's website and ensuring that access is available to all menus and it is possible to use the full version on a mobile device.
- For some of the administrative services provided, creation of a chatbot platform to facilitate administrative services.

As a result of the update, the municipality's website should be perceived as more user-friendly and accessible to citizens, and the ease of use should reduce the number of telephone and face-to-face enquiries to municipal officials.

Process:
- Design of the methodology for analysis of the user experience with relevant tools (for example: surveys, focus groups, usability testing).
- Implement the user experience measuring tools and collect evidence.
- Analyze the results from the user experience tools.
- Design website updates in line with the analytics and create an algorithm that makes it more intuitive.

  As part of the website's update, the strategic documents for the management of the municipality, including the mayor's vision for its development, should be made available in one place.

  To increase the visibility and transparency of the work of the Municipal Council, the updated website should also include the following elements
    o For municipal councilors – a brief description of professional experience and educational background, contact information (at least e-mail address), participation in Municipal Council committees, and an indication of the political party that the councilor represents;
    o With regard to the Municipal Council's committees – members and their political affiliations, agendas of upcoming meetings, decisions and opinions of

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[1] To be implemented within one year.

the committee and votes on key issues, monthly or quarterly reports on the committee's activities, including the results achieved.
- Launch of the updated website.

Resources:
- Methods for user experience measurement and analysis.
- 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 rollout. External know-how may also be used. Need to provide an annual budget for website maintenance, including an adblocking system.
- **Civil society:** The usability analysis should be oriented towards citizens. Community groups or local businesses with a focus on IT could contribute with their skills. The development of technical and content criteria for the new website should involve civil society representatives.

Reform 2: Develop a municipal platform for signals and complaints

Rationale for the suggested reform:
Citizens do not have the possibility to follow up on their signals/reports and complaints to the Municipality of Blagoevgrad in the process of their handling and processing by the administration. There is a perception of a lack of responsiveness and interest on the part of the administration due to delays in responding to some reported signals and complaints.

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

Result to be achieved:
- More integration between user experience and administrative process.
- More effective response to signals and complaints.
- Citizens will feel heard and will see the results of their signals/complaints.

Process:
- Overview of available open source software solutions for submitting signals and complaints.
- Development of a technical proposal for a platform, including objectives, resources and impact on current administrative processes.
- Ensure technical know-how needed to develop a customized platform.
- Design of the administrative process for receiving and responding to signals and complaints.

- Roll out the platform for a trial period and make any necessary adjustments.
- Develop a media campaign to promote the platform.
- Roll out the platform.

Resources:
- Expertese in IT, especially application development.
- Expertese in public relations/communications.
- Budget for technical maintenance.

Roles and responsibilities:
- **Municipality:** The reform should be led by an officer in a leadership position to oversee the working group that includes experts in public relations, customer service and IT. The official proposal is formally approved by the mayor. If necessary, the procedure for processing signals should be submitted to the municipal council for approval and concurrence.
- **Civil society:** NGOs can provide technical advice on the selection and adaptation of the application and should be involved in the validation of the technical proposal. The media has an important role to play in promoting the platform. The NGOs are to be involved in the functioning and monitoring of the platform.

Reform 3: Establish consultative mechanisms for civil society groups

Rationale for the suggested reform:
The Municipality of Blagoevgrad does not have a public council or similar consultative body, as well as sectoral councils enabling the participation of experts, representatives of NGOs, active representatives of official professional organisations and locally represented national industry associations that the municipality can use to discuss strategies and policies with the civil sector. The Municipality of Blagoevgrad has not established sustainable partnerships with civil society. For this to happen, predictable and sustainable mechanisms for consulting with civil society groups on issues of importance to the community are needed. Building this partnership will also contribute to the perception that the administration is more open and responsive.

Objective:
Establish sectoral advisory/working groups that meet on a regular and predictable basis to discuss the challenges facing the community and proposals to address them. Create webpages/sections linked to the municipal website for each of these groups and include relevant information about their composition, role and current work.

This will result in:
- Greater engagement of civil society groups and associations with the municipality.
- The municipality will be better able to benefit from the expert knowledge of civil society.
- It will be easier to find public-private solutions to municipal problems.

Process:
- Review of what works well and what does not in existing consultation mechanisms/formats.
- Creation of a database of NGOs, official professional organizations and locally represented national sectoral associations operating in the municipality, and identify a specific distribution of working groups by sector or issue that meets the needs of the municipality.
- Development of draft rules for the consultative working groups (membership criteria, governance, periodicity, etc.).
- Designation of officials who will represent the municipality in each group. Sending an invitation to Municipal Council members to join the groups.
- Consultations with community members and organizations that appear as promising candidates for membership of each working group.
- Formally establishing the groups and launching their work according to the rules, including publicizing their work on the designated sub-pages/sections of the municipality's website.

Resources:
- Municipal staff time.
- Use of municipal premises.

Roles and responsibilities:
- **Municipality:** Efforts to renew advisory mechanisms should be overseen by the mayor or a deputy mayor in collaboration with the chairperson of the Municipal Council. The convening and chairing of working groups should be entrusted to designated officials. The municipality should explore good and working practices.
- **Civil society:** Civil society representatives can be consulted in the process of selecting and drafting texts at the time when the groups are set up. They are to be full members of the working groups, where they can act as co-chairs and secretaries. Civil society organisations should explore good and workable practices.

Reform 4: Adopt a digital platform for citizen participation

Rationale for the suggested reform:
Opportunities for civic participation are not structured to encourage civic engagement. The municipality carries out public discussion as required by law, but presents fully developed solutions that are unlikely to be changed, making the consultations a 'rubber stamp' rather than an opportunity for broad citizen participation. It is therefore necessary to involve citizens at an earlier stage in the development of policies and decisions. There is also a lack of clear and widely publicized rules, structure, and deadlines for the consultation process, and regular meetings with citizens. Information about the results of the consultations and what the municipality has done as a result of citizens' input is not reaching citizens effectively. All of this contributes to low levels of citizen participation, with rare exceptions on extremely urgent issues, and to citizens' lack of confidence in the municipality's willingness and efforts to listen to their voices. These vulnerabilities can be addressed by introducing a digital platform for citizen participation.

Objective:
Create an online platform (accessible via computer and/or smartphone) where citizens can easily share suggestions, discuss municipal initiatives, and participate in consultation processes.

This will achieve the following results:
- A more active engagement of citizens with municipal proposals.
- An easier and more convenient way for citizens to present their own initiatives.
- Closer alignment between citizens' needs and municipal actions.

Process:
- A review of available open source citizen participation software solutions that would allow discussion of any issue of importance to the community and could 'host' the formal public consultation process.
- Development of a technical proposal for a platform, including objectives, resources, and implications for existing consultation processes, and decide whether to develop an application to complement the platform.
- Ensure that the necessary technical expert knowledge to develop a bespoke platform is available.
- Design of the administrative process for managing the platform and processing citizens' data.
- Roll out the platform for a trial period and make adjustments as needed.
- Development of a media campaign to promote the platform.
- Roll out the platform.

Resources:
- Expertese in IT, especially in application development.
- Expertese in public relations/communications.
- Budget for technical maintenance.

Roles and responsibilities:
- **Municipality:** The reform should be led by a senior official who oversees the working group that includes experts in the areas of public relations, customer service and IT. The technical proposal is to be formally approved by the mayor. The Municipal Council, acting on the proposal of the mayor, should adopt and approve the methodology for the use of the same.
- **Civil society:** Civil society organizations can provide technical advice on the selection and adaptation of the application and should be involved in the validation of the technical proposal. The media play an important role in promoting the platform. Non-governmental organizations carry out citizen monitoring of the functioning of the platform and, if necessary, make proposals for its updating.

III.   Medium- and long-term reforms[2]

Reform 5: Establish an ombudsman or a similar function

Rationale for the suggested reform:
In Blagoevgrad, there is no ombudsman figure to act as an intermediary between the municipality and the citizens. Such a figure would improve citizens' access to the institutions, contribute to a greater sense of openness and responsiveness of municipal institutions, and help to respond effectively and quickly to complaints and signals. This reform should take place in the long term, as currently there is still a lack of understanding of the role and functioning of the institution and some resistance to its introduction due to the risk of politicization.

Objective:
Election of an ombudsman or creation of an ombudsman-type institution to act as a focal point for citizens' suggestions and complaints about municipal governance and services, to be able to summarize and forward these suggestions and complaints to the relevant authorities, and to monitor the actions taken.

As a result, the following will be achieved:
- Citizens can indicate a clear addressee for their suggestions and complaints.
- Citizens have a sense of security in raising issues without fear of being isolated by the authorities.
- The municipality has more effective mechanism for receiving and organizing the complaints.

Process:
- Developing an institutional proposal, including selection criteria and resources for the mediation role, if different from that foreseen in the national legislation for the local ombudsman. The candidate selection process should provide an opportunity for public scrutiny of the selection through public meetings with citizens.
- Consulting citizens on the proposed approach.
- Adoption of the new position, in accord with the relevant legal requirements.
- Launching a major awareness-raising campaign about the role and powers of the ombudsman and how citizens can contact him/her, and publicizing the new role in the local media as part of this campaign.
- Conducting an election for a candidate for the position and implementing its functions.

Resources:
- Budget for the new position.
- Possible use of municipal premises.

Roles and responsibilities:

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[2] To be implemented within two to five years.

- **Municipality:** The municipality's legal experts can develop the initial proposal, and the mayor and council have the responsibility to consult it with citizens, then adopt the reform and secure funding for it.
- **Civil society:** Community members may be consulted as part of the process of developing the institutional proposal. In the absence of a formal ombudsman, a civil society organisation may also be selected as an intermediary through an open consultation process.

IV. Funding necessary for program implementation

The actions proposed in this programme will be developed and implemented subject to the availability of adequate funding. The municipality will make the necessary efforts to secure these financial resources from the municipal budget and other national sources, international programs and funding mechanisms, funding opportunities under European Union programs, as well as through donations and volunteer work.

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