

Transparency and Anticorruption Reform Agenda of the Municipality of Kardzhali 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 by the Municipal Pact for Anticorruption, signed by the Mayor of the Municipality of Kardzhali, Mr. Hasan Azis 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 Kardzhali, 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 Kardzhali that will ultimately improve the lives of citizens.

II. Short-term reforms ¹

Reform 1: Conducting civic education campaigns

Rationale for the suggested reform:

The citizens of Kardzhali are more likely to engage with municipal topics and issues on social networks than through official channels provided to them by the municipality and the Municipal Council, including public discussions and consultations. Often, citizens do not participate or provide feedback due to lack of awareness of existing channels of interaction or because of distrust in the ability to influence the decisions taken through these channels.

Objective:

Educating citizens about their rights and existing opportunities to participate in municipal decision-making, including information on how these opportunities work, what kinds of inputs are valuable, and how citizen proposals are considered.

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

The reform should achieve the following results:

- Increased citizen attendance at council sessions and public consultations.
- Strengthened legitimacy and trust in council members and administration officials.

Process:

- Compile a list of all opportunities and avenues for citizens to participate in municipal decision-making;
- Develop a comprehensive easy-to-understand civic engagement guide;
- Publish the guide on the municipal website and publicize it in media and social media;
- Develop an outreach plan that includes a calendar of activities (press conferences, livestreams, Q&As, townhalls and etc.). The plan should include the following components:
 - Conducting information campaigns focusing on the functions of the administration and the Municipal Council, as well as civil rights and obligations;
 - Conducting “Open Days” for the administration and the Municipal Council within which young people, including members of the Student Councils, can attend committee meetings and plenary meetings of the Municipal Council;
 - Discussing with the Regional Department of Education (RDE) the possibility to include in the tutorial hour of the upper grades special attention to the administrative services provided by the municipality, health issues, incl. health insurance, the right to vote, the issuance of personal documents, etc.;
 - Exploring the possibility of setting up mini-public councils in neighbourhoods, within which to discuss specific problems and solutions and thereafter address them to the municipality;
 - When developing the guide and the plan for the information activities to ensure a focus on the civic education of young people by developing and

¹ With a performance horizon of one year.

planning targeted initiatives (and / or materials) to attract young people in the process of public discussions, including together with youth civil society organizations.

- Implement the information activities.

Resources:

- Legal expertise – knowledge of local government and local administration, knowledge of normative documents;
- PR/communications expertise, including experience in digital marketing;
- Expertise in conducting advocacy campaigns and mobilizing the community;
- IT support, as needed;
- Possible use of municipal premises.

Roles and responsibilities:

- **Municipality:** PR/communications experts will design and execute the information plan, under the supervision of the secretary of the 3municipality. Municipal councilors should be invited to participate on a voluntary basis.
- **Civil society:** The media will play an important role in publicizing the events; Facebook groups and local associations can further disseminate the calendar among members; community leaders can act as facilitators of outreach activities, side by side with municipal officials.

Reform 2: Holding regular meetings with citizens in local communities

Rationale for the suggested reform:

In the Municipality of Kardzhali there is little engagement by citizens with the official participation mechanisms. Public discussions do not attract much citizen participation. Municipal council sessions are open, but citizens usually do not attend, unless they are personally invited or when some municipal councilors do not seek more active contact with them. Some citizens do not use social networks and/or other online tools, including the municipality's website.

Objective:

The goal of the reform is to adopt a more regular, consistent and coherent approach for meeting with citizens.

This will increase the perception of openness and responsiveness by the municipal administration and the members of the Municipal Council, will stimulate civic trust and engagement and will facilitate the communication of signals and complaints.

The reform should achieve the following results:

- Municipal officials/council members are better known within the community.
- Community issues are tackled more quickly and efficiently by the municipality.
- Citizens perceive their leaders as more responsive, reliable, and legitimate.
- Citizens can anticipate the regular opportunities they will have to engage with municipal officials/council members.

Process:

- Review the range of possible townhalls and community meetings carried out in the past and identify the ones to pursue going forward (e.g. in villages or quarters);
- Organize meetings every 6 months between representatives of the municipal administration (issue-based), citizens, and local media to report on what has been done in the past period;
- Develop an approach that ensures division of labor in respect to the efforts needed among the mayor, deputies, village mayors, and council members for the implementation of a sustainable mechanism for communication with people from small settlements who do not use social media or have difficulties with access to the Internet;
- Develop a calendar of town halls and publicize it online (website and social media) and through local media. The minutes from the meetings with citizens and the actions taken by the municipality in follow-up to these meetings are to be published.

Resources:

- Senior officials' time.
- Municipal premises.
- Social media platforms for online events.

Roles and responsibilities:

- **Municipality:** PR officials and administrative staff will develop the calendar and organize the logistics, while senior officials/council members will be the ones holding the sessions with citizens;
- **Civil society:** Local media and interested citizens will help disseminate information about the calendar of activities within the community to foster participation.

Reform 3: Updating Internet-based communication channels, including the official website of the Municipality of Kardzhali from a user experience perspective**Rationale for the suggested reform:**

The website of the Municipality of Kardzhali is not always easy to use and tailored to the needs of citizens. Some information is hard to find, is not updated in a timely manner, and in some cases is in administrative language that is difficult to understand. Some of the documents uploaded to the website are drafts that change with short notice.

No minutes of public discussions are published, and the announcements of the online broadcasting of municipal council sessions sometimes reach citizens too late. These gaps in the organization of the website in accordance with the needs of citizens create the perception of incomplete transparency and insufficiently developed electronic services.

It should be easy for the municipality to upgrade the existing website and the e-services offered by increasing the amount of information provided and by improving its accessibility for citizens.

Objective:

The goal of the reform is to carry out an analysis of citizen use of the municipal website, to revamp it and to include modern communication channels in order to maximize its accessibility, relevance, and ease of use.

This will increase citizen perception of the transparency and openness of local government institutions.

The reform should achieve the following results

- The municipal website will become more user-friendly and accessible for citizens;
- Ease-of-use of the website will lead to a decrease in phone or in-person queries submitted to municipal officials.

Process:

- Analyze the usability of the website with relevant tools (survey, focus groups, usability testing);
- Update the website and add new functionalities, among which:
 - Add a “pop-up window” when activating the “Profile of the Buyer” button to guide to the information on public procurement;
 - Upon finalization of a particular public procurement procedure (tender), upload information on the website about the company that won the tender and contract parameters (e.g. deadline for implementation);
 - Add a link to „Profile of the Buyer” that opens the Public Procurement Register;
 - Provide periodic information on the funds collected and spent from local taxes;
 - Publish on the website of the municipality the final version of the documents that have passed a public discussion and have been adopted at a session of the Municipal Council.
- Promote the updated website;
- Appoint an employee/employees from the municipality to provide answers to the questions addressed through the platform „Kardzhali for you”; contact information of this employee/employees to be placed in a visible place on the site;
- Publish the ordinances adopted by the Municipal Council on the website „Kardzhali for you”.
- Publish information about the work of the Public Councils at the municipality on the municipal website and on the website „Kardzhali for you”.

Resources:

- User experience methods;
- Web development skills;
- IT infrastructure and software suites.

Roles and responsibilities:

- **Municipality:** Public relations/communications experts will lead the user experience analysis and generate recommendations. IT staff will be responsible for the update of the website;

- **Civil society:** Stakeholder representatives participate in the usability study of the site. Community groups or local IT companies could be included in the process.

III. Medium- and long-term reforms²

Reform 4: Strengthening the public consultation process with a view to better involvement of the socio-economic partners, professional and sectoral organizations and NGOs.

Rationale for the suggested reform:

There is inconsistency in engagement with the civil sector. Despite some positive examples of NGOs cooperating with the administration and managing to influence municipal decision-making, the nongovernmental sector does not appear to be part of a systematic and consistent approach to attracting civic participation. There is a lack of a structured, sustainable and inclusive mechanism for engagement with NGOs by local authorities, which generally leaves some NGOs out of the process of expert deliberations and municipal decision-making. This, in turn, not only leads to reduced levels of civic engagement and participation, but also to a decrease in civic trust in the long run.

Objective:

Implementing a more inclusive and deliberative approach to public consultations, involving citizens in the process of setting priorities, adopting policies, and monitoring their impact through the better and systematic involvement of sectoral organizations and NGOs. This will increase civic trust and engagement, as well as levels of participation.

The reform should achieve the following results:

- Increased citizen/sectoral organisations'/NGOs' participation in public consultations;
- Increased role of the feedback from citizens/sectoral organizations/NGOs in municipal policy-making;
- Enhanced citizen/sectoral organizations'/NGOs' 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, especially with a view to better inclusion of NGOs and sectoral organisations in the consultative processes;
- Formulate an enhanced approach that creates multiple stages of citizen involvement, as well as a clear feedback mechanism between citizens'/branch organizations'/NGOs' proposals/reactions and municipal proposals/actions.

The enhanced approach should include the following elements:

- More active involvement of professional/sectoral organizations in the process of public discussions and use of their expertise and capacity;

² With a performance horizon of two to five years.

- Public consultations should utilize the specific expertise of members of civil society organisations;
 - Upgrade the good practices of the municipality and NGOs related to the monitoring of local policies;
 - A deputy mayor or an employee of the municipal administration should be appointed as responsible for the relations of the municipality with the civil sector;
 - When discussing the budget, focus groups should be organized with representatives of stakeholders.
- If necessary – update the existing Public Consultation Ordinance;
 - Train administrative staff on the implementation of the Public Consultation Ordinance;
 - Promote the consultation process (development of media materials, etc.)

Resources:

- Legal expertise;
- Expertise in moderation, conducting trainings and advocacy campaigns to mobilize the community;
- PR/communications support.

Roles and responsibilities:

- **Municipality:** Legal experts and public officials in charge of consultations will develop the approach for more active and effective involvement of socio-economic partners, professional and sectoral organizations and NGOs in the process of public consultations. Municipal staff will be trained in the new approach for successful implementation.
- **Civil society:** The municipality could consult the improvements to the approach with civil society organisations and utilize the experience of local and/or national NGOs in facilitation and community mobilization.

This reform agenda should be implemented through the development of an annual Action Plan with specific deadlines, detailed activities pertinent to each reform, and assignment of responsible individuals, which is to be approved by the mayor of the Municipality of Kardzhali by March 31 of this year.

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