Transparency and Anticorruption Reform Agenda of the Municipality of Pernik 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 in the Municipal Pact for Anticorruption, signed by the Mayor of of the Municipality of Pernik Mr. Stanislav Vladimirov on 19 July 2022 at the IRI National Conference "Combating Vulnerabilities to Corruption at the Municipal Level", which took place in Sofia, Bulgaria;
<div align="center">and</div>

- 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 Pernik, 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 the 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 Pernik that will ultimately improve the lives of citizens.

II.   Short-term reforms[1]

Reform 1: Develop an institutional communication strategy

Rationale for the suggested reform:
The municipality's communication channels and approach are not sufficiently predictable, sustainable and effective, and messages and information are not always accessible and understandable. For example, the municipality uses ad hoc social networks for faster communication, which creates unpredictability. The municipality's website contains a lot of information, but citizens find it difficult to navigate it and to find what they are looking for. As a result, there is a perception of a lack of information and/or that information is published selectively or is difficult for citizens to access and understand.

Objective:
Establish clear priorities and guidelines for city officials on the content, channels, and audiences they should engage with, with the aim of achieving the following results:
- Municipal communication products are published on a more regular basis 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 municipal communication needs based on a review of current media and social media presence, branding and image, messaging and audience.
- Development of a communication strategy including messages, content, channels (e.g. website, Facebook, press conferences, interviews, etc.), target audience, and action plan.
  The strategy should also include steps to expand the public relations team and increase its capacity to meet the communication needs of the municipality and to communicate with citizens quickly and efficiently.
- Official adoption of the strategy.
- Training of the municipal staff to implement the strategy and provide additional resources if needed.
- Launch of the implementation of the strategy.

Resources:
- Expert knowledge in communications, including media relations and social media management.
- IT support.
- Strengthening of the capacity of the public relations team, as necessary, in light of the implementation of the strategy and the other reforms in this programme concerning the communication activities of the municipality.

Roles and responsibilities:

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[1] To be implemented within one year.

- **Municipality:** Public relations/communications officers should lead the technical side of implementation, with the mayor formally approving the strategy and senior municipal officials/managers (e.g. deputy mayor) overseeing its implementation. If a decision is made to involve the municipal council in drawing up the strategy, the document should be submitted to the municipal council for adoption following its 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 feedback on how citizens receive information from the municipality; NGOs with a media focus could provide technical advice.

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

Reform 2: Update the municipal website from a user experience perspective

Rationale for the suggested reform:
The municipal website is the digital face of the institution. The information on the website is difficult to access and citizens find it difficult to navigate. The information provided is not organized in a way that prioritizes the most frequently requested and most relevant information for citizens.

Objective:
Analyze how citizens use the municipality's website and update it to achieve maximum accessibility, relevance and ease of use.
As a result of the update, the website of the municipality should be perceived as being more user-friendly and accessible for citizens. Making the website easier to use should reduce the number of telephone and face-to-face inquiries to municipal officials.

Process:
- Develop a user experience analysis methodology with appropriate tools (e.g. survey, focus groups, usability testing).
- Implement the user experience analysis and evidence gathering tools.
- Analyze the results from the user experience measuring tools.
- Design website updates in line with the analysis.
- The analysis and design should take into account the need to add information about youth policies and organisations, including relevant external links.
- Roll out of the updated website.

Resources:
- Methods for measuring user experience.
- Website development skills.
- IT infrastructure and software packages.

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

- The public relations department needs to be expanded and its capacity needs to be enhanced to cope with the increased engagement associated with the proposed reforms.

Roles and responsibilities:
- **Municipality:** User experience analysis and recommendations are led by PR/communications experts. IT staff is responsible for monitoring the website's update and deployment.
- **Civil society:** The user experience analysis should be oriented towards citizens. Skills could also be contributed by community groups or local businesses with an IT focus.

Reform 3: Develop a citizen support policy

Rationale for the suggested reform:
Official channels of communication are perceived by citizens as inefficient and cumbersome. Citizens are reluctant to formally approach the administration when they have a problem because they believe that their request or signal/complaint will be lost or that the administration will not respond. This perception has been fueled by cases where there has actually been a lack of response or an excessive delay in the response. Citizens also do not know who to contact in the administration and have no way of tracking their complaints and signals. Citizens are unaware of the existing efforts to open up the administration with more opportunities for communication and support for citizens.

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.

The following effect is sought to be achieved:
- Inquiries are directed to the appropriate staff in an efficient manner.
- Citizens perceive the municipality as open and responsive.
- Citizens stop relying on the mayor as the primary point of contact.
- Citizens are better aware of where to direct their queries, opinions or requests.

Process:
- An analysis of the current citizen support system, including the contact mechanisms available to citizens (telephone numbers, e-mail addresses, online forms) and any existing guidance on who to contact on 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 provides a streamlined process for receiving, prioritizing and responding to citizen requests.
- Official adoption of the policy.
- Identify contact persons for the different problem areas and train them in the new process.
- Updating the website and other forms of online presence to direct citizens to the right contacts.
- Prepare a press release on the municipality's new citizen support process and coordination centers.

Resources:
- IT support for online information updates.

Roles and responsibilities:
- **Municipality:** Municipal experts lead the analysis and development of the citizen support policy, leading 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:** Citizens could be consulted as part of the analysis phase.

Reform 4: Develop a municipal platform for submitting signals and complaints

Rationale for the suggested reform:
The municipality's website has a feedback form for citizens to submit signals, but they do not receive any feedback on where their complaint or signal is directed or when they will receive a response. This form is used to send e-mails to the registry department, which will forward the alert ex officio to the appropriate department for response. But there is no tracking mechanism for citizens. This level of anonymity gives the impression that the response rate is low. This is one of the reasons why the mayor is perceived as the only visible figure who can solve people's problems.

Objective:
Provide a clear, accessible and effective platform (website and/or mobile application) for citizens to submit and follow up on signals and complaints.

As a result, the following will be achieved:
- Improved integration between user experience and administrative procedures.
- More effective response to alerts and complaints.
- Citizens will feel heard and will see the results of their complaints.

Process:
- Overview of available open source software solutions for submitting reports and signals.
- Development of a technical proposal for the 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 signals and complaints.
- Roll out the platform for a trial period and make any necessary adjustments.
- Development of a media campaign to promote the platform.
- Launch of 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 a senior official (deputy mayor) who oversees a working group that includes experts in public relations, customer service and IT. The mayor should formally adopt the technical proposal. If necessary, the proposal should be submitted to the municipal council for adoption.
- **Civil society:** NGOs can provide technical advice on the selection and adaptation of the application and should be involved in the approval of the technical proposal, the media play an important role in publicizing the platform.

Reform 5: Conduct civic education campaigns

Rationale for the suggested reform:
Transparency is not just about publishing information, it is also about making it easier for citizens to understand how government works and why certain decisions are made. It is important that citizens understand how decision-making processes work, how decisions will affect their lives and what opportunities they have to participate in shaping these.
Information that is too technical or presented in a way that is not easy to understand will cause citizens to lose interest in the work of the municipality. The lack of knowledge about administrative departments and the functions they are responsible for, about official communication channels, how they work and the benefits they provide, or about the budget cycle, creates a sense of distance and anonymity and therefore a lack of responsiveness.
The challenges described above can be overcome by implementing a civic education campaign. In order for the campaign to have a more sustainable impact in the long term, aspects of it should be specifically targeted at young people in upper secondary education and up to the age of 25 years.

Objective:
Informing citizens, especially young people, 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 citizens' suggestions are taken into account.

As a result, the following will be achieved:
- Increase citizen participation in municipal council meetings and public consultations.
- Strengthen the legitimacy and credibility of administrative staff and municipal council members.

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 civic participation, including a version of this guide in an accessible and engaging format for high school students and young people.

- Publish the guide on the municipality's website and publicize it in the media and via social networks.
- Develop a public relations plan including a calendar of activities (press conferences, live broadcasts, Q&As, general meetings, etc.).
  As part of the planning and implementation process, an effort should be made to build partnerships between the municipality, youth civic society organisations (CSOs) and local media to carry out civic education campaigns, including the implementation of educational initiatives, peer practices, etc. on various projects and the introduction of innovative tools to engage citizens, such as the creation of podcasts and broadcasts to help young people navigate the role of local institutions and mechanisms of interaction.
- Implementation of information activities.

Resources:
- Legal experience.
- Expertese in public relations/communications.
- Experience in community mobilization.
- IT support, if necessary.
- Possible use of municipal premises.

Roles and responsibilities:
- **Municipality:** Public relations/communications specialists are responsible for the development and implementation of the outreach plan under the direction of a deputy mayor. Municipal councillors should be invited to participate 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 facilitators for outreach activities, along with municipal officials.

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