Transparency and Anticorruption Reform Agenda of the Municipality of Vratsa 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 towards greater transparency, accessibility, anticorruption measures, and citizen engagement as stipulated in the Municipal Pact for Anticorruption, signed by the Deputy Mayor Mr. Aleksandar Vladimirov on behalf of the Mayor of the Municipality of Vratsa Mr. Kalin Kamenov 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 Vratsa, 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 Vratsa that will ultimately improve the lives of citizens.

II.   Short-term reforms[1]

The working group felt that it was inappropriate to set short-term reforms, but agreed that some of the reforms set as longer-term could be achieved in a shorter timeframe if practical for the municipality and/or the municipal council.

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

Reform 1: Carry out awareness-raising campaigns on corruption and its prevention

Rationale for the suggested reform:
The citizens in the Municipality of Vratsa are not aware of the mechanisms and procedures in place in the municipality and in the municipal council aimed to prevent and combat corruption. In this sense, citizens are also unaware of the possibilities available to them to report suspected or actual corruption and pressure and/or conflicts of interest. The lack of sustained interest in monitoring the policies and decisions of the municipality and the municipal council creates conditions for vulnerabilities to corruption.

Objective:
Raising citizens' awareness of the opportunities they have to influence the fight against corruption and the actions taken by the municipality.

By planning, organizing, and implementing information activities on fighting corruption, the municipality will increase citizen trust and engagement.

The reform will achieve the following results:
- Raising citizens' awareness about the need to prevent and report corruption.
- Increasing citizens' confidence in the ability and willingness of municipal leaders to fight corruption.
- Lowering the perception of corruption in the municipality.

Process:
- Identify and classify the anticorruption policies and mechanisms in place in the municipality.
- Develop an outreach plan, including an activity plan with roles and a calendar, to raise citizens' awareness of the identified actions and mechanisms.
- Determine the division of labor among municipal employees in the implementation of campaign activities.
- Implementation of the plan.

Resources:

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

- Expertese in the area of communication.
- Possibility to use municipal premises for face-to-face activities.

Roles and responsibilities:
- **Municipality:** The public relations/communications officers manage the technical side of implementation, while senior municipal officials and/or councilors manage the public relations side.
- **Civil society:** Civil society can work with different groups of citizens or facilitate meetings.

Reform 2: Conduct civic education campaigns

Rationale for the suggested reform:
In Vratsa, there is a lack of understanding among citizens of how the processes of municipal governance and decision-making work at the municipal level, as well as of the opportunities for citizen oversight. This lack of understanding fuels citizens' concerns that some elements of the procurement and recruitment process may be influenced by corruption. It is particularly difficult for citizens to distinguish poor performance from corruption because they do not understand the selection process and how certain criteria are applied in public procurement.

Statutory control is poorly understood. At the same time, citizens often do not understand exactly what the powers of the municipality include, what the role of the municipal council is in decision-making and oversight, and whether any form of oversight actually takes place. Many civil society groups do not know how to participate in public events in the city and are more likely to seek direct contact with the mayor than to engage in public discussion. This has led to fragmentation of the civic space, with NGOs working on isolated projects rather than using their expertise to tackle community problems.

Objective:
Informing citizens 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 citizen suggestions are considered.
This reform will increase civic trust and engagement, as well as the level of civic participation.

The reform seeks to achieve the following results:

- Increase citizen participation in municipal council meetings and public consultations.
- Increased citizen awareness and engagement with the policy and decision-making processes in the municipality and the municipal council.
- Strengthening the legitimacy and citizen trust in the members of the municipal council and the staff of the administration.

Process:
- Preparation of a list of all possibilities and ways for citizens to participate in the decision-making process in the municipality, as well as explanatory material on the

functioning of the municipality in terms of decision-making and the responsibilities of the institutions and individual structures and employees in the municipality (e.g. functional diagrams and organisational charts with responsibilities and powers).

- Develop a comprehensive, easy-to-understand guide for citizen participation, including explanatory material on how the municipality works – decision-making and responsibilities.
- Publish the guide on the municipality's website and publicize it in the media and social networks.
- Develop an outreach plan that includes a calendar of activities (press conferences, live broadcasts, Q&As, general meetings, etc.). The plan should include many and small meetings in different target groups and localities to explain the work of the municipality, with due attention to how the municipal budget is formed and how funds are spent.
- Develop a local civic education programme, involving municipal councilors, aimed at various target groups, including high school students, to lay the foundations for active citizenship and an understanding of how the community works.
- Implementation of information activities.

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

Roles and responsibilities:
- **Municipality:** The public relations/communications experts develop and implement the outreach plan under supervision by a deputy mayor. The participation of council members should be 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 intermediaries in outreach activities, alongside municipal officials.

Reform 3: Adopt a participatory budgeting process

Rationale for the suggested reform:
The citizens of Vratsa do not take advantage of the opportunities for civic engagement that are available. This is partly due to frustration after negative experiences in the past, but also to a perceived lack of practical relevance of these existing opportunities.
Formal participatory mechanisms fail to motivate citizens because they often perceive the public discussions of the consultation process as meaningless discussions, because in many cases proposals are presented to them after they have already been developed in detail, making their adoption seem like a foregone conclusion.

This fully applies to the budget of the municipality. The citizens of Vratsa do not understand how the municipal budget is drawn up and do not believe that they can influence it, which contributes to the lack of civic participation and engagement.

At the same time, the statutory format of a public discussion is not sufficient to effectively gather ideas, suggestions and feedback from citizens, nor for the municipality to demonstrate whether and how citizen feedback has influenced the budget.

This challenge can be addressed step by step through a participatory budgeting process.

Objective:
Create a well-structured and accessible process for citizens to contribute to the development and implementation of the municipal budget.

The result will be an increase in citizen participation and an improvement in the conditions for partnership with civil society.

The reform seeks to achieve the following results:
- Some elements of the municipal budget are determined by the citizens.
- Citizens see tangible benefits from their interactions with the municipality.

Process:
- Set up a working group (administration, municipal council, civil society) to explore possible methods of citizen participation in the budget process.
- Develop a technical proposal that includes a budget ceiling, participatory approach and responsibilities. The technical proposal should also include explanatory meetings in localities and with target groups, with the participation of municipal councilors, to explain the budget preparation and adoption process.
- Consultations with citizens on the proposal.
- Official adoption of the proposal.
- Designation of officials responsible for participatory budgeting.
- Development of media materials to inform citizens about the new approach.
- Implementation of the participatory budgeting approach before the next budget cycle.

Resources:
- Expertese in the area of participatory budgeting.
- Expertese in the area of community moderation/mobilization.
- Experience in financial planning/budgeting.

Roles and responsibilities:
- **Municipality:** Working group members (finance staff, municipal council members, etc.) should familiarize themselves with participatory budgeting in order to develop a sound proposal. The mayor should approve and the municipal council should adopt the approach. Designated officials will oversee implementation, assisted as necessary by public relations and administrative experts.

- **Civil society:** For this approach to be effective, civil society must be involved throughout the entire reform process; national or international NGOs can provide technical expertise on participatory budgeting.

Reform 4: Develop a municipal platform for signals and complaints and citizen participation

Rationale for the suggested reform:
Digitalizing services on online platforms will help increase transparency, as well as improve efforts to prevent and counter corruption. The Municipality of Vratsa needs an easy and effective way for citizens to submit signals and complaints. At the same time, the high level of non-participation of citizens requires the introduction of an easy way with a low threshold of commitment for citizens to submit proposals and participate in consultation processes as part of the municipality's efforts to provoke citizen participation.

Objective:
Provide a clear, accessible and effective online platform (website and/or mobile app) where citizens can submit and track their signals and complaints, share suggestions, discuss municipal initiatives and participate in consultation processes.

The reform seeks to achieve the following results:
- More integration between user experience and administrative procedures.
- More effective response to signals and complaints.
- Citizens feel heard and see the results of their signals and complaints.
- Actively involve citizens in municipal proposals.
- Citizens present their own proposals and initiatives.
- Closer alignment between citizens' needs and the municipality's actions.

This will improve citizens' perceptions of the openness and responsiveness of municipal administration, and increase civic trust, engagement and participation.

Process:
- Review of available open source software solutions for: 1. citizen signals and complaints; 2. citizen participation in deliberations on issues of importance to the community, including as part of the formal public consultation process.
- Develop a technical proposal for the platform, including objectives, resources and impact on existing administrative processes. The platform should be linked to and accessible from the municipality and municipal council websites.
- Ensuring that the technical know-how needed to develop a customized platform is available.
- Managing the administrative process for responding to signals and complaints, as well as receiving suggestions, organizing discussions and formal consultations.
- Roll out the platform for a trial period and make any necessary adjustments.
- Development of a media campaign to promote the platform.
- Roll-out of the platform.

Resources:
- Expertese in IT, especially application development.
- Expertese in public relations/communications.
- Commercial and 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 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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