



THE CONTRIBUTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS* TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PRINCIPLES OF GOOD GOVERNANCE AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

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■ Relevance of the concept of good governance

■ Over the last two decades, the debate about how public institutions should function has focused on the concept of “good governance” – an understandable term, but its content sounds abstract to the public. Several national and international organizations, institutions, and research centers have drawn attention to good governance, placing it alongside the issue of fighting corruption. Such an approach has its profound reasons – good governance can be seen as the “flip side of the coin” of the social phenomenon of corruption. If the fight against corruption is primarily associated with measures that expose and sanction abuse of power and ineffective governance, then good governance is associated with a complex set of measures that create an enabling environment for more effective governance in the public interest and put up effective barriers to potential abuses before they occur.

A similar approach can be found in the first studies and publications on the relationship between anti-corruption and sustainable economic development, produced in the mid-1990s by international financial institutions. In 1996, the International Monetary Fund highlighted the link between anti-corruption and good governance. In its handbook, „The IMF approach to promoting good governance and fighting corruption “IMF defines good governance through its core „aspects, including by ensuring the rule of law, improving public sector efficiency and accountability, and addressing corruption” (IMF 2005).

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The World Bank defines good governance as a model of government based on three components: 1) a process in which government is elected and replaced as a result of free and democratic elections; 2) the capacity of government to formulate and implement sound policies; and 3) respect by citizens and the state to the institutions that govern their economic and social interactions (Kaufmann–Kraay–Zoido-Lobaton 1999).

When addressing the topic of good governance, several researchers – representatives of the academic community – focus on the interrelationship between good governance and the way public institutions function. According to Susan-Rose Ackerman, good governance is possible when „all types of institutional structures join forces to achieve substantive outcomes and enjoy public legitimacy“ (UNODC 2021, Rose-Ackerman 1999).

When looking at the complex issue of the functioning of public institutions, the focus is more often on institutions at the national level. However, the complex institutional structure of modern societies cannot function adequately unless it integrates into a common mechanism the institutions operating at various levels – national, regional, and local. In this context, local authorities not only have a key role to play in the socio-economic development of local communities but also carry out a range of activities delegated by the state and can build a solid foundation for the effective implementation of the principles of good governance.

In dynamic societies, it is particularly important for institutions to function effectively and to adapt according to the needs of society. In this regard, Douglas Nord places particular emphasis on the cooperation between public institutions and civil society structures. In his point of view, the direction of development and institutional change depends on „the interaction between institutions and organizations that shapes the direction of institutional change“ (Nord 2000: 18). An identical approach to issues of good governance has been applied by several NGOs, which focus their attention primarily on the inclusion of „civil society as a voluntary actor“, and as an entity that is a corrective of governance (TI Bulgaria 2009: 13).

In modern democratic society, NGOs perform essential functions, related to the protection of civil rights and interests, mobilizing citizens in support of public causes, and exercising civic control over the institutions (Kashukeeva-Nusheva–Hristova–Toneva 2019: 75). In the context of governance at the local level, their role as a corrective to local government institutions is particularly important. It is for this reason that the attention of several studies of public institutions at the local level has focused both on assessing the way civil society structures function and on their contribution to good governance at the local level. In the region of Central and Eastern Europe, studies of the capacity and contribution of non-governmental organizations are a particularly valuable guide for the direction in which civil society is developing in emerging democracies and for the process of their consolidation. For example, one of the researchers of civil society in the West Balkan region – Diana-Gabriela Reianu, emphasizes her research on the develop-

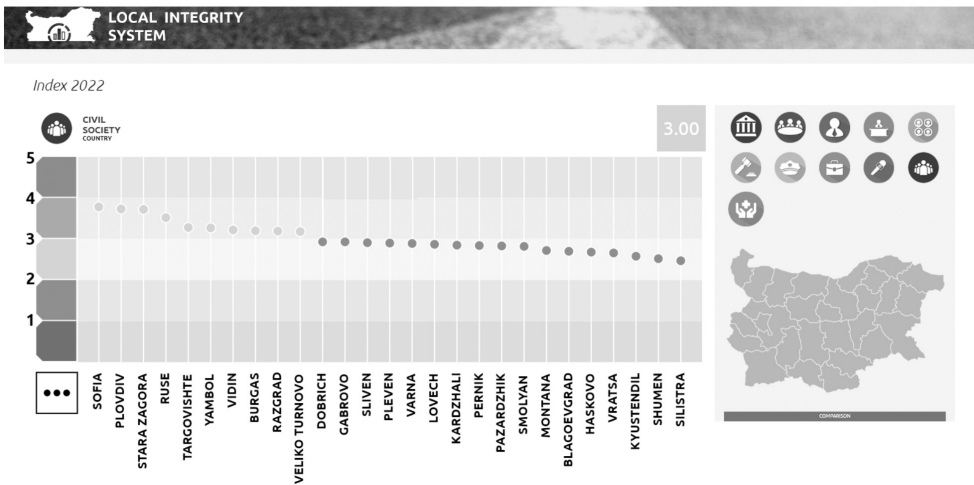


ment of civil society in Montenegro, stating that „an empowered civil society is a crucial component of any democratic system“ (Reianu 2024).

Research on the contribution of civil society organizations to the implementation of good governance principles at the local level

In 2015, Transparency International Bulgaria developed a research methodology that assesses local-level institutions (mayor, municipal council, municipal administration) and civil society structures (NGOs, political parties, media, and business) in terms of (1) their capacity, (2) principles of their governance and (3) their role in the 27 largest municipalities, which are regional centers. The Local Integrity System Index study is based on more than 270 indicators that allow for comparative analysis by the municipality, institutions and structures studied, and trends over the period 2015-2023. Each indicator is rated on a scale of 1 (lowest value) to 5 (maximum value). The survey not only provides an assessment of the contribution of NGOs to the development of local communities but also allows for a comparison of civil society structures in different regions of the country, thus providing an overall snapshot of civil society structures in the country.

Figure 1. Local Integrity Index – 2022: Civil society – non-governmental organizations ranking



Source: Local Integrity System Index, https://lisi.transparency.bg/en/post_year/civil-society-2022-country-overall/



NGO Capacity and Governance

The study shows that the main positive contribution to the overall score is made by indicators related to the governance principles of NGOs, while the lowest values are related to their role as structures capable of exercising citizen control over public institutions.

The index of local NGOs for 2022 has a value of 3.0 points, and in 2023 – 3.02 points, with the highest scores being given to NGOs in large cities – Sofia, Plovdiv, Ruse, Stara Zagora, Burgas. This score is the result of the capacity-building, transparent, and accountable management of the organizations, which allows them to function independently, combining skilfully civic control and partnership with local authorities.

Data from Transparency International Bulgaria's Local Integrity Index study show that the NGO sector in small towns suffers from a lack of sufficient financial resources, and there are almost no financial programs at the local level aimed at good governance, civic control, and anti-corruption. In the country's smaller cities, the lack of financial resources hampers the activities of NGOs.

This deficit has also been identified by other studies of local communities. For example, research by the International Republican Institute states that „NGOs are either financially dependent on the municipal budget or are asked to join small projects or to help address a local crisis“ (IRI 2022: 9); Most NGOs are „local interest groups (sports clubs, pensioner groups, etc.) or providers of delegated social services for the municipality, i.e. citizen-oriented NGOs are almost non-existent outside the capital“ (IRI 2023: 6).

Despite these problems, the results of Transparency International Bulgaria's research show that there are good practices of municipalities that provide financial support for anti-corruption initiatives and NGO projects aimed at good governance at the local level.

Such is the case of Stara Zagora – a city located in south-central Bulgaria. Since 2006 Stara Zagora has established a municipal fund that supports NGOs that have won projects and need co-financing. The fund was established by a decision of the Municipal Council and an ordinance¹ has been created for its management, which defines the rules for co-financing or bridge financing of NGO projects.

In the capital Sofia, there are several programs and funds to support initiatives of NGOs, with funding provided by both public resources and businesses. Funding is secured from both public and business resources, and information on application requirements is published promptly and accessible to all interested organizations through the City Council website.²

1 http://www.starazagora.bg/images/stories/municipality/adm_acts/naredba_finansovo_podpoma-gane.pdf .

2 <http://sofiacouncil.bg/?page=news&id=595>



The study shows that in several small and medium-sized cities in the country, the lack of financial resources is compensated by the ability of civil society organizations to mobilize intangible resources. In this regard, the essential role of volunteers in the implementation of civic initiatives is highlighted. The data allow concluding that the key to maintaining the capacity of NGOs is their ability to mobilize volunteers, experts, and prominent personalities with authority in society. Equally important is NGOs' satisfaction with the fact that their initiatives receive authentic civic support.

For example, several civil society organizations in the country have managed to mobilize hundreds of volunteers to monitor the elections. Examples of such civic campaigns are available in the period 2009–2023. One example is provided by the civic initiative to monitor the electoral process „It's my decision“, which integrates the efforts of volunteers from over 20 NGOs from all regions of the country.³

Contribution of civil society organisations to the implementation of the principles of good governance at the local level

The International Republican Institute study highlights one significant problem – a small number of organizations specializing in anti-corruption or civic control operate at the local level. The 2023 report states that as a rule, „most municipal NGOs are local interest associations (sports clubs, pensioner groups, etc.) or providers of delegated social services for the municipality (childcare, services for victims of domestic violence, education for persons with special needs, etc.), i.e., citizen-oriented NGOs are almost non-existent outside the capital“ (IRI 2023: 6).

Transparency International's research shows that, except for the large cities mentioned above, anti-corruption organizations and organizations do not exist, and few organizations are carrying out civic oversight. However, good examples can be identified of organizations whose contribution to the prevention of political corruption and the establishment of good governance principles at the local level is expressed in several ways: (1) independent citizen monitoring of the activities of local institutions, including investigations of abuses and ineffective performance of local government institutions; (2) initiatives to ensure transparency in the activities of institutions and to hold institutions accountable; (3) interaction with local authorities and transfer of know-how in good governance, anti-corruption and modernization of public institutions.

³ <http://samizbiram.bg/?lang=en>.

Access to public information as a tool for citizen control and prevention of abuse of public resources

A fundamental principle of good governance is ensuring publicity, transparency, and accountability about the work of institutions. One of the deficits identified in both TI-Bulgaria's (Kashukeeva-Nusheva 2023: 14) and the International Republican Institute's (IRI 2023: 9) studies is the formal approach of local authorities to fulfill these obligations. Often, local authorities provide formal responses, and this discourages NGOs from further anti-corruption monitoring. Despite the difficulties, several positive examples can be cited from the activities of organizations in Pernik, Varna, Dobrich, and Burgas, which, through their consistent efforts to hold local government institutions to account, have led to the disclosure of misuse of public funds or have prevented schemes to sell municipal and state property.

The example from Pernik is related to the consistent efforts of a civic organization to remove the veil on the non-transparent contract relations between media and local authorities in the period 2011–2015. Several activists of a local society organization noticed that one of the local media did not publish any critical material. Until 2015, the public in Pernik had no information on the contracts for media coverage of the municipality's work. The active work of the NGO „Active for Pernik “changed this practice. It has started to steadily seek information about the contracts between the municipality and the local media. Having failed to obtain the data it sought, it turned to the courts for assistance, citing the requirements of the Access to Public Information Act. From the information obtained, the municipality had concluded contracts for media coverage and thus it had ensured its media comfort.⁴ The case is assessed as an important achievement for civil society because it is not only related to the purchase of a positive image by concluding contracts with selected media but also because the municipality of Pernik has accumulated a huge public debt in previous years.

The cases from Northeast Bulgaria are related to the decent work of civil society organizations that manage to preserve public property from the decisions of local municipal authorities. The NGO „Civil Society for Dobrich “challenged in court a decision of the local municipal council to sell part of the central square to a bar.⁵ A positive example is also provided by the activities of several NGOs in the so-called „sea capital “Varna, which for many years have sought to protect the city's Sea Garden from development. For example, „Green Varna “activists reveal that the municipality prepares documents that permit construction in this area without having mandatory public consultations. In 2023, a group of active citizens created a Facebook community „Varna can protect its Sea Garden “, which continues to ensure publicity of the process and mobilize citizens against decisions that harm the public interest.⁶

4 <http://www.perunik.com/news/192058/Vestnik-Sapernik-uspya-da-prilapa-dogovor-za-360000-lv.-ot-obsthina-Pernik>.

5 http://dariknews.bg/view_article.php?article_id=1435907.

6 https://www.facebook.com/groups/MorskataRevived/?locale=bg_BG.



Good examples of public consultation and public councils

The direct involvement of NGOs in the discussion of strategic documents, development policies, and joint anti-corruption initiatives is one of the key prerequisites for the effective implementation of good governance principles. Several deficits have been identified in this respect. According to the organizations themselves, the reasons are rooted in the lack of experience, capacity, and self-confidence to carry out this type of civic action. The studies cited show a mixed picture – in some municipalities, public deliberations are effective and provide a real opportunity for citizen participation, in others the process is carried out formally, without meaningful discussion, and without considering the views of the participants... „In short, municipal participatory mechanisms are not perceived by citizens as relevant and engaging, nor as effective“ (IRI 2023: 9).

However, there are several good examples of established partnerships between NGOs and local authorities. For example, because of TI Bulgaria’s initiative, a set of recommendations has been formulated for 8 municipalities that are at the bottom of the Local Integrity Index ranking,⁷ or municipalities whose local authorities have demonstrated a willingness to develop policies to prevent corruption and adopt good governance principles (Vidin, Lovech, Veliko Tarnovo, Shumen, Ruse, Blagoevgrad, Pernik, Smolyan).

Good practices related to effective interaction between civil society organizations and local authorities.

Research on the interaction between civil society structures and institutions at the local level shows that there are many good practices both in large cities and in small municipalities. In this regard, examples can be given from three municipalities that differ in size and socio-economic characteristics.

Sofia is not only the capital and administrative center of the country but also the center where the most active NGOs operate. To create conditions for better dialogue with citizens, Sofia Municipality has created a section on the municipality’s website called „Get Involved “(<https://www.sofia.bg/en/participate>). It provides a platform for public dialogue and citizen participation in six categories: „Share your opinion,“ „Polls“, „Public discussions,“ „Public consultations,“ „Apply for municipality programs, „Participate in municipality campaigns.“ In the public consultation section, information is published on the topic, the time and place of the debate, the deadline for submitting comments to the relevant administration, as well as instructions on how to access the materials.

The „Public Consultation “section (<https://www.sofia.bg/en/public-consultations>) contains information on the topic, place, and time/period of the public

⁷ <https://lisi.transparency.bg/years/2023/>.

consultation, contact details of the responsible officials, attached documents, comments received and answers to questions raised, opinions expressed and comments, which are available on the Single Portal for Public Consultation of Sofia Municipality.

A good example of transparency and equality of access is provided by the practice of the Architecture and Public Works Department in Sofia Municipality, which maintains adequate access to information on expert advice (<https://nag.sofia.bg/Pages/Render/198>), professional consultations, public hearings, and public consultations. The website of this structure provides timely and well-structured information on a register of citizens and organizations wishing to receive regular information related to spatial development and spatial planning in the Capital City Municipality (<https://nag.sofia.bg/Pages/Render/858>); notices of public consultations; structured information on public consultations and professional consultations (<https://nag.sofia.bg/Pages/Render/861>); a register of public consultations (<https://nag.sofia.bg/Pages/Render/1201>); information on the public consultation, together with the attached documents (<https://nag.sofia.bg/Pages/Render/989>).

Good practices for interaction with citizens: „Public forum for Implementation of partnership projects in Troyan municipality“

Troyan Municipality is a small municipality in the North Central region, with a population of thirty-six thousand inhabitants. The local authorities maintain an ongoing dialogue with citizens on all issues of public importance and have provided a variety of tools for seeking public opinion from the stage of initiating management decisions. What is original and valuable in the practice of Troyan municipality is the way projects are selected. The process is public, and transparent and involves the most active and socially engaged organizations and citizens. Every year after the deadline for submission of project proposals, the Mayor of Troyan invites citizens to participate in the public forum, where they decide which civic initiatives should be financially supported (IPA 2015: 70–71).

Conclusion

In summary, the numerous studies of civil society structures in Bulgaria outline a picture that has similar characteristics to the picture in several Central and Eastern European countries. The newly established non-governmental organizations make a significant contribution to the processes of democratization and modernization of public institutions at the national and local levels. Although NGOs suffer from a deficit of financial resources, they manage to compensate for this deficit with their ability to mobilize the expertise and energy of active citizens and volunteers, thereby having a significant impact on the development of local communities and being a key factor in the consolidation of the democratic process in their countries.



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Notes

- Source: Local Integrity System Index, https://lisi.transparency.bg/en/post_year/civil-society-2022-country-overall/.
- http://www.starazagora.bg/images/stories/municipality/adm_acts/naredba_finansovo_podpomagane.pdf .
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