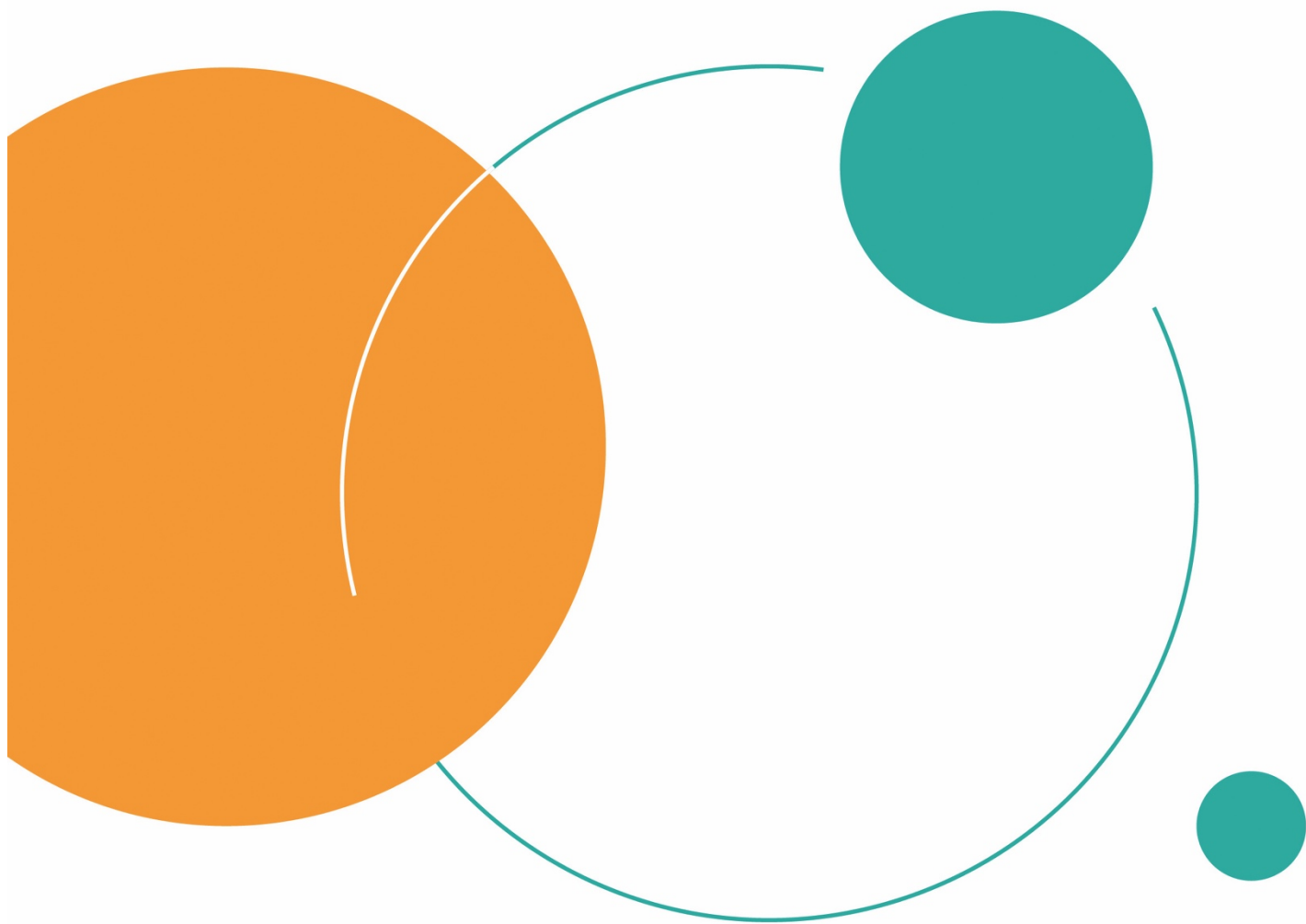




OPENNESS OF THE LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENTS



IN SERBIA AND IN THE REGION 2017

ANALYSIS OF THE OPENNESS OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT UNITS IN SERBIA AND IN THE REGION IN 2017



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Introduction

In cooperation with partners from the regional network NGO “ActionSEE”, the Centre for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA) prepared the analysis of openness of institutions in which we analyse a level of transparency, openness and accountability of local self-government units in the Western Balkans region. A general conclusion is that the openness of local self-government units in Serbia and in the region is at a very low level. In the period from December 2017 to February 2018, the members of the network “ActionSEE” worked on a comprehensive research, based on a scientific methodology, that comprised a sample of 144 municipalities from 6 countries and more than 60 indicators for each local self-government unit.

For us, the openness of local self-government units implies transparency and efficiency of the institutions, and also the developed communication with citizens.

In comparison to results of the openness of the executive power and parliaments at the national level, the results of local self-governments are worse and raise concern, which was also the conclusion of the 2017 research. It is to be expected that the openness increases towards lower levels of government as they have a direct contact with citizens. However, this research showed the contrary. Local governments in the region should make much more effort in order to include citizens in making of decisions that directly concern the quality of their lives.

Considering that there are many thorny areas, municipalities in the region have to focus on improving the existing state in the near future.

The openness of the government is one of the principle postulates of the good and righteous governance and an important characteristic of each democratic society. It is a general, i.e. public value of developed societies and a significant instrument for prevention of corruption. Unfortunately, this is a topic that is seldom discussed in the region and concrete measures aiming to achieve openness standards are even more rarely undertaken.

This document is intended for decision-makers in local self-government units in the region and in the state authorities that deal with the local self-government. It may be useful to representatives of the international institutions, but also to colleagues from the ONG sector who are engaged in this issue.

We remain open to all suggestions, good willed criticism and debates about our proposal.

Analysis of the openness of local self-government units in the region

The analysis of the large number of set indicators in the second year of our research showed significant differences in comparison to openness results obtained in 2016. First of all, in 2016, Albania fulfilled only 12.12% of openness indicators, whereas in 2017, this country scored much higher: 27.55%. However, other countries in the Western Balkans region achieved a somewhat worse result in 2017 in relation to 2016.

The total level of openness of local self-government units in the region in 2017 is **31.5%**, which is a **2.5%** decline in relation to the last round.

This result can be explained by the introduction of new indicators in the new research. Thanks to previously acquired knowledge, concrete results and analyses of regional openness, and believing that the local self-government units, led by simply presented steps towards the improvement of the state in the abovementioned areas, shall work harder to improve the situation, we decided to advocate a higher level of openness of institutions in the region. This research has therefore been enriched with indicators advocating a higher standard of proactive transparency.

Even though the indicators were enhanced in the second round of measuring, which raised the bar when it comes to openness of public authorities, an actual improvement was not noticed even in basic things that a government level closest to the public should fulfil. For example, the lower level of accessibility of local self-governments at the regional level is affected by the fact that in most cases the reports from public hearings are not published. Furthermore, local self-governments continue not to publish the information requested and received through demands for free access to information of public importance.

The efficiency of local self-government units remain at a low level in 2017, too. Specificities recorded in the entire region reveal the fact that local self-governments do not develop indicators for efficiency measuring while preparing their annual work plans.

In the area of integrity, local self-governments scored even lower than last year. Local self-governments do not invest in improving the knowledge and capacities of their employees in the field of corruption prevention and protection of whistle-blowers.

The lack of strategic approach to openness is visible in the context of opening the data that local self-governments publish on their websites. In a large number of cases, there is no commitment to publish the information from official documents (strategies, policies, procedures) in an open format.

According to these data, local self-governments do not perform the civil service function and do not allow citizens to access to relevant information and to participate in the decision-making process. All problems that are observed at the regional level are present in Serbia and together give an utterly negative picture of the state of openness of local authorities.

The recommendation that strategic documents and action plans for their implementation must be directed towards the development of openness is still valid. Furthermore, it is of vital importance that

competent state authorities and local self-government bodies work on the development and adoption of plans that shall incite a homogenous development of local self-government units.

The policy of openness must be the policy of all local self-government units in the region and must find its place amongst other important policies of the states. It is high time we started solving this issue.

Analysis of the openness of local self-governments in Serbia

The analysis of the openness of local self-government units in Serbia has been conducted on the basis of a sample constituted of 42 local self-government units, at the communal, city and municipal level.¹ The openness of local self-governments has been assessed in four areas: accessibility, efficiency, integrity and transparency. The total openness index of local self-government units in Serbia in 2017 is at the same level as in 2016, fulfilling 39% of indicators, which leads to a conclusion that the transparency of local self-governments is still at a very low level.

Transparency

A drop in transparency indicators fulfilment has been recorded in all observed sub-areas. In 2016, local self-government units in Serbia fulfilled 44% of indicators, whereas in 2017, they fulfilled only 40%. A significant drop was observed in the area of budgetary transparency. In 2016, the indicator fulfilment in this area amounted to 36%, while in 2017, it was only 29%. This remains the sub-area with the lowest score when it comes to local self-governments transparency. A drop in indicators fulfilment was also recorded in the sub-area regarding the organisational information. While it was 46% in 2016, in 2017 it amounted to 39%. In the public procurements sub-area though, a significant increase in transparency was recorded: in 2016, it was 47% whereas in 2017, the value of indicators in this sub-area increased to 65%.

The budgetary transparency was measured on the basis of the accessibility of information regarding local self-government units' budgets available on their websites and of the public participation in the budget adoption process. Local self-government units reached a high transparency level by publishing their budgets and the information about the budget on their websites. The citizens' participation is the lowest-ranking indicator of the budgetary transparency. The practice of regular publishing of the budget on the websites was observed in 45% of analysed local self-government units that have made budgets available on their websites for three previous years. A little less than one half of local self-government units (45%) adopted the practice to publish their budgets, but they do not do it regularly. The number of local self-government that do not publish their budget is lesser than in 2016. Out of 42 analysed local self-government units, only 10% do not have budgets published on their website. Publishing of the decision on the budget is the basic and the simplest step towards the improvement of the local financial

¹ In 2017, there were 150 local self-government units in Serbia, at the communal level, 24 cities and 30 municipalities (Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, Statistical Yearbook for 2017: <http://pod2.stat.gov.rs/ObjavljenePublikacije/G2017/pdf/G20172022.pdf>)

transparency. At the same time, it is the easiest way to respond to ever increasing requests to improve the transparency of the public administration and to fulfil the legal obligation.²

A major challenge for local governments is the creation and publication of a citizen's guide to the local self-government budget. In order to bring the local budget closer to citizens and to increase the transparency of local finances, the Ministry of Finance recommended that local governments draft a citizens' guide to the budget for 2017 and publish it on the website.³ Nonetheless, the results in this sub-area in 2017 are unsatisfactory. Out of 42 analysed local self-government units, only one (2%) published the citizens' guide to the budget in 2017. This score is even lower than in 2016, when 7% of local self-government units drafted and prepared the citizens' guide to the budget. **This indicator shows that local self-government units fulfil their obligations in the area of transparency of local finances only if such obligation is foreseen by the law.**

Respecting of deadlines and timely submission of the draft decisions on the budget to the local assembly for adoption is a significant problem for local governments. The OECD⁴ Best Practices for Budget Transparency suggest that the executive power should submit the proposed budget decision to the legislative authority at least three months prior to the start of the fiscal year. However, assemblies of the local self-governments in Serbia discuss budget proposal in very short deadlines. In 93% of analysed local self-government units, the budget proposal for 2018 was addressed to the local assembly within the deadline shorter than a month in relation to the deadline foreseen for the adoption of the local budget.⁵ In the case of three local self-government units, the draft decision on the budget was addressed to the local assembly two months before the expiration of the deadline foreseen for the adoption of the budget. A similar negative image is marked by the indicator measuring the citizens' participation in the preparation of the budget. Nine local self-government units (21%) organised consultations about the budget for 2017 with citizens, whereby a draft budget was prepared without public consultations in 33 (79%) local self-government units. These two indicators show that local self-government units' budgets are adopted without a consultative process, neither with citizens' participation, nor through discussions at local assemblies.

In 2017, too, it was noted that a small number of local self-government units had published decisions on the annual financial statement for the last three years. 17% of local self-governments fulfil this indicator in its entirety, whereas 42% of local self-governments do not publish decision on the annual financial statement. When it comes to semi-annual reports on the budget execution, the budgetary transparency remains at a humble level. 28.5% of local self-governments published the reports on the budget execution

² Article 45 of the Budget System Law ("Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia", no. 54/2009, 73/2010, 101/2010, 101/2011, 93/2012, 62/2013, 63/2013 - rectified., 108/2013, 142/2014, 68/2015 - state law, 103/2015, 99/2016 and 113/2017) foresees the obligation of local authorities to publish the decision on the budget on their websites.

³ Ministry of Finance, Instruction for drafting of the decision on the budget of local governments in 2017, including projections for 2018 and 2019:

<http://www.mfin.gov.rs/UserFiles/File/lokalna%20vlast/2017/uputstvo%20za%20lokal.pdf>

⁴ OECD Best Practices for Budget Transparency, 2002. <http://bit.ly/2t5Kg4i>

⁵ In accordance with the Budget System Law, the deadline foreseen for the adoption of the decision on the budget of local self-government units is December 25th of the current year for the following one.

for the first half of 2017 on their websites. Nonetheless, an advancement regarding this indicator was noted as in 2016, 81% of self-government authorities did not publish such information on their websites. In 2017, too, one was able to observe certain resistance put up by some local self-governments in the area of budgetary transparency and participative budget drafting, although there are some **improvements** in this field. Local self-governments fulfil legal obligations, but do not take steps necessary for the improvement of proactive transparency, even when such steps do not require additional efforts from local services.

The biggest problem of local governments in the area of budgetary transparency is the lack of consultations with the citizens. Only in two self-government authorities from the sample, there are consultations with citizens about the draft budget and calls for consultations are published on the website. In one self-government unit, consultations do take place, but calls are not published, whereby more than 90% of local self-government units do not organise consultations about the local budget with citizens nor inform the public via their website. This is one of the key indicators of insufficient openness of the local government towards citizens and of the lack of the participative practices in decision-making, as the budget is the key instrument for the implementation of local policies, and the citizens have the full right to be informed about public finances disposal in their local community. The Budget System Law stipulates that the principle of publicity has to be observed when preparing and executing the budget. The Law also predicts that services in charge of finances submit draft decisions on the local government budget to the municipal or the city council and that at the same time they acquaint the public about the draft decisions on the budget. Nonetheless, the Law does not define the ways in which the local government informs the citizens about draft decisions on the budget, which is one of the reasons of a low score in the budget transparency. One of the easiest and the most efficient ways to inform the public about the draft decisions on the budget is their publishing on the website. However, this research showed that local self-government units did not do so.

In 2017, the local self-government units' transparency scored better in the area of **organisational information** publishing compared to the budgetary transparency and indicators fulfilment in this sub-area and it reached 39%. However, the transparency of the local self-government units cannot be assessed as satisfactory in this field either. Local self-governments mainly fulfil their obligations prescribed by the law, but the initiatives aiming to increase proactive transparency remain rare.

Local self-governments in Serbia publish the electronic version of their official newsletters on their websites. Besides, there is a legal obligation to prepare and publish the Information booklets on the work that should contain the information about activities and competences of the local government, employees, income and expenses and the exercise of the right to free access to information of public importance.⁶ In 2017, 78% of local self-government units had the Information booklet on the work published, whereas 75.6% of local self-government units regularly updated it.⁷ When it comes to

⁶ Article 39-40 of the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance

⁷ The Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection, Report on the implementation of the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance and the Law on Personal Data Protection for 2017, page 44.

publishing and updating of the Information booklets, the situation is somewhat better in comparison to 2016, when 75.6% of local self-government units had the Information booklet published and 74.1% of local self-government units regularly updated them.⁸

In 2017, a drop in fulfilment of indicators regarding regular publishing of local assemblies' decisions. In 2017, it was determined that 48% of local self-government units regularly published local assemblies' decisions on their websites⁹, while in 2016, 57% of local self-government units regularly published local assemblies' decisions. The number of local self-government units that do not publish local assemblies' decisions on their websites remains unchanged – 36% of local self-government units fail to publish local assemblies' decisions.

In order to improve transparency and civic participation in the public life of the local community, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe recommends to local self-governments to publish their work plans and minutes from local assemblies' and councils' sessions.¹⁰ When it comes to fulfilment of this recommendation, local self-government's score is utterly unsatisfactory. The openness analysis for 2017 indicated that 93% of local self-governments do not publish minutes from local assemblies' sessions. 91% of local self-government units do not publish the agenda of assemblies' sessions on their websites, while 9% do it irregularly.

Public procurement is an area that particularly interests the public as through public procurements local self-governments allocate important financial resources of the local community. Transparency of public procurements is a very effective mechanism for prevention of corruption. The previous implementation of the regulations governing public procurements has shown that there is a significant room for improvement of the transparency of public procurement and that local self-governments have available institutional mechanisms that go beyond the mere fulfilment of legal obligations.¹¹

In 2017, self-government units scored better in the sub-area of public procurement transparency in comparison to 2016 and reached 65%.

The number of local self-governments that do not publish work plans for public procurements decreased in relation to 2016. In 2017, 19% of local self-governments still do not publish public procurement plans. In 2016, the score in this indicator was 54%, which represents a considerable improvement. In 2017, it was noted that 21% of local self-government units regularly published their public procurement plans for the last three years, while 60% of local self-government units did so from time to time.

⁸ The report on the implementation of the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance and the Law on Personal Data Protection for 2016, page 46.

⁹ There were assemblies' decisions published in the last two years.

¹⁰ Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers, Recommendation Rec(2001)19 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the participation of citizens in local public life:

<https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=09000016804f513c>

¹¹ The Anti-Corruption Agency, the Analysis of causes and manifestations of corruption at the local level, page 42:

<http://www.acas.rs/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Analiza-uzroka-i-pojavnih-oblika-korupcije-na-lokalnom-nivou.pdf>

Local self-governments attained a high score when it comes to publishing agreements on public procurements. 83% of local self-governments regularly published agreements on public procurements, whereby 12% of analysed local self-government units published such agreements in an irregular fashion. **There were 5% of local self-government units that did not publish public procurement agreements in 2017.** The identical score was observed when it comes to availability of decisions on allocation of public procurement agreements. In comparison to 2016, a drop in value of indicators demonstrating the availability of decisions on allocation of public procurement agreements was recorded. In 2016, 93% of local self-government units published public decisions on public procurements, whereas in 2017, the value of this indicator is 10% lesser.

In 2017, the lowest level in transparency of public procurements of local self-governments was noted in the area of publishing of annexes to the public procurement agreements. Not any of the 42 analysed self-government units published annexes to the public procurement agreements on their websites. In 2016, the value of this indicator was lamentable - 98%.

The local self-government units, as contracting authorities, are obliged to keep records of all data pertaining to public procurement during the planning, conducting and implementing of a public procurement. This is why fulfilment of openness indicators in the area of public procurements should not be a too demanding task for local self-governments.

Contracting authorities are held to publish on the Public Procurement Portal all public procurement plans, concluded agreements and annexes to the agreements. The respect of the transparency principle in the area of public procurements reflects in the fact that a contracting authority makes available all data not only in line with the provisions of the Public Procurement Law, but also by enabling the public to access the information about public procurements in a simple manner and by enabling the electronic communication whenever it is possible. **The fact that there are no annexes to the public procurement agreements published on the website raises concern as the efficiency of the corruption prevention mechanism is diminished.** The need for a full transparency of the public procurement procedure at the local level has been emphasised through the Model for local action plans for the fight against corruption plan prepared by the Anti-Corruption Agency.¹² By this Model, local self-governments were recommended to publicly publish all documents created in the public procurement process. Although the deadline for adoption of local anti-corruption plans expired on June 30th 2017, so far only 77 local self-government units have adopted these plans.

Accessibility

The accessibility of local self-government units remains at a very low level in 2017, too, with only 32% of fulfilled indicators. There were no significant changes in the mean value of indicators in relation to 2016, but there were certain changes noted in the sub-areas. When it comes to ensuring and respecting

¹² The Anti-Corruption Agency, the Model for local action plans for the fight against corruption with the instructions for preparation, implementation and monitoring, Belgrade 2017, page 69.

procedures for free access to information of public importance, the total score in 2017 amounts to 35%, which is a significant decrease in relation to 43% in 2016. The increase in indicators' value was observed in the sub-area of public consultations with citizens. In 2017, the fulfilment of indicators in this sub-area was 27%, while in 2016, it was 23%. When it comes to interaction with citizens in 2017, this sub-area scored 34%, which is also a worse result in comparison to 2016, when this value was 38%.

The majority of local self-government units (74%) published on their websites in 2017 the contact of the person in charge of free access to information of public importance. The instruction for free access to information of public importance is available in the Information booklet on the Work in 81% of local self-government units, whereby 9% of them do not publish this type of information.

The majority of local self-government units (71%) do not have a special section on their websites dedicated to access to information of public importance. 29% of local self-government units provided this service to the citizens. Although the institutional mechanisms for free access to information of public importance are not at an enviable level, the findings of research on local self-governments' openness indicate that 74% of local self-government units had not undertaken training programmes aiming to improve their capacities to ensure free access to information of public importance.

Interaction with citizens via consultations with the president of the municipality or the mayor, or via electronic communication remains at a low level and local self-governments fulfil in this sub-area 34% of indicators in 2017. One of the ways to improve interaction with citizens is to schedule terms when the president of the municipality or the mayor can receive the citizens. In 2017, such practice existed in 17% of local self-government units, whereas in 83% of them, the exact term of consultations with the president of the municipality/the mayor had not been precisely determined.

During 2017, local self-government units partially used the possibility to interact with citizens via social networks. 60% of local self-government units have a Facebook account, while 45% of them regularly update their profiles. 48% of local self-government units have an active Twitter account, whereby 35% of them regularly use it to interact with citizens. Only 10% of local self-government units publish the monthly electronic bulletin, while other self-government units do not use this possibility to inform their citizens.

In the area of accessibility, local self-governments realised the weakest score in the sub-area of consultation with citizens, where only 27% of indicators were fulfilled. **The institutional mechanism for public hearings implementation in the process of decision-making remain underdeveloped in 2017, too, as local self-governments insufficiently use information technologies to increase the civic participation in the decision-making process.** In 2017, local self-governments in Serbia had not made in advance nor published the public hearing programme. However, 45% of local self-governments do publish on their websites calls for participation in public hearings. **This practice is spread in the field of spatial and urban planning and environmental protection, mainly because this is a legal obligation.** Nonetheless, in 55% of the analysed local self-governments, announcements of public hearings on the website were not an identifiable practice in 2017. There is a special section dedicated to public hearings only in 7% of local self-

governments' websites. The reports on held public hearings are seldom published on the website and do not contain reasoning regarding sustained and overruled citizens' proposals.

Local self-government units achieved good results in the area of competitions for allocation of funds for public interest projects financing. Out of all self-government units that had published calls for allocation of funds in 2017, only 24% did not announce the results of the competition, 24% published partial data (without any information concerning scoring methods), while 52% published ranking lists with scoring methods.

Integrity

The integrity of local self-governments in Serbia remains at a very low level in 2017, although a slight improvement was recorded. The value of indicators relating to the integrity and prevention of conflict of interest is 28% in 2017, whereby in 2016 it was 24%. The integrity of self-governments was measured by indicators referring to online mechanisms for submission of complaints and objections, availability of documents regarding the area of integrity reinforcement and fight against corruption and local employees' trainings.

On local self-government units' websites there were no instructions for citizens about how they can submit complaints or objections about the work of the local government or report cases of corruption. However, 50% of local self-government units made possible for their citizens to address the assembly bodies via website, primarily to the president of the municipality or the mayor. Only one local self-government in 2017 had a functional online reporting mechanism for corruption. Local documents establishing institutional mechanisms for the prevention of corruption are not available on the websites of 57% of local self-governments. In the case of 43% of local self-government units, at least one integrity-enhancing document was published on the website in 2017, most commonly the code of ethics for local officials.

The number of local self-governments that published integrity plans or anti-corruption plans on their websites is symbolic.¹³ This datum indicates important long-term obstacles to the reinforcement of integrity at the local level. Local self-government units had the obligation to prepare and adopt integrity plans until June 30th 2017.¹⁴ This deadline was subsequently postponed to October 31st 2017, by a decision issued by the Anti-Corruption Agency.¹⁵ The National Anti-Corruption Strategy and Action Plan for Chapter 23, established that local self-governments must prepare and adopt local anti-corruption plans. The deadline for fulfilment of this obligation expired on June 30th 2017. Only one self-government unit adopted the plan within the foreseen deadline. According to the last report on the implementation of the

¹³ This research has not included the issue referring to drafting and adopting of integrity and anti-corruption plans but only their availability on the local self-governments' websites.

¹⁴ The Anti-Corruption Agency, Guidelines for preparation and implementation of the integrity plan, article 22: <http://www.acas.rs/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Smernice-za-izradu-plana-integriteta-2017.pdf>

¹⁵ The Anti-Corruption Agency, Decision on modifications of Guidelines for preparation and implementation of the integrity plan, article 1: <http://www.acas.rs/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/pdf029.pdf>

Action Plan for Chapter 23 (July 2018) 77 of local self-government units adopted local anti-corruption plans.¹⁶

Efficiency

In 2017, the efficiency of the local self-government units was measured through indicators relating to monitoring of the work of local self-government units, reporting and strategic planning. The total score of **efficiency** indicators in 2017 is 55%, which represent an increase in comparison to 48% in 2016. In 2017, local self-government units scored best in the sub-area of reporting where 100% of indicators were fulfilled, which is by 2% better than in 2016. Public companies founded by local self-governments have the legal obligation to submit to the local assemblies ordinary trimestral and annual reports on realisation of business programmes. Moreover, public companies are held to undertake an audit of their financial statements.

Monitoring in the local self-governments in Serbia primarily refers to monitoring success in realisation of the programme budget. Since 2015, all local self-governments in Serbia have had the obligation to prepare the programme budget. The programme budget contains indicators for measuring of the efficiency thanks to which information on programme efficaciousness and efficiency and programme activities and projects are obtained. In the programme budget, local self-government units use two types of efficiency indicators – outcome indicators and output result indicators. The application of the outcome indicators provides information about the final achievement of the programme, programme activity or project, i.e. about a realised social or economic change. The application of the output result indicator delivers information about direct products and services provided thanks to the implementation of the programme activity or project.¹⁷

Local self-government units do not have the obligation to prepare the programme of the local administration authorities' work, nor the annual reports about the work. However, executive authorities of the local self-government units (the president of the municipality or the municipal council) have the legal obligation to regularly report to the assembly, at their own initiative or upon request, about the execution of decision and other acts of the municipal assembly.¹⁸

Reporting on the effectiveness of the local self-governments' work is related to the implementation of the programme budget realisation and performance indicators. Direct budget users, in accordance with the Budget System Law, are obliged to produce semi-annual reports on the performance of their programmes for the first 6 months of the current year. Performance reports are based on the programme budget performance indicators. The local assembly considers also annual reports on programme

¹⁶ Report number 2/2018 on the implementation of the Action Plan for Chapter 23, Belgrade, July 2018, page 546.

¹⁷ Permanent conference of cities and municipalities of the Republic of Serbia, Programme budgeting and strategic/action planning, Programme Exchange 4, presentation.

¹⁸ The Law on Local Self-Government ("Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia" no. 129/2007 and 83/2014 – state law), article 48.

performance¹⁹ prepared by the authority in charge of finances within the local self-government. This report is submitted to the local assembly as an integral part of the draft decision on annual financial statement.

In the sub-area of strategic planning, in 2017, local self-government units fulfilled 46% of indicators, which is a decline in comparison to 2016 when they fulfilled 55%. In 2017, 74% of local self-governments in Serbia had strategic plans or a development strategy. 26% of local self-government units do not have strategic plans or their strategic plans have expired.²⁰ When it comes to indicators regarding action plans for the implementation of local strategies, the situation is completely opposite. 76% of local self-government units did not have action plans for the implementation of local strategies in 2017²¹ while 24% of them had an updated action plan.

Research methodology

Openness is a key requirement of democracy because it enables citizens to obtain the information and knowledge needed for equal participation in political life, efficient decision-making and holding institutions accountable for policies they implement.

Institutions around the world are undertaking concrete actions in order to increase their transparency and accountability towards citizens. With a view to determine the extent to which the citizens of the Western Balkans receive timely and understandable information from their institutions, the Regional Openness Index of parliaments has been developed.

The Regional Openness Index measures the degree to which the institutions of the Western Balkan countries are open to citizens and society, based on four principles: (1) transparency (2) accessibility (3) integrity and (4) efficiency.

The principle of **transparency** implies that organisational information, budget and public procurement procedures be publicly available and published. **Accessibility** refers to the provision of and abiding by procedures for free access to information and to the enhancement of the information accessibility through the mechanism of public hearings and strengthening of interaction with citizens. **Integrity** includes mechanisms for the prevention of corruption, the implementation of the Codes of Ethics and the regulation of lobbying. The last principle, **efficiency**, concerns the monitoring and evaluation of policies implemented by institutions.

Following international standards, recommendations²² and examples of good practice, these principles are further elaborated through specific quantitative and qualitative indicators that are assessed on the

¹⁹ Programmes included in the local self-government programme budget.

²⁰ Even local self-government units that did not respond to the questionnaire are included in this group.

²¹ 6 local self-government units that did not respond to the questionnaire are included in this group.

²² Standards and recommendations of numerous international institutions have been analysed, namely: Access Info Europe, EU, OECD, OGP, SIGMA, World Bank, etc.

basis of availability of information on official internet sites of institutions, the quality of the legal framework for individual issues, other sources of public information and questionnaires forwarded to institutions.

After the completed monitoring, a control phase followed which showed a standard error of +/- 3%. The measurement was carried out from December 2017 to end of February 2018. Based on the results of the research, we developed a set of recommendations and guidelines for institutions.

ActionSEE is a network of organisation of the entire society that works together in order to promote and ensure transparency and accountability of institutions in the entire south-east Europe, to enhance the potential for citizen activism and participation, to promote and protect human rights on the internet as well as to build capacities for the use of new technologies.

The [CRTA](#) is an organisation of young people with broad experience in civic activism, journalism and politics. In our efforts to advocate the implementation of the concept of responsible behaviour in a society, we develop different mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the degree of accountability of holders of authority, we research and educate citizens and politicians about the concept of accountability and we advocate the concept of responsible behaviour to be implemented in practice and legislation as the basic value of a developed democratic society. We demand from decision-makers to report their actions to the citizens, and this is why we draw the line and sum up their work both at a national and at a local level. We wish that as many citizens as possible join us!

Through our portals [Truth-O-Meter](#) and [Open Parliament](#), the CRTA informs the citizens, encourages critical thinking, improves openness and accountability of institutions, and bring the decision-making process closer to citizens.