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Transparency, Intergovernmental Coordination, and Anti-Corruption Reforms in North Macedonia

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Abstract

Efforts to combat corruption increasingly emphasize the dual importance of transparency and intergovernmental coordination. These two governance principles are closely intertwined. When effectively combined, they create a framework that not only strengthens democratic legitimacy but also prevents abuse of power. From a legal reform perspective, transparency is more than a procedural value; it is a safeguard against corruption. International standards and obligations, particularly those stemming from European Union accession processes and global anti-corruption frameworks, further reinforce the need for transparent and coordinated governance. North Macedonia offers a compelling case study. As a unitary state undergoing decentralization and gradual deconcentration of central power, its institutional architecture relies heavily on coordination between ministries, regulatory bodies, and local governments. The actual Strategy for Transparency 2023–2026 reflects both domestic demand for stronger accountability and compliance with international obligations. Yet, the effectiveness of these reforms depends not only on formal commitments but also on how transparency and coordination are practiced within a complex political environment. The positioning of institutions, the role of their leaders, and the broader political dynamics shape whether anti-corruption objectives are achieved in practice. This paper examines how transparency reforms in North Macedonia intersect with intergovernmental coordination and legal commitments, highlighting the challenges and opportunities of aligning domestic governance structures with international anti-corruption standards.

Keywords: Corruption, transparency, intergovernmental coordination, international and regional standards, North Macedonia

Introduction

Transparency makes the governance closer to citizens, fostering trust and accountability. Transparency ensures that the processes are open to scrutiny, making it easier to hold government officials accountable for their actions and decisions. Intergovernmental coordination often requires shared responsibilities and joint decision-making. Transparency ensures these processes are open to enquiry, making it easier to hold government officials accountable for their actions and decisions. Transparent intergovernmental coordination helps ensure consistency in policymaking, making the decision-making processes exposed and with that more effective and efficient. Additionally, when citizens understand the collaborative efforts and the reasons behind certain decisions, they are more likely to trust the government. Transparency, as a concept, is undoubtedly connected with the idea of good governance, which implies the responsible management of public affairs and public resources. A cornerstone of good governance is accountability based on transparency. According to the principles of SIGMA and the OECD, accountability presupposes the existence of clear lines of responsibility and accountability. At the most general level, accountability presupposes the relationship between the government and the citizens who elected it. In that regard, citizens enjoy certain rights to be informed about the actions of the government, and certain standards are guaranteed in treatment and compensation if those rights are violated (Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014; Michener & Bersch, 2013; Kaufmann & Bellver, 2005; GRECO, 2019). This article analyses the government's effort in North Macedonia to increase transparency at various governance levels by introducing a new Strategy for Transparency 2023- 2026, while enforcing various legal measures aimed to prevent the corruption. Considering the steps taken towards increased transparency, the paper will present how transparency (or lack of it) influences intergovernmental coordination, hindering the potential for possible corruption. The conclusions are pointing the necessity in keeping all those elements in place for meaningful intergovernmental coordination processes.

The Concept of Transparency

Transparency helps in making the governance closer to citizens, fostering trust and accountability. It helps in ensuring consistency in policymaking, it makes the decision-making processes open and with that more effective and efficient. The transparency and good governance go hand in hand. Good governance is considered a

fundamental factor for economic development and stability of society. It includes effective and efficient services, clear transparent, and enforceable laws and rules, consistency and coherence in policy-making, respect for rule of law, and high standards of ethics. On the other hand, a foundation of good governance is accountability based on transparency. Within this frame, the political authority / government / body of the state administration, can be considered as transparent if regularly and proactively publish the information on the user-friendly manner and protects and promotes the unhindered realization of citizens' rights to access information of a public nature. In that sense, it is important to mention that alongside with citizens' rights there are connected obligation of the corresponding institutions and authorities to publish the data they have.

Transparency is necessarily connected with democracy and with the right of citizens to seek and receive information about the operation of their government and administration (understood in the broadest sense of the word. That is because an educated and well-informed citizen wants his or her views and knowledge to be taken into account in the public decision-making process – and governments are under pressure to respond. Informing, consulting, and involving citizens are means to promote openness and investment in a better policy-making process, and in this process - information is the first stage, consultations are the second, and partnership with the institutions is the highest stage. Within this, the concept of Active transparency implies proactivity of the institutions in publishing the public data. The Responsibility is understood as a determination who should be held accountable for untaken action (or omission), - on horizontal or vertical level. Accountability, is connected with responsibility and assumes the need to explain the actions and decisions and provide clear answers to the citizens and stakeholders concerns through established clear mechanisms for complains and objections Inclusivity and participation improve the effectiveness of management and but the quality of the decisions made which means that citizens and stakeholders can influence the actions and decisions of the state, safely, equally and without discrimination and contribute with their views in all phases of the cycle of creating and carrying out public policies. All of these elements should be in place related to the concept of Integrity, which assumes that all levels of government consistently support ethical standards during their activities and give priority to the public interest over private ones (Cerna, 2014; Michener & Bersch, 2013; Kaufmann & Bellver, 2005).

The Structure of Public Governance in North Macedonia and Policies for Governance Coordination

The Republic of North Macedonia (North Macedonia) is a unitary state and a parliamentary democracy. The governance is organized into two layers, and it is divided into central government and local government- each of it with their structure and particularities. The Law for organization of the state administrative bodies regulates the organization, competencies and work of the state administration bodies (Law on the organization of the state administrative bodies, 2000). The local self-government is established as a fundamental value and a right that is constitutionally granted and protected (Constitution of Republic of North Macedonia, 1991, Art. 114). The governance organization of the local level is as well-regulated in details through statutory provisions (Law on the territorial organisation of local self-government, 2004; Law on City of Skopje, 2004). Considering the population composition, North Macedonia is a multiethnic and multinational state with a diverse population structure. According to the last census in 2021, 58.44% of the population declared themselves as Macedonians, 24.30% as Albanians, 3.86% as Turks, 2.53% as Roma, 0.47% as Vlachs, 1.30% as Serbs and 0.87% as Bosniaks and others (State Statistical Office, 2021). The established political model is based on power-sharing and redistribution of public resources and political power. The system is not a typical consociationalism model but shares many characteristics. As a result, multi-ethnic coalitions are a regular occurrence on the Macedonian political stage (Shikova, 2018). The minority-majority relations affect all the efforts for the governmental coordination being vertical or horizontal. In general, often the system is immensely affected by political bargaining, but as well by prospects of potential EU membership. Nevertheless, North Macedonia has been an EU candidate for membership since 2005, fulfilling difficult political demands and facing many vetoes from the neighbouring countries (Shikova, 2025).

Since the Accession Partnership of the Republic of Macedonia with the EU (2001), and the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (2001), which regulates the power-sharing relationship between different communities, there is a strong political focus on the decentralization reforms. According to Article 22 of the 2002 Law on Local Self-Government (Law on Local Self-Government, 2002), municipalities have both own and delegated competencies where the municipalities undertake responsibilities in important areas such as education, the provision of basic services and social welfare, economic affairs and transport, environment, health, etc. According to the Article 115 of Constitution of Republic of North Macedonia (1991)

and the Article 23 of Law on Local Self-Government (2002), a public administration body may also delegate the execution of specific tasks from its competence to the municipality. Apart from delegated competences, there are as well shared competencies within the sphere of education, health, road maintenance, urban planning, and building permits (OECD, 2022).

Transparency as Governmental Policy

Transparency in intergovernmental coordination is not a key topic in Macedonian political society. However, there are efforts towards greater transparency of the public institutions in general. In that frame, recently the Government adopted the Transparency Strategy 2023-2026, a unique document, that is meant to increase the transparency on central level institutions, but it is recommended to be implemented on a local level as well. The document set the prerequisites that need to be met for some institutions to be considered transparent. This strategic document takes into account transparency in a broader, essential sense and highlights the active role of institutions in achieving it. As a result of the Strategy, it is expected that the organizational culture will change towards increased openness of the institutions. That will affect the public perception and increase the citizen's trust in the system. Publishing not only data but also original documents in an easy-to-use format will raise accountability securing a method for possible involvement of the citizens in these processes. That can encourage citizens' participation (directly or being represented through citizens' associations) in policy creation and will contribute to their quality. The document predicts the usage of the new technologies and the communication channels by the Government and public bodies for spreading info about public activities and decisions that should increase the level of transparency (Strategy for Transparency of the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2023).

These efforts are in line with public administration reform (the Strategy exists only on the central level and not on the local level) and they are built on previous steps taken in a sphere i.e. the previous Strategy for Transparency of the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia (2019-2021); mechanisms that were adopted for strengthening fiscal discipline; legally expanding of the scope of information that institutions should publish regularly on their web sites, etc. Although in general there are certain improvements towards more transparency, it is evident that this is mainly related to the central government institutions, and it is not quite

mirrored on a local government level. It is not an overstatement if it is point out that most of the municipalities do not meet basic standards for openness and apply low standards for public consultations. That directly affects their transparency and transparency of the processes. In that respect, there is no possibility for effective monitoring and evaluation of the process of intergovernmental coordination, as well as its results – the enacted public policies. Considering the measurements, for example, the average openness of the municipalities for 2021 was at least 30% lower than the openness of the central government institutions – and some of the local self-government units fulfilled only 25% of the set criteria for transparency (Metamorphosis Foundation for Internet and Society, 2021). This is extremely problematic considering that the administrative processes of the country are directly influenced by the party politics and greater transparency is a must in reaching EU standards and fighting against corruption. The unclear and overlapping competencies of the institutions, lack of transparency, and the influence of politics over the system of administrative bureaucracy have long been contentious issues in the country (European Commission, 2025), and despite the steps undertaken, there are still challenges ahead.

Anticorruption Policies

There is no universally accepted definition of corruption; however, it is commonly understood as the betrayal of public trust for the purpose of advancing private interests (Henry, 2006; Rosenbloom & Kravchuk, 2005). In its efforts to combat corruption, North Macedonia has established a comprehensive legal framework in which the Law on Prevention of Corruption and Conflict of Interests and the Criminal Code (1996) with its amendments, constitute the cornerstone regulating corruption-related offences. Complementary legislation — including the Law on Whistleblower Protection (2015), the Law on Lobbying (2021), the Law on Public Procurement (2021), and the Law on Public Financial Control (1990) with amendments, provides additional institutional safeguards. At the strategic level, priorities for policy action were set through the National Anti-Corruption Strategy 2021–2025 (2021). Moreover, the international obligations arising from the UN Convention against Corruption (2004) and the Council of Europe conventions on corruption (Council of Europe, 1999a, 1999b) reinforce domestic commitments, requiring not only legal compliance but also broader systemic transformation.

Institutionally, the architecture for preventing and combating corruption is extensive. The State Commission for Prevention of Corruption (SCPC) (2021) serves as the principal body leading anti-corruption efforts, supported by the State Audit Office and the Bureau for Public Procurement. The Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Interior, and the Public Prosecutor's Office also play significant roles in the enforcement of anti-corruption policies, complemented by the work of the Financial Police, the Customs Administration, and various oversight institutions. Furthermore, internal integrity mechanisms have been established within all public sector institutions, were designated Integrity Officers act as internal anchors of integrity policies, connecting day-to-day operations with the overarching anti-corruption framework. Thus, while laws and institutions ensure external oversight of the effectiveness of integrity policies and procedures, the internal mechanism encompasses the responsibilities of institutional leadership, Integrity Officers, and other employees engaged in the functioning of the integrity system. Their collective mandate is to foster and maintain an institutional climate of integrity, strengthened through specialized training, methodological development, and application of guidelines for implementation (State Commission for Prevention of Corruption, 2021).

Is the Intergovernmental Coordination Transparent?

Intergovernmental coordination requires communication in policy-making between the different levels of government, especially if the different levels of government share responsibilities in certain policy areas. Therefore, intergovernmental relations dominate the executive branches of the government layers, and that can create an issue concerning accountability. That comes at stake, especially in systems of power-sharing, like in North Macedonia, that often consensus decisions and coordination between executives are sometimes done behind closed doors, at the expense of public accountability and transparency. Despite the introduced mechanisms for greater transparency, political bargaining predominates in the relationships among the level of governments, sometimes making intergovernmental coordination a less transparent process and prone to corruption. That is related to general policies not just for intergovernmental coordination, but for instance the last corruption perception index lists North Macedonia on 88th place out of examined 180 countries and territories, putting it in a vicious cycle of week democracy and flourishing corruption (Corruption Perception Index, 2024).

Alongside with abovementioned issues, In North Macedonia the institutions have discretionary authorities and they are spread in many laws. The actions of institutions under a given discretionary authority are evident in the legal act by which the decision is made. In its work, the administration issues a series of specific administrative acts, with which it resolves certain cases, most often in administrative proceedings. Laws, i.e. the vague and poorly defined provisions of laws and bylaws, give institutions tacit freedom in certain situations to act as they deem best. However, although flexibility is provided for the sake of better efficiency, most often the powers are abused for personal interest, not for the public good, thus exceeding the limits of the legal and ethical performance of functions. This is largely due to the lack of specific guidelines for acting under discretionary authorities by institutions. If such guidelines exist, institutions with discretionary powers will explain their actions in more detail in the decision, and supervisory authorities will be able to decide on the manner of acting and respecting the guidelines when applying substantive law. According to the established institutional system/mechanism, the acts of the public administration are subject to supervision and control by the immediately higher authorities (ministries), specialized bodies (second-instance commissions), the state administrative inspectorate or the courts (Administrative, Higher Administrative and Constitutional Court). Supervision is carried out over the legality of general acts (rulebooks, statutes, etc.), over specific acts, over the operation and over the material and financial operations of the administration and is carried out by independent institutions such as the Parliament of the Republic of Macedonia, the State Audit Office (SAO), the Ombudsman (OP), the State Commission for the Prevention of Corruption (SCPC) and others, whose recommendations have only a consultative role and do not cause legal consequences for the institutions. This is important, because abuse of discretionary powers can only be established when their acts are effectively controlled (Gjorgjievski & Vrglevski, 2023).

There is a general understanding that steps need to be taken towards more transparency on all government levels in North Macedonia and that includes the processes of intergovernmental coordination. That is reflected in the various reform processes. Some of them include the Open Data Strategy 2018-2020 (2018); The Strategy for the Reform of the Public Administration 2023-2030 (2023), as well as the National Action Plan for Open Government Partnership (2024-2026), in which the Government commitments to facilitate the access to information and for greater transparency - both centrally and at the local level. Those efforts have their predecessors' steps. For instance, between 2004 and 2005, significant reforms were carried out to consolidate

the local public finance system. Within the Law on Financing Local Self-Government Units (2004) predicts establishing a Committee for Monitoring and Development of the Local Government Finance System, composed of members from national and local governments, with aim to promote transparency and accountability in the use of public resources. That was as well one of the main objectives of the Fiscal Decentralization Reform starting from 2021 (OECD, 2022). Additionally, there is a huge legislative framework that tends to increase transparency. The illustrative example can be the Law on Local Self-Government (LLSG) that permits coordination of policies in specific areas of mutual interest between the government and municipalities. Those agreements need be reported to the Parliament that oversees them from the aspect of transparency, especially the allocation of subsidies, and financing sources (Law on Local Self-Government, 2002, Art 79- 80).

Discussion

Intergovernmental coordination requires effective communication in policymaking between different levels of government, especially when they share responsibilities in certain policy areas. Within intergovernmental relations, the executive branch tends to predominate in North Macedonia. However, persistent issues related to accountability indicate the need for greater responsibility and stronger democratic oversight. Coordination and decision-making are often conducted in non-transparent settings, through informal channels, where political negotiations and political deal-making frequently occur. These processes are frequently marked by competition rather than cooperation, and the pursuit of effective decisions sometimes comes at the expense of public accountability.

To make intergovernmental coordination a more transparent process and more resilient to corruption, unified websites and regularly updated data are needed. Regulations, legal acts, and other documents that directly or indirectly affect citizens' rights and obligations should be publicly available, systematically organized, and regularly updated. Assistance to citizens in finding relevant information should be mandatory, and access to information should be understood not merely as access to documents, but as the right to obtain valid and reliable data. Access to information should not entail costs, as stipulated by the Macedonian legal framework. Nevertheless, citizens must be given greater opportunities to gain insight into budget expenditures and revenues, as well as into public processes, the exercise of official mandates, and the use of discretionary powers.

Significant differences in openness and transparency among institutions have been observed, often depending on the goodwill and commitment of those in managerial positions. In addition to disparities within the central government, varying levels of transparency exist among the planning regions (which are established primarily for statistical purposes) and, more notably, at the local level. The least transparent processes are those related to public finances, with transparency decreasing at lower levels of government and in institutions with lesser status in the state hierarchy.

Although most initiatives for improvement originate at the central government level, intergovernmental processes in the country remain heavily influenced by party politics. Achieving greater transparency is essential for meeting EU standards and strengthening the fight against corruption. Therefore, the existing administrative culture of secrecy must change. The necessary instruments are already in place to transform the behaviour of civil servants and government officials toward greater openness and accountability.

Conclusion

Although intergovernmental coordination in North Macedonia is governed by statutory provisions that prescribe established procedures, routines, and oversight by the Parliament and its bodies, a persistent lack of transparency can be observed in practice. Nevertheless, despite the institutional and normative efforts undertaken, intergovernmental coordination frequently remains insufficiently visible to the public and that increases the chances for corruption. Active transparency, especially in matters of financial disclosure, continues to represent a significant challenge for institutions, and is particularly pronounced at the local level. Consequently, a transformation of the prevailing administrative culture of limited openness is necessary, supported by existing legal instruments to guide the conduct of public officials. While progress has been recorded at the central level of government, further advancement is required locally to ensure greater openness and public insight into intergovernmental processes. Despite the extensive legal frame and established polices, in essence there are structural and practical obstacles towards more open process of coordination. The anticorruption measures are in place; however, they remain with fragmented implementation and an overly formalistic approach has less effects on the corruption level. For more transparent processes resilient to potential corruption, the objective extends beyond the mere prevention of corrupt practices; it encompasses the development of public institutions characterized by

professionalism, accountability, and ethical responsibility. Such transformation is essential for North Macedonia to achieve higher levels of transparency, accountability within the intergovernmental coordination in the public sector (on central and local level) and with it to achieve democratic legitimacy.

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