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LTI 2022: Novi Pazar, Sombor and Sokobanja - the most transparent local governments

The transparency of cities and municipalities in Serbia has slightly increased in 2022 compared to the previous year, but the average is still low. The most transparent local governments are Novi Pazar, Sombor and Sokobanja, Transparency Serbia Local Transparency Index (LTI) 2022 research results show.

The average score of 145 local self-government (LSG) in 2022 is 49 (out of 100), which is still a poor result, but one point better than the previous year and nine points better than in 2015, when the initial survey was conducted.

A result above 70 points was recorded by 11 municipalities and cities, while four achieved a score higher than 80.

Novi Pazar, ranked fourth last year, is now at the top of the table, with a score of 87. Sombor again holds second place, with 85 points, while Sokobanja has improved by two positions and it is in third place with 84.

LTI position/grade	LTI 2022	LTI 2021	LTI 2020
Novi Pazar	1/87	4/78	2/82
Sombor	2/85	2/88	3/80
Sokobanja	3/84	5/75	8/68
Tutin	4/81	93/42	78/45
Kanjiža	5/79	3/83	4/77

Tutin made a great success, coming from the 93rd position and 42 points to the fourth place on the list. At the top of the list are also Kanjiza, Uzice, Veliko Gradiste, Vranje, Leskovac, Vrnjacka Banja and Subotica.

Among city municipalities, which due to a smaller level of competencies, cannot be fully compared to other LSGs, Surcin (69) and Sevojno (66) scored very well.

The fact that municipalities with smaller budgets and the number of employees are among the best-placed LSGs clearly shows that the lack of resources cannot be a valid justification for non-transparency.

At the bottom of the 2022 LTI list, with less than 30 points, are Bujanovac, Knic, Kovacica, Secanj, Koceljeva and Presevo.

As for the categories, some growth of transparency was recorded in four areas, with "Public Debates and Public Competitions" being the only significant - from 44.3% to 54.7%. There was a decline in four areas: the most notable was in areas of "Information Booklet" - from 51.9% to 41.7% and "Public Procurement" - from 95.5% to 72.6%. The decline in transparency in public procurement is a direct consequence of the implementation the new Law. Namely, the contracting authorities are no longer obliged to publish information on their websites but only on the Public Procurement Portal, so many municipalities and cities opted only for the latter. The area where transparency is still the lowest refers to the work of city and municipal assemblies and councils.

While it is good that the average transparency score is growing, there are still large fluctuations in both the upper and lower parts of the table. In LTI 2022, some well-rated LSGs from previous LTI cycles performed worse, and some previously poorly ranked significantly increased their results. The 2020 elections, followed by personnel changes, combined with reliance on "political will" in the absence of written procedures to maintain transparency, were likely to have impacted some municipalities' positive and negative changes.

Therefore, the main conclusion of the research is that significant and continuous efforts are needed to improve and maintain transparency even among the best positioned LSGs. For achieving and maintaining transparency, it is necessary to adopt clear procedures that will precisely prescribe what all municipalities should publish and who is responsible for it. And what is even more important - these procedures must be applied.

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USAID has supported some municipalities to enact acts prescribing these procedures, demonstrating a willingness to be more accountable to citizens. As transparency is generally greater where there are legal obligations, the Government and the Assembly could give additional incentive to municipalities by prescribing a minimum of information that LSGs must publish on their websites.

It is also worth noticing that 25 municipalities and cities that have been supported in recent years by the USAID Government Accountability Initiative (GAI) achieved a significantly better average result than other LSGs (56:45). This tendency proves that even the LTI's regular research and publication of results alone and working with local governments to implement reforms help increasing transparency.

The LTI 2022 results show how the abolition of legal obligations, pandemics (not accompanied by the introduction of new forms of communication with citizens) and direct support to municipalities and cities, have affected transparency. What is needed is to build mechanisms to ensure that the publication of documents and information does not depend on anyone's political will or the enthusiasm of individuals in local administration. There are already numerous examples of good practices, which we pointed out in the LTI report, with an invitation to all local governments to apply them.

Finally, LTI itself, as a long-term monitoring mechanism, has once again proved to be a guideline for local governments that are ready and willing to increase the transparency of their work.

Notes:

The Local Self-Government Transparency Index LTI 2022 is a survey, evaluation and ranking of 145 local self-governments and 25 city municipalities in Serbia conducted by Transparency Serbia. This is the sixth year (fourth in a row) in which TS has undertaken this research. Municipalities and cities are ranked based on transparency criteria, determined through 95 indicator questions. Researchers verify all results in two rounds.

LTI is a cross-section of the transparency data at their collection (or verification), and the current circumstances may differ from those presented in the report.

Poor results in some categories do not necessarily mean widespread corruption in these areas. Similarly, good results do not guarantee that there is no corruption. Transparency is a mechanism to facilitate the detection or prevention of corruption.

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