

## **Integrity Plan Verification from the Perspective of the Experience of Local Self-Government Service Users**

### **Methodology**

The verification of integrity plans in the local self-government system was conducted through research of the experience of a total of 1,592 users of the services of this system in 38 cities, municipalities, and urban municipalities, distributed evenly across Serbia. Considering the fact that citizens exercise different types of rights and obligations, and that the local self-government exercises different types of competences which affect the life of citizens in the local community, for the purposes of this research, the sample was divided so as to encompass the service users who come into direct communication with five of the most common administrations, i.e., services. These are categorized according to type of activity or competence, regardless of their specific designations in various local self-government units. The five categories are:

1) **General administration** - General affairs (citizen status, registers of birth, maintenance of citizens' records, lists of voters, and other, primarily administrative, competences).

2) **Construction and urban planning** (issuing construction permits and certificates of occupancy, legalization, urban planning requirements, and permits for all other types of construction work).

3) **Inspection activities** (all types of inspection within the competence of the local self-government – municipal, health care, sanitary, municipal police, and similar areas).

4) **Social affairs** (exercising various types of rights in the area of family, social, children's, veteran and disability protection, and the area of culture, sports, agriculture, and other social areas).

5) **Fiscal affairs** (local tax administration in charge of collecting and keeping local tax revenues).

Research has shown that various services within the local self-government display considerable differences regarding exposure to risk of corruption and irregularities.

The research was conducted using the direct interview technique. Forty interviewers were trained for these purposes.

Field research was conducted from February 25 to March 15, 2013.

### **Key research findings**

One in ten users of local self-government services (10%) said they do not have *any* information on the process of exercising their rights/obligations through this service, while less than a quarter (23%) said they are *for the most part* unacquainted with it. In total, this data suggests that a third of the local self-government service users (33%) are unsure when it comes to the process of dealing with this type of public authority. Citizens who contact the departments for construction and urban planning affairs, as well as inspection services are the least informed – in the case of departments for construction and urban planning affairs, as much as 45% of its users say they have little to no information, while the number for inspection services is 38% (an average of 33%). Significant difference may be observed between service users of different backgrounds when it comes to how informed they are. Taking education into consideration, for example – the less educated are considerably less informed on the procedures in local self-government, making

them more vulnerable to different kinds of abuse they may come into contact with in municipality and city authorities.

Half of the respondents (50%) get the information on exercising their rights and obligations from the clerks working in local self-government units. One in five service users (20%) is informed by people they know, who have had experience with certain kinds of procedures in the municipality, while only 16% of citizens are able or in the habit of obtaining information through written documents published for the public that local self-government units place at various sites; this data is important for the process of improving citizens' access to information on local self-governments.

Acquaintances among civil servants in local self-government are used primarily in order to influence procedures, and in a lesser degree to influence the outcome of requests addressed to local self-governments. Although 72% of respondents claim never to have tried to "pull strings" in order to influence procedures, the share of those who have done so is not negligible (28%). It is interesting to note that of all the people trying to influence a procedure, those who do it in advance – before even trying to address their request through regular procedures – are more numerous than those who only try to do it afterwards with the help of an acquaintance (17% in the former case, and 11% in the latter). A larger portion of the citizens, then, "knows" or expects in advance that there is going to be a problem with the procedure, or they simply want it to be concluded sooner than is otherwise possible. Upon analyzing user responses according to type of administration addressed, the only service deviating from the average regarding attempted influence via acquaintances and connections is the construction and urban planning service. When contacting employees in charge of these areas, almost 40% of users asked for some sort of informal "intervention" to influence the procedure (mostly in order to speed it up).

Nine out of ten respondents (90%) claim that no one in the local self-government asked them for a bribe. Among the 10% who did encounter this, only 1% say the bribe was requested directly, while most of them think it was asked for indirectly, by delaying and postponing decisions and deciding on requests; the largest number of service users had experience with bribery at the departments for construction and urban planning affairs: 17% (*10% on average*).

The practice of giving presents to local self-government employees is more common than the traditional asking for and taking of bribes; one third of the citizens who have had experience with local self-government services (34%) have given gifts to employees, while 66% claim not to have done so.

A larger part of respondents believe the employees have enough knowledge (54%) and professionalism in their work (46%). Although "positive" figures encompass about half of the users in contact with local self-government employees, the other half are either not satisfied with the above-mentioned, or lack the knowledge and experience to make an assessment.

Local self-government service users believe that municipal services have a sufficient number of employees and in that sense there are no particular problems (as believed by 70% of the respondents), although the ones "behind the counter" often think otherwise. Nevertheless, even though they do not see the number of employees as posing a problem (at least not based on what they see "from the outside"), service users are not quite satisfied when it comes to work organization at local self-government units. In fact, this integrity element scored some of the lowest marks of all five elements (42% find it satisfactory, while 28% do not).

The biggest hindrance in communication with local self-government services is encountered by service users in complicated procedures (31%), followed by lack of information (19%), and

finally, the exceedingly lengthy processes and waiting times for requests to local self-governments (16%).

More than 40% (42%, to be precise) of local self-government users believe the people employed in this type of institution have little to no interest in responding to users' requests more promptly and accurately; on the other hand, 58% think the employees are willing to better respond to citizens' requests.

Seven out of ten local self-government users (69%) claim never to have had motives or reasons to complain about the work of a local self-government employee. Of those who did have a reason, most complained about procedures (24%), and a small number complained about the outcome of a request, i.e. a local self-government authority decision (7%). Although most citizens and other users had no reasons to complain, the fact that almost one third of them (31%) said they had a motive to do so, indicates there is much room for improvement of the local self-governments' work.

Only 23% of those who claimed to have had motives to complain actually used this right. Of those who did not use this opportunity, there are roughly equal numbers of service users who see complaints as just another "marathon" procedure with an uncertain outcome (25%), those who do not trust the system can fix itself by way of complaints (27%), and those who are not informed about complaint procedures (25%).