Readers of Public Administration Review recognize that transparency and civic engagement are essential in order to fight and deter corruption within any form of government, national, municipal, or other. To achieve the required level of civic participation, reformers must gain the trust of the people and convince them that their participation could make a lot of difference. Moreover, wide availability of information is essential to inspire citizen participation in government. And then, of course, procedures need to be in place in order for allegations, comments, and proposals to be received.

The first task then, convincing civil society and concerned citizens that their involvement is worth their time, effort, and money, was perhaps the single biggest challenge our administration faced when we took over the municipal government of Athens in January 2011. Two separate instances in the first months of our administration’s first term established the Mayor’s reformist and anticorruption credentials. First, in March 2011, the Mayor decided to drastically downsize the municipal radio station—an outlet that was used by previous administrations in order to have journalists who worked with major news organizations essentially on their payroll. The contracts of journalists who were working a second job in other radio stations, or in television, newspapers, or magazines, would not be renewed. Curiously enough, it was the attack launched against the Mayor by the displeased journalists that created a very negative backlash against them and led people to realize that the Mayor was not afraid to fight against powerful media interests.

A couple of months later, in June 2011, a businessman came to the Mayor’s Office and alleged that the President of the Board of a municipal agency, a personal appointee of the Mayor who was elected with their ticket, had sought a bribe for the awarding of a public contract. The incident was immediately referred to the Internal Affairs division of the Greek Police. When charges were pressed and made public, many people close to the Mayor feared that the Mayor had acted hastily and should have somehow shielded the case and his appointee—and that the corruption charges would have a spillover effect on him personally. However, what actually happened was that this firm stance against an incident of possible corruption (the appointee in question was eventually cleared of all charges) was appreciated by the public—it showed that the Mayor was willing to risk his stature, his clean image, if that is what was required to deal effectively with corruption.

After people started noticing what was going on in the municipal government, we had to give them something to actually observe: online information. A law that had been passed a few months before we took over mandated that all governmental bodies should publish all their decisions, especially those of a financial nature, online. While most public entities were trying to find ways to bypass this information, we went the opposite direction: we started posting online not only individual expenses, but the execution of the municipal budget in real time. People could check, on a line-by-line basis, what we were spending and what we were receiving. Similarly, we worked to provide easily searchable data concerning our hot-button issues, namely building permits and violations and bar and restaurant licensing. We wanted people to know that, with a couple of clicks on their computer or their tablet, they could access any information connected to the municipal administration.

Furthermore, we did not want people only to observe, but to actively participate in the workings of city government, especially in processes where a high level of transparency was required. We encouraged citizens and groups to engage in public consultations when drafting city ordinances for the licensing of bars and restaurants; propositions for changes in zoning; and in specifications for public contracts, ensuring that they would not be tailored to favor a specific candidate. We found that the feedback we gained from these consultations turned out to be very useful. To a great extent, we found ourselves incorporating it in the final results of the consultations.
It turned out that the participants took notice and appreciated that their input had been used. This cemented our administration's relation with concerned individuals and citizen groups. Finally, we are utilizing CRM (customer relationship management) software in order to provide a platform for filing a complaint, an allegation, a suggestion, or a proposal, enabling citizens filing the entry to track down its course: they can see which department it has reached, which employee it has been assigned to, and when. We have also made it very clear that, if citizens wish to allege any form of corruption, they can do so by going directly to the Mayor's office, where the confidentiality of their complaint will be respected. We are currently working on a new platform to receive allegations for low-level corruption, without the requirement that they go through the Mayor's office, which many people might find intimidating.

It seems that engaging the public has worked for our administration so far. The Mayor has been able to brand himself as one of the few active politicians who does not tolerate corruption and who welcomes and encourages citizen participation in the processes of government. Our online budget observation platform has been made mandatory by law for all public institutions. The participation of concerned citizens and their groups in our public consultations has soared; a recent public consultation on the way a municipal building should be restored drew almost 400 proposals, whereas no more than 10 or 20 people would bother to show any interest in the past. And, last but not least, the Mayor's reelection in May 2014, against candidates fielded by national parties that would claim the top three spots in the elections for the European Parliament, held simultaneously was achieved probably due to his image as a corruption fighter and his engagement of the public.

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