Common Integrity Challenges in Human Resource Management: The Case of Local Government in Albania

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Abstract: Corruption is a challenge to democratic governance, sustainable development, and the strengthening of citizens' trust in public institutions. In recent years, the literature has put more focus on the importance of a value-based approach to preventing corruption in the first place, rather than a compliance-based approach focused on rules and their enforcement once corruption has occurred. Both approaches are not exclusive, and there is a need for their fusion or combination. Albania, in line with international standards, has in recent years adopted integrity plans for central institutions and local government units. These plans are educational and preventive instruments against corruption, through which the leadership and the staff identify integrity risks and draw up a plan of measures to minimize them within three years. While integrity plans are personalized for each institution, they can also be useful at the policy level, since some of the challenges of integrity can be similar or the same in several institutions. This study analyzes the integrity plans of 16 municipalities in Albania to identify common challenges of integrity in the field of human resources. The field of human resources is extremely important, as it is directly related to employee support and administration, as well as the management of internal processes that affect the efficiency and integrity of the municipality.

Keywords: Public Integrity, Integrity Plan, Human Resources, Local Government, Albania

Introduction

Public integrity in recent years has been considered a new approach and the most effective response to curbing corruption, since the traditional approach based on setting more rules and enforcing them has proved ineffective (OECD, 2020). Public integrity, according to OECD (2017), "refers to the consistent alignment of, and adherence to, shared ethical values, principles and norms for upholding and prioritising the public interest over private interests in the public sector." Other studies emphasize the advantages of a value-based approach in comparison with a compliance-based one. According to Paine (1994, p. 111), a compliance-based approach that merely aims to avoid legal sanctions fails to address the underlying causes of misconduct. Meanwhile, if public officials act with integrity, it is unnecessary to anticipate every possible form of misconduct through laws and regulations (Heywood & Rose, 2015). The integrity strategy holds that moral misconduct within an organization can be prevented only when its members have internalized moral principles (Dubbink, 2015, p. 8). Thus, integrity aims to prevent misbehavior rather than react by punishing it after it has occurred. This does not mean that the compliance strategy is obsolete. Other studies stress the importance of fusing both approaches or of finding the right equilibrium in combining them (Heywood et al., 2017; Lewis & Gilman, 2005).

The combination of both approaches began in Albania in 2020. Albania has experience in the compliance approach. It has ratified the anti-corruption conventions and has an extensive legal framework for ethics and good governance. Active and passive corruption constitute criminal offences, and special structures have been established in the justice system to combat them. However, beyond the punitive approach, in line with international developments, in recent years many of the preventive instruments for curbing corruption in Albania have focused on public integrity through the adoption of integrity plans. Integrity Plans (IP) "should be understood as an educational and preventive instrument and as a strategic and administrative document that relies on the results of the integrity risk assessment

process for all work processes in the institution" (Dhoga & Sulstarova, 2022, p. 6). The goal is to promote an ethical culture within the institution by using various qualitative and quantitative methods to identify integrity risks in general or in specific areas of the institution's activities, leading to a three-year strategic plan drafted by the employees themselves with concrete measures to reduce those risks. Through this process, the leadership and staff of the institution create awareness of ethical shortcomings and risks and become promoters of change (Dhoga & Sulstarova, 2025). Involving the staff in the process of assessing the situation, identifying strategies for changing it, and being responsible for its implementation creates better communication and builds ownership in the change process (Denhard et al., 2020, p. 520). Although Integrity Plans are personalized for each institution, often the risks they face are similar or the same. Thus, Integrity Plans can also help provide common solutions to common integrity challenges at the policy or legislative level. On the other hand, making integrity plans public increases the accountability of institutions to citizens and civil society as a prerequisite for good governance.

This paper will analyze the findings of Integrity Plans in sixteen municipalities out of a total of 61 in Albania, with a primary focus on common risks in the field of human resources. Since safeguards are often weaker than at the national level, local authorities can be more vulnerable to risks of corruption (Meijers, 2019, p. 4). Local officials are part of smaller communities, which places them at a greater risk of conflicts of interest in their decision-making. Additionally, their remuneration is often lower than at the national level, and there may be inadequate mechanisms to hold them accountable (Transparency International, 2015).

Common Challenges of Integrity in Human Resource Management

Integrity Plans have shown that municipalities in Albania struggle with limited human and budgetary resources, lack transparency in their activities, and are far from engaging citizens in their decision-making. Furthermore, local officials often have insufficient knowledge of integrity mechanisms and anti-corruption measures (Rusi, 2022). Local government units also have gaps in approving codes of conduct. Of the 61 municipalities, 18% lack a code of conduct, and in 21% of cases, ethical rules apply only to a specific municipal body, such as the council, while a general ethics regulation is missing (Çani, 2022).

This study will analyze in more detail integrity risks in the field of human resource management in 16 municipalities. Human resources are particularly important, as they are directly related to employee support and administration, as well as the management of internal processes that affect the efficiency and integrity of the municipality. A sound human resource management system is pivotal in preventing and mitigating corruption (Eldiana & Prahyawan, 2025). Employees of local government units in Albania are subject to the provisions of Law No. 152/2013 on civil servants (Article 2), which aims to create a sustainable, professional civil service based on merit, moral integrity, and political impartiality (Article 1). However, the mere existence of the law, if not properly implemented, would be of little value in fighting corruption (Meyer-Sahling & Mikkelsen, 2016).

Meritocratic recruitment is considered "the most important bureaucratic feature for deterring corruption," since elected officials and merit-recruited personnel can monitor each other (Dahlström et al., 2012, p. 666). Every year, local government units are required to approve an admission plan for their civil service (Law No. 152/2013, Article 18) and conduct open competitions based on merit (Law No. 152/2013, Article 22). However, municipalities face risks related to adherence to meritocratic criteria in the recruitment and promotion of their staff, as well as the misapplication of legislation governing the civil service in general. From the analysis of the integrity plans, it appears that municipalities still do not fully implement the legislation on civil service and lack a clear definition of employees who exercise public functions but occupy positions that should be part of the civil service according to the provisions of the Labor Code (PI Roskovec 2023-2026; PI Belsh 2022-2025;

PI Has 2022-2025; PI Kukës 2022-2025). Furthermore, some municipalities do not demonstrate transparency in the recruitment process by failing to publicly announce vacancies (PI Tirana 2022-2025; PI Kukës 2022-2025). Additionally, municipalities have not consistently applied competitive criteria in the career advancement of their employees within the civil service (PI Bulqizë 2022-2024; PI Has 2022-2025; PI Kukës 2022-2025).

Civil servants should be assessed every six months for their work performance (DCM 109/2014), and a positive result is important for their career advancement within the civil service (DCM 242/2015). Performance management "should be transparent and based on clear and objective criteria, to limit the managers' discretion" (Chêne, 2015, p. 6). Performance criteria support meritocracy in two ways: by determining if the employee is fit for the current position and by assessing an employee's potential for future career advancement (OECD, 2020, p. 108). However, one of the most frequently encountered risks in Albanian municipalities is a lack of awareness of the importance of a merit-based appraisal system and its limited translation into decision-making for career development, salary step advancement, and the identification of training and professional development needs, effectively turning performance management into a purely formal process (PI Belsh 2022-2025; PI Berat 2021-2024; PI Bulqizë 2022-2024; PI Has 2022-2025; PI Kavajë 2022-2025; PI Kukës 2022-2025; PI Maliq 2022-2025; PI Pukë 2022-2025; PI Roskovec 2023-2026; PI Shijak 2022-2025). Other risks related to performance management have been identified due to the exclusion of additional tasks assigned to civil servants by the heads of municipalities from the assessment process (PI Përmet 2021-2024; PI Pogradec 2022-2025; PI Pukë 2022-2025).

A meritocratic civil service requires staff stability and clear procedures for staff dismissals. Integrity plans, however, show that some municipalities have undergone frequent restructuring, thereby changing the job positions of their staff or jeopardizing their very sustainability within the civil service (PI Tirana 2022-2025; PI Pogradec 2022-2025; PI Maliq 2022-2025). Also, the provisions of the law have not been reflected in the internal regulations of municipalities. The internal regulatory framework, which forms the basis of human resource management, remains incomplete, is not updated with changes in the municipal structure, and lacks clearly defined lines of hierarchy, reporting, and accountability (PI Durrës 2021-2024; PI Has 2022-2025; PI Himarë 2022-2025; PI Kavajë 2022-2025; PI Kukës 2022-2025; PI Maliq 2022-2025). This creates ambiguity regarding the duties and responsibilities of employees and can lead to excessive discretion by management in all aspects of human resource management, from recruitment criteria and performance assessment to job termination. Subsequently, the purpose of the Civil Servant Law has often not been implemented, has been improperly applied, or has been misrepresented at the local government level in Albania (Dhoga, 2022).

Integrity risks are not always voluntary. They can sometimes depend on external or structural factors that influence the performance of municipal staff. The analyzed municipalities, especially small or peripheral ones, often encounter risks related to staff shortages, which lead to the overloading of existing staff with additional tasks, increasing the risks of legal and procedural non-compliance and affecting the quality of services provided to citizens (PI Has 2022-2025; PI Himarë 2022-2025; PI Kukës 2022-2025; PI Lezhë 2022-2024; PI Maliq 2022-2025; PI Përmet 2021-2024; PI Pukë 2022-2025; PI Shijak 2022-2025). Limited human resources make it difficult to deliver public services that meet citizens' needs while adhering to standards of transparency, good governance, and safeguarding the public interest (Rusi, 2022).

Additionally, existing staff often lack the capacity and knowledge to carry out tasks, which are not addressed through the necessary training (PI Belsh 2022-2025; PI Durrës 2021-2024; PI Has 2022-2025; PI Himarë 2022-2025; PI Kavajë 2022-2025; PI Kukës 2022-2025; PI Maliq 2022-2025; PI Përmet 2021-2024; PI Pogradec 2022-2025; PI Pukë 2022-2025).

Some of these tasks relate to public procurement, asset management, and service delivery to citizens—areas with a high risk of corruption or legal violations. Integrity plans show that staff were aware of their lack of capacity and were keen on implementing the law, but sometimes lacked the know-how to do so. Even when staff benefited from external and specialized training, there was a lack of a follow-up system to assess its impact or to maximize the knowledge gained by disseminating it to other employees through an internal knowledge-transfer plan (PI Bulqizë 2022-2024; PI Lezhë 2022-2024; PI Tiranë 2022-2025).

Implementation of Integrity Plans

In addition to their educational role, integrity plans are also a preventive tool against corruption and potential abuses within public administration. They serve the important mission of building, guiding, and managing an administration that operates based on the principles of legality and professionalism and that earns the trust of the public (Dhoga & Sulstarova, 2025). The engagement of employees in identifying integrity risks simultaneously educates them about the need for concrete measures to minimize these risks, as part of a strategic three-year plan.

While drafting an integrity plan is not a simple exercise, an even greater challenge lies in implementing the envisaged measures. Effective implementation reduces the risks of corruption, thereby preventing misconduct within the institution. However, according to monitoring reports, municipalities have faced challenges in implementing integrity plans. The calculation of the implementation rate of Integrity Plans shows that, on average, action plans have been implemented at 59% (AMVV, 2025: 9). In the field of human resources, municipalities have generally taken important measures in terms of staff training, performance evaluation, improving job descriptions, and increasing transparency in recruitment processes. There is also a positive trend towards meritocracy and professionalism, particularly in higher-risk sectors such as financial management and public service delivery (AMVV, 2025, p. 13).

Although municipalities still have much to do in implementing their integrity plans, an important aspect of these documents is their ability to adapt and be reviewed over time. They are dynamic instruments that can be improved and updated during monitoring periods, reflecting changes in risks and adapting to the evolving needs of the institution.

Conclusions

In recent years, in line with international standards, Albania has begun to combine its compliance-based approach to fighting corruption with a value-based approach through the adoption of integrity plans at both the national and local levels of government. The integrity plans aim to promote an ethical culture within institutions by using various qualitative and quantitative methodologies to identify risks in general or specific areas of the institution's activities, culminating in a three-year strategic document drafted by the employees themselves with concrete measures to mitigate these risks.

While integrity plans are personalized for each institution, they can also serve as instruments for identifying common risks faced by multiple institutions and for providing common solutions at the policy level. This study analyzed the integrity plans of 16 municipalities to identify common risks and challenges in the field of human resources. Municipalities encountered risks related to adherence to meritocratic criteria in the recruitment and promotion of staff, as well as the misapplication of legislation governing the civil service in general. Small and peripheral municipalities often face risks related to staff shortages or a lack of staff capacities in critical areas with a high risk of corruption, such as public procurement, asset management, and service delivery to citizens. For these risks, each municipality has developed an action plan to mitigate them. However, the practical implementation of integrity plans remains a significant challenge for many municipalities.

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