



*Research Article*

# Measuring Municipal Transparency in the European Union: A Qualitative Analysis of Transparency Indices

**Cristina ROCHA AND Sandra CUNHA**

Universidade Politécnica do Cávado e do Ave (UPCA), Barcelos, Portugal

Correspondence should be addressed to: Cristina ROCHA; [crocha@ipca.pt](mailto:crocha@ipca.pt)

Received date:13 April 2026; Accepted date:3 August 2026; published date: 10 September 2026

Copyright © 2026. Cristina ROCHA AND Sandra CUNHA. Distributed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International CC-BY 4.0

## Abstract

Transparency is a fundamental principle of contemporary public governance, contributing to accountability, citizen participation, and the strengthening of trust in public institutions. Despite its growing relevance in local governments, there remains a void of comparative studies on the instruments used to assess municipal transparency in the different Member States of the European Union (EU). This gap hinders comparisons between local governments, limits the identification of good practices, and restricts the development of harmonized evaluation models.

In this context, the present study aims to identify the tools for measuring municipal transparency in EU Member States with representation from Transparency International and to determine whether a common index for assessing local government transparency exists across the European Union. To this study, a qualitative approach, of an exploratory and descriptive nature, was adopted, based on a comparative analysis of the transparency assessment instruments existing in EU countries with representation from Transparency International.

The results reveal heterogeneity in municipal transparency assessment practices. Although 23 of the 27 Member States have representation from Transparency International, only ten have specific instruments for assessing transparency at the local level. There are also significant differences in territorial coverage and the frequency of assessments. It was concluded that there is currently no common model for evaluating the transparency of local governments in the EU. This fragmentation makes it difficult to compare municipalities and highlights the need to develop common evaluation models that promote the sharing of good practices and the improvement of local governance.

**Keywords:** Transparency; Municipal Transparency Index; Municipalities; Local Governments

## Introduction

In the 80s and 90s of the twentieth century, there was a worldwide movement of reforms in public management in most countries. International organizations, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank, were important in stimulating this global trend, by disseminating the anglo-american experience and promoting similar reforms in several countries (Pina, Torres and Royo, 2007). EU governments supported the fundamental principles of these reforms, the vision of which includes the need to improve the effectiveness of public management, intensify control and accountability. The changes introduced by the doctrine of the New Public Management in the 90s led to the emergence of fundamental concepts, including transparency and citizen involvement, with the aim of increasing trust in the government (Pina, Torres and Royo, 2007).

Transparency emerges as an essential requirement to overcome the current challenges of public management, allowing the creation of governance aligned with the aspirations of society. It allows the link between key issues for public administration, namely participation, accountability and democracy (Lima and Brandão, 2020). Transparency is therefore crucial for citizens to better understand government policies, strengthen public trust, reduce corruption and hold politicians accountable for their decisions and solutions. Consequently, transparency has played a central role in public management accountability procedures (Tejedo-Romero and Araújo, 2018). For Guillamón, Bastida and Benito (2011), transparency is a crucial component to supervise public administration and control political powers efficiently.

On the other hand, initiatives such as the Open Government Partnership and Transparency International, among others, seek to assess transparency through the development of rankings. This has enabled several countries to put transparency policies into practice through the approval of access to information laws (Tejedo-Romero, Rodrigues and Araújo, 2023). In addition, high standards of transparency and its appropriate measurement contribute to increasing the accountability of government officials and are essential to foster the improvement of governance (Hood and Heald,

2006). To this end, several international organisations have developed indicators to measure the level of transparency, both at national and local levels.

Despite the growing proliferation of transparency indices and assessment tools developed by national and international organizations, the literature continues to present limited knowledge about their characteristics, coverage, and applicability in the context of local governments in the European Union. Generally, there is a lack of comparative studies that systematize the different instruments used by Member States and that allow the assessment of the existence of common criteria for evaluating municipal transparency.

This gap makes it difficult to compare local governments, limits the identification of good practices, and restricts the development of harmonized models for evaluating municipal transparency. In this context, it becomes relevant to analyze and compare the instruments currently used in the different Member States of the European Union, contributing to a better understanding of existing evaluation practices and to the debate about harmonizing the measurement of transparency at the local level.

## Objectives

The study of transparency at the level of Local Governments is essential to evaluate the action of governments, understand public policies and ensure effective accountability (Tejedo-Romero and Araújo, 2021). The literature shows that there are several practices of transparency policies, which vary from municipality to municipality (Tavares and da Cruz, 2020), but that appropriate instruments have not yet been developed to measure and make comparisons of transparency performance in governments (da Cruz *et al.*, 2016).

This study aims to contribute to the knowledge about the measurement of transparency at the level of local governance, analyzing the reality of EU countries, having as a starting point the chapters of Transparency International, since this entity is widely recognized in the study of transparency and the perception of corruption.

Thus, the objective of this study is to identify the tools for measuring municipal transparency in EU Member States that have national chapters of Transparency International and that have a local transparency assessment index to determine

whether there is a local government transparency assessment index common to all EU Member States.

### Methodology

To achieve the proposed objectives, this study adopted a qualitative approach, developing an exploratory and descriptive study focused on the comparative analysis of the content of the transparency assessment indices of the EU Member States that have representation of Transparency International and was based on the content analysis of the official websites available of Transparency International of the 27 EU Member States.

The selection of European Union member states is justified by the existence of a common political and legal framework, based on shared democratic principles and a commitment to governance models oriented towards efficiency, transparency and accountability. On the other hand, Transparency International is one of the leading international organizations in the field of transparency, public integrity, and corruption prevention. With a presence in over one hundred countries and representation in 23 European Union member states, Transparency International offers a relevant context for conducting comparative analyses on the assessment of transparency in local government.

Data collection took place between November 2024 and March 2025, through consultation of the official websites of Transparency International and supplementary documentation provided by the respective national organizations. Reports, methodologies, and other documents related to municipal transparency assessment instruments were also analyzed. The information collected focused on the designation of indices, application periods, methodologies adopted, dimensions and indicators considered, information sources used, and the number of municipalities covered by the respective assessments.

### Theoretical Framework

The concept of transparency has been widely discussed in recent literature and relates to many other concepts, such as open government and freedom of information (Tavares and da Cruz, 2020). Together with other fundamental principles and values, transparency is seen as a crucial foundation of good governance (Tavares and da Cruz, 2020). It is a necessary condition in a healthy democracy that promotes the fight against corruption.

Transparency in public administration derives from institutions, their policies and their practices for providing information that aims to improve the understanding of public policies and increase policy efficiency (Guillamón, Bastida and Benito, 2011). According to Neto, Cruz and Vieira (2007) and Rodrigues (2020), transparency has often been mentioned as a way to solve various government problems, such as corruption, inefficiency and poor performance, because important, understandable, credible and timely information about the activities and decisions of political actors is made public (Oliveira and Ckagnazaroff, 2022). Garrido-Rodríguez *et al.* (2022) argue that transparency is seen as a fundamental component for building trust in governments and for their accountability, which translates into the ability of all public institutions to promote accessibility to all data.

As local governments are a power of proximity, the measurement of local transparency is essential to evaluate the performance of government officials, understand public policies and for politicians to be accountable (Tejedo-Romero and Araújo, 2021). Relations between local governments and citizens are crucial for local representative democracy. Measures that promote transparency can improve the relationship between local governments and citizens and also show interest in their needs (Tejedo-Romero and Araújo, 2021). Information and communication technologies have enabled the creation of structures for disseminating public data through online websites, with facilitated accessibility that, by that way, supports the implementation of transparency regulations and increases public demand. In this context, it is crucial to analyze the functioning of public organizations regarding the transparency of these websites, and, by other hand, it is necessary to study the patterns of action of local governments in disseminating information (Zafra-Gómez *et al.*, 2025). In this sense, it is possible to measure transparency based on the websites of the municipalities, as the information made available online has several advantages (Tavares and da Cruz, 2020). Several international organizations, such as the Transparency International, the OECD, the International Budget Partnership, have developed methods to measure the scope of the information made available by public authorities on their websites, specifically through the elaboration of indexes or rankings (Tejedo-Romero and Araújo, 2021). Since the 90s of the twentieth century, several initiatives have been carried out to evaluate access to information.

There are multiple measures and indices of transparency that evaluate numerous angles of the government's openness. These actions cover several groups of countries, analyze several areas of government transparency and use various indicators and methods (Coronel, 2012).

The elaboration and comparison of transparency indices promote the discussion on the performance and administration of public entities, leading to the opening of a fundamental concept of governance (Tejedo-Romero and Araújo, 2021). Hood and Heald (2006) argue that high standards of transparency and their appropriate measurement contribute to the promotion of government accountability and are crucial to promote the quality of governance. On the other hand, the dissemination of a ranking of local governments has the purpose of pressuring society and encouraging municipal governments to improve their ways of communication and relationship with the population, in order to achieve transparent governance, involvement with the population and with accountability (da Cruz *et al.*, 2016).

## Results

The results of the study show that, among the 27 EU Member States, 23 countries are represented by Transparency International. However, only ten (Austria, Bulgaria, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Slovakia, Spain and Portugal) have transparency assessment tools at local government level. In addition, only four countries (Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania and Portugal) assess the transparency of all their municipalities. In the remaining countries, the existing indices cover only a very small fraction of the universe of local governments (less than 4%).

As regards the frequency of publication of the indices, there is also an uneven practice. The data indicate that six countries did so consecutively (Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, and Portugal), while four countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Spain) carried out their evaluations of their municipalities interspersedly.

The results reveal a diversity in the approaches adopted by the different instruments for evaluating municipal transparency, reflected in the territorial coverage, the frequency of evaluations, and the methodologies used.

## Conclusions

Our study shows that there is so far no tool that can be used at a global level to assess the transparency of local governments within the EU. The lack of this instrument makes it impossible to compare local governments, hindering the identification of good practices and the monitoring of municipal performance in terms of transparency.

The analysis shows that the transparency evaluation of local governments carried out by these analysed countries is not uniform over time, which shows a lack of predictability in the assessment of transparency at the local level, as well as does not have a uniform territorial coverage, thus also making it difficult to compare among countries. This lack of common criteria and consistent practices makes it difficult to have an integrated view on measuring the transparency of local governments in the EU context.

In addition to the differences identified in territorial coverage and the frequency of assessments, a significant diversity was also observed in the approaches adopted by the different instruments for measuring municipal transparency. This result reinforces the lack of uniform evaluation criteria and highlights the difficulty in making comparisons between local governments in different countries.

In this context, it is concluded that there is still a significant path to be traversed in the field of evaluating the transparency of local governments in the European Union. Future investigations could deepen the comparative analysis of the identified instruments, namely through the study of the dimensions and indicators used, contributing to the reflection on the development of harmonized models for evaluating municipal transparency.

## References

- Coronel, S. (2012) "Medindo a Abertura: Uma pesquisa sobre classificações de transparência e as perspectivas para um índice global." Available at: [http://www.freedominfo.org/wp-includes/js/tinymce/plugins/paste/paste-word.htm?ver=349-21274#\\_edn1](http://www.freedominfo.org/wp-includes/js/tinymce/plugins/paste/paste-word.htm?ver=349-21274#_edn1).
- da Cruz, N., Tavares, A., Marques, R., Jorge, S. and Sousa, L. (2016) "Measuring Local Government Transparency," *Public Management Review*, 18(6), pp. 866–893.

- Available at:  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2015.1051572>.
- Garrido-Rodríguez, J.-C., Garrido-Montañés, M., López-Pérez, G. and Zafra-Gómez, E. (2022) "The Importance of Measuring Local Governments' Information Disclosure: Comparing Transparency Indices in Spain," *Sustainability*, 14(20), p. 13081. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/su142013081>.
  - Guillamón, M.D., Bastida, F. and Benito, B. (2011) "The Determinants of Local Government's Financial Transparency," *Local Government Studies*, 37(4), pp. 391–406. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2011.588704>.
  - Hood, C. and Heald, D. (2006) "Transparency: The Key to Better Governance?," *Transparency The Key to Better Governance?*, pp. 1–246. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5871/BACAD/9780197263839.001.0001>.
  - Lima, C. and Brandão, P. (2020) *Transparência no Campo da Administração Pública*. Available at: [www.cgu.gov.br](http://www.cgu.gov.br).
  - Neto, O., Cruz, F. and Vieira, A. (2007) "Publicidade e Transparência das Contas Públicas: obrigatoriedade e abrangência desses princípios na administração pública brasileira," *Contab. Vista & Rev.*, 18(1), pp. 75–94.
  - Oliveira, D. and Ckagnazaroff, I. (2022) "A Transparência como um princípio-chave de Governo Aberto," *Administração Pública e Gestão Social* [Preprint]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.21118/APGS.V14I3.13300>.
  - Pina, V., Torres, L. and Royo, S. (2007) "Are ICTs improving transparency and accountability in the EU regional and local governments? An empirical study," *Public Administration*, 85(2), pp. 449–472. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9299.2007.00654.x>.
  - Rodrigues, K.F. (2020) "Desvelando o conceito de transparência: seus limites, suas variedades e a criação de uma tipologia," *Cadernos EBAPE.BR*, 18(2), pp. 237–253. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1590/1679-395173192>.
  - Tavares, A. and da Cruz, N. (2020) "Explaining the transparency of local government websites through a political market framework," *Government Information Quarterly*, 37(3), p. 101249. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.GIQ.2017.08.005>.
  - Tejedo-Romero, F. and Araújo, J.F.F.E. (2021) "Análisis comparado de la política de transparencia en los municipios Ibéricos," *Revista Espanola de Documentacion Cientifica*, 44(4). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3989/redc.2021.4.1790>.
  - Tejedo-Romero, F. and de Araujo, J.F.F.E. (2018) "Determinants of Local Governments' Transparency in Times of Crisis: Evidence From Municipality-Level Panel Data," *Administration and Society*, 50(4). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095399715607288>.
  - Tejedo-Romero, F., Rodrigues, M. and Araujo, J.F.F.E. (2023) "How far is municipal transparency from neighbours? Evidence from Spain and Portugal," *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, 36(3), pp. 193–215. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPSM-01-2022-0026>.
  - Zafra-Gómez, J., Olmo, J.C., Garrido-Rodríguez, J. and López-Hernández, A.M. (2025) "The Politics of Transparency: Analyzing Online Information Disclosure in Spanish Municipalities," *Politics & Policy*, 53(3). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.70043>.