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СТРУГА



## Analysis of the current practices of using the mechanisms for consultations with the citizens in public policy making on local level and its effectiveness

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## **Glossary of Acronyms Used in the Analysis**

BS – Business Sector  
CSO – Civil Society Organization  
DUP – Detailed Urban Plan  
EU – European Union  
FG – Focus Group  
FRLZ – Local Community Development Foundation - Stip  
GUP - General Urban Plan  
LED – Local Economic Development  
LGU - Local Government Unit  
LSG – Local Self-government  
MOU – Memorandum of Understanding  
NU – Neighbourhood unit  
OECD – Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development  
OFA – Ohrid Framework Agreement  
ToR – Terms of Reference

## Executive Summary

Consultation with citizens is main prerequisite for practicing a participatory and transparent good governance. It is based on the idea of citizens improving their own life by means of own ideas and participation and the administration developing accountable local governance that can be trusted.

Basic forms of consultation with citizens are elaborated in legal documents adopted in the country at both national and local level. Yet, there is no restriction on the methods that local governments can use to solicit citizens input for all issues within their competences. This analysis is an attempt to provide insight into current status of practices utilized by local governments in the country in general.

The analysis looks at the extent and different dimensions of the mechanism for citizen participation focusing primarily on local government representatives' and citizens' perceptions on the issue as well on their experiences and what strategies they have at their disposal to deal with the process of consultations. It also look at the effects of these tools.

The findings are based on the results from 412 interviews with citizens from different regions of the country, 32 structured interviews with relevant stakeholders (Mayors and municipal Councilors) from all 8 regions in Macedonia and 8 regional focus groups (CSOs, journalists, businesses, etc.) with 105 participants.

The analysis shows that there is a general perception among the citizens that the local governments are making efforts to consult citizens. This effort is stronger and more effective when it comes to informing the public about the work of the municipality. In that regard municipalities use all means available to them to spread information about the (usually positive aspects of the) work of the Mayors and most citizens have a general picture of what their local government is doing.

When it comes to including citizens as equal partners in decision-making process the situation is somewhat challenging. Both citizens and local governments have at their disposal tools and mechanisms laid out in the legal documents yet they refrain from using them. Again both sides see these mechanisms difficult to utilize due to the legally binding procedures which they need to include. As a consequence, citizens rarely initiate them while local governments use them selectively and devoid of their legally binding features meaning that they use them in a simplified and adapted mode. Thus referendum, civil initiative and citizens gathering are almost never used as tools for consultation in the prescribed format.

Citizens mostly prefer direct contact with decision-makers. Local government representatives also acknowledge this approach and see it as most useful and hence public gatherings, usually within neighborhood units, are by far the most frequent forms of consultation with citizens as well as direct meetings with local authorities at open days or public hearings. In addition to the legally offered tools and mechanisms both citizens and local government utilize other forms of consultation such as community forums, social media (Facebook, Twitter) and websites (forums) usually initiated by donors and CSOs.

The budget, the development of urban plans as well as capital investments are the topics which citizens are most interested to know about as well as communal issues and local infrastructure. Local government representatives acknowledge this yet very often their consultation with citizens on these

topics is superficial and serving as alibi for authorities that they are performing and achieving results. CSOs feel that local authorities mostly involve citizens in cases where they have direct benefit such as applying for donor funding or capitalizing on CSO expertise when developing various thematic strategies (for LED, environment, gender equality etc.)

Citizens on the other hand show a very low level of participation. Majority of citizens have not approached their local government for any issues of their concern as was pointed out by both the poll results and by the Mayors and Councilors. This can be directly linked to the effects of the participation and decision to take action. It is worrisome that pressure from citizens groups and CSOs very rarely yields results which are favored by citizens. It happens frequently that the results are completely opposite of what has been agreed by citizens and decision-makers. This in turns demotivates people to be active and to initiate change.

Mayors and CSOs consider the legally offered tools and mechanisms for consulting citizens as not sufficiently adapted to reality, such as conditions for organizing referendum for example, and appeal for overcoming weaknesses and loopholes in the system.

Due to the fact that citizen participation is multifaceted, the approach in dealing with this complex issue requires a variety of actions. This includes refining existing legislation, defining additional tools, educating citizens on their rights and available tools as well as motivating their use.

The analysis provides a set of recommendations for different stakeholders in order to deal with the issue of citizen participation at municipal level.

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## Introduction

Involving the citizens in the decision making processes on local level is closely connected with the decentralization. Successful decentralization demands high level of participation of the local community in these processes. Local authorities oriented towards effective communication with the citizens are in a position to better serve the needs of the citizens and focus on “real” priorities thus effectively utilizing municipal budgets. This is why the communication between the local authorities and the citizens must be practiced through institutional mechanisms which can be changed and improved. For the citizens it is an opportunity to get involved and influence issues which directly impact their everyday life, and for the authorities, opportunity for building support for their ideas and gaining new innovative ways of problem solving.

Any attempt to bring the topic of citizen participation to the forefront of public policies that aim to improve existing participation mechanisms or to propose new one in general must have as its foundation a solid framework of both quantitative and qualitative data. With this in mind, the goal of this analysis was to collect information that will assess the current situation regarding the practices of local governments in consulting citizens in order to inform the design of future interventions for improving these mechanisms and increase participatory democracy in Macedonia. The analysis will also provide insight into the use of the existing tools by both citizens and local authorities, the effects of their use and as such will provide data which can contribute to a wider public debate on the issue and legal changes. It can also serve as a tool for lobbying the municipalities for introducing new and different tools for consultations.

The specific objectives of the analysis are the following:

1. To analyse the situation regarding the current mechanisms for consultation with citizens in the process of public policy making on local level;
2. To facilitate discussion among local stakeholders (LGUs, CSOs, BS);
3. To stimulate sharing and replication of good practices for mechanisms for consultations among LGUs;
4. To lobby at LGUs for institutionalization of the proposed mechanisms.

These objectives are in line with the EU commitment to support and promote democracy and human rights by enhancing participatory and representative democracy, strengthening the overall democratic cycle, in particular by reinforcing an active role for civil society within this cycle, and the rule of law. This topic is closely linked to the European Union enlargement process, in terms of its membership, as well as its expansion in terms of its competences. In this context the idea of direct citizen participation in European policy-making has become both more important and more challenging. Many decisions are being taken at a level directly affecting over 500 million persons within complex EU institutional arrangements.

## The Macedonian Legal Context

In compliance with Article 2 of the Constitution<sup>1</sup> of the Republic of Macedonia, the sovereignty of the state emanates from the citizens and belongs to the citizens. They practise government through directly elected representatives, through referendum and other forms of direct representation. In addition, Article 9 states that all citizens have equal freedoms and rights, irrespective of their sex, race, color, national and social background, political and religious conviction, wealth and social status. Generally, the Constitution provides the basic framework within which the citizens can articulate their rights linked to free expression and influence on legislation.

Citizen participation and decentralization are closely linked together. A successful decentralization process requires participation of the local community in the decision making process. Local governments which are oriented toward their citizens and in continuous communication with them are in position to better address local needs and manage public expenses more efficiently. On the other hand, the process of decentralization increases opportunities for inclusion of citizens in the processes of policy creation and decision-making. Hence, the exchange between the local government and the citizens needs to be practised through institutional mechanism which can be modified and improved over time.

Macedonia is a decentralized state as a result of the Law on Local Self-government<sup>2</sup> adopted in 2002 which followed after the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement<sup>3</sup> (OFA) in 2001. This Law establishes the legal framework for organizing the system of local self-government in the country and provides the general guidelines for functioning of the units of local self-government. With this Law a number of competences were transferred from central government level to the local government. Local self-governments became responsible for urban planning, environmental protection, local economic development, communal issues, culture, social and child protection, education, primary health protection, crisis management and fire protection. These responsibilities required the establishment of a number of services offered to the citizens, thus making the communication between the municipal authorities and the citizens an important and ever-more pressing issue.

The direct participation of citizens is defined as individual or collective involvement of the inhabitants of the municipality in decision-making regarding issues of local importance in different levels of decision-making. The citizens can directly participate in the decision-making process through several mechanism laid out in the Law. The expenses for execution of the direct participation of the citizens in the decision-making process should be covered from the municipal budget.

The Law itself prescribes the following forms of citizens' participation:

- Civil initiative;
- Citizens' Gatherings;
- Referendum;
- Appeals and Proposals; and
- Public Hearings, Surveys and Proposals.

A separate law, the Law on referendum and other forms of direct participation<sup>4</sup> lays out the procedure for announcing and implementing referendum, civil initiative and citizens gathering. It practically

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<sup>1</sup> Constitution of Republic of Macedonia, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Law on Local Self-government, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Ohrid Framework Agreement, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Law on referendum, 2005.



regulates the mechanism for implementing the citizens' initiatives regardless whether they refer to issues of national or local importance. In this context the area for activating the mechanism for wide citizens input for issues of state policy as well as current local issues is extremely all-encompassing, so many issues can be put on a test and re-examined. Local level referendum is initiated by the municipal council for issues that fall within its competence upon its own initiative or the request of at least 20% of the citizens in the municipality. The decision adopted on the referendum is binding for the council.

This type of referendum can be set up for adoption of legislation, for issues that have to be determined within the municipality, for re-assessing an adopted regulation or for issues not regulated by legislation. Decisions are considered adopted if are voted by the majority of the total number of citizens that voted if more than half of the registered voters in the election list cast a ballot. Based on the decisions the municipal council is obliged within 60 days of the announcement of the referendum results to regulate the issue in accordance with the results obtained.

In order to use the civil initiative tool it needs to be supported by at least 10% of the voters in the municipality, that is, of the neighbourhood self-government to which a certain issue refers. Then the municipal council is obliged to discuss the proposal at the latest 90 days after the raising of the initiative and to inform the citizens on its decision. The civil initiative is defined as a form of direct expression of citizens in decision-making by initiating initiatives in front of the Parliament and the municipal councils. This initiative can be started for submitting a proposal for changes in Constitution, proposing adoption of law and initiating referendum at state level. It can also be used for initiating and adopting certain legislation of the municipalities and starting a referendum at local level.

The citizens gathering can be convened by the mayor of the municipality upon his/her own initiative, at the request of the council or at the request of at least 10% of the voters in the municipality, that is in the neighbourhood self-government that a certain issue relates to. In this case, the Mayor is due within 30 days of receiving the initiative to organize the gathering. Also the municipal bodies are obliged within 90 days to review the conclusions made at the citizens' gathering and to take them into account when making decisions and determining measures on issues they relate to, and to inform the citizens on their decisions. The citizens gathering is a form of direct expression of citizens in decision-making of local importance and the neighbourhood units to which an issue refers. It can be used for expressing citizens' view on particular issues of importance of the neighbourhood unit and for initiating initiatives for resolving issues of local importance. At this type of gathering, citizens living in that area review issues, take positions and prepare proposals regarding topics of direct and everyday importance on the life and work in the municipality or neighbourhood unit.

Every citizen has the right, individually or jointly with others, to submit appeals and proposals regarding the work of the bodies of the municipality and the municipal administration. In that case, the Mayor has to create conditions for submission of appeals and proposals; to provide detailed reply for the appellant at the latest within 60 days after the receipt of the appeal, i.e. proposal; to submit the appeals and proposals that do not fall under municipal competence to the responsible (state) body and to inform the appellant about it.

In the course of preparation of the regulations of the municipality, the council, that is, the Mayor, may previously organize public hearings or surveys or ask for citizens' proposals.

In order to review issues and determine proposals which refer to the quality of the public municipal services the council can establish a Consumer's protection committee consisting of representatives of

the bigger groups of user of public services. The municipal statute has the role of determinant of the members, ways of their selection and field of work.

According to the Law on local-self-government the document with the highest legal power in the municipalities is the Statute. The Statute regulates the organization and operation of the municipal organs as well as other important aspects referring to citizen inclusion in decision-making such as organizing the way of informing the citizens, the cases of excluding the public from the sessions of the municipal council, appeals and proposals regarding the work of the bodies of the municipality and acting upon them, the way of organizing public hearings and carrying out surveys and collecting citizens' proposals. Every municipality can, in its Statute, propose other ways of direct citizen participation in accordance with the Constitution and this Law. Such is the example with the Statutes if 2/3 of the municipalities in Macedonia which included the "community forum"<sup>5</sup> as a tool for direct citizen participation in local decision-making.

In addition, the Law stipulates that the council sessions are public and presence of the public is not to be excluded at the debate on the municipal budget, annual municipal finance accounts and reports and the urban plans.

Also the law prescribes that forms of neighbourhood self-government may be established in the municipalities, such as urban units (in cities) and neighbourhood units (in other populated places). The citizens can use the urban i.e. neighbourhood units for reviewing issues, taking positions and preparing proposals for issues of direct and everyday importance for the life and work of the inhabitants of that territory. The citizens also participate in elections for council of the urban i.e. neighbourhood units.

The Mayor may delegate the performance of certain activities of direct interest and everyday importance for the life and work of the inhabitants to the president of the council of the urban i.e. neighbourhood unit, in a way determined by the statute of the municipality.

Another important legislation is the Law on free access to information<sup>6</sup>. With the adoption of this law in 2006 it is considered that the CSOs and the wider public acquired a powerful tool through which they can realize their right to information. Practically this Law provides transparency and openness in the work of the information holders and enables individuals and entities to realize their right to free access to public information. Related to the implementation of this Law is the constituting of the Commission for protection of the right to free access to information which also creates the guidelines for how to use these legal obligations.

Despite the fact that the Law on Local self-government was adopted in 2002, the real devolution of competences began on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2005, following the adoption of the Law on financing of local-government units<sup>7</sup> when the competences that were transferred from central government level to the local government received a financial backing. This law laid out the phased approach of the fiscal decentralization process and aimed to set-up financing mechanisms for the local governments based on transparent and objective criteria and measures. Besides determining the sources of income and their

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<sup>5</sup> [www.forumivozaednicata.com.mk](http://www.forumivozaednicata.com.mk)

<sup>6</sup> Law on free access to information, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Law on financing units of self-government, 2004.

purpose within the municipal budgets, the Law, in Article 32 proscribes that the municipality is obliged to prepare quarterly financial reports approved by the council and submitted to the Ministry of Finance which also are to be shared with the citizens. The same refers to the annual municipal financial reports.

The main procedure for preparation, adoption and execution of the budgets in the local self-government unit, as well as reporting, is determined in the Law on execution of budgets<sup>8</sup>. There are 7 basic principles on which the budgets of the local governments and state budget is based and transparency is one of them. In Macedonia the budgets refer to one fiscal year which is 12 months and starts on January 1<sup>st</sup> and ends with December 31<sup>st</sup>. The budget calendar is also laid out in this document and determines the whole process of budgeting at local level including the period for public debate on the budget. Article 54 stipulates that the final financial report and final account of the municipality needs to be published in the official bulletin of the municipality.

The Macedonian state had already showed its commitment to the economic, social and political proximity of its legal framework to the EU by ratifying the Council of Europe's European Charter of Local Self-government<sup>9</sup> in June 1997. The charter is based on the principle that the right of citizens to participate in the conduct of public affairs is one of the democratic principles that are shared by all member States of the Council of Europe. According to the EU accession progress report of 2015<sup>10</sup>, decentralisation, which is a basic principle of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, shows signs of stagnation with one municipality still not finalizing the second phase of fiscal decentralisation and some progress made with the adoption of the strategic decentralisation programme for 2015-2020 and its action plan.

One of the main principles the Ministry of Local Self-government laid out in the Program for sustainable local development and decentralization 2015-2020<sup>11</sup> is the principle of subsidiarity and participation is seen as a guarantee that the citizens are not only considered users of services, but also as active participants in decision-making at the local level. The Program is in line with the Europe 2020 Strategy and takes into consideration the results of the Survey of Citizens' Satisfaction with the services provided by local governments, conducted in November 2014 by the Ministry, which indicate that citizens are least satisfied with the democracy, transparency and accountability, especially in the field of information on municipal budget spending, tackling corruption and citizen participation in making strategic decisions of local importance. The Strategy for equal regional development 2009-2019<sup>12</sup> is also based on the principle of transparent and accountable local governance.

## **Citizen Participation in neighbouring EU countries**

The relevance of citizen participation in decision-making processes has been recognised in Europe and many international and intergovernmental organizations have developed documents, handbooks and models to support and strengthen this process. Even though many of these documents are not legally

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<sup>8</sup> Law on budgets, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Decree for Ratification of the European Charter for Local Self-government, 1997.

<sup>10</sup> Commission staff working document the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, report 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Program for sustainable local development and decentralization 2015-2020.

<sup>12</sup> Strategy for equal regional development 2009-2019, 2009.

binding, they set standards, principles and best practices which should be considered in initiatives on national level.

In 2001, in the White Paper on European Governance, the European Commission highlighted five principles of “good governance”<sup>13</sup>. The principles, to be applied at all levels of government, including local and regional tiers, are openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness, and coherence.

The European Parliament adopted a resolution on the perspectives of Developing Civil Dialogue under the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009<sup>14</sup> wherein is reinforced the significance of consultation and it calls on EU institutions to adopt binding guidelines concerning the appointment of civil society representatives, methods for organizing consultations and their funding, and calls on them to maintain registers of active CSOs.

The previously mentioned European Charter of Local Self-Government is another essential document which is the first internationally binding treaty that guarantees the rights of communities and their elected authorities and establishes the principle of subsidiarity. Also, the issue of participation is addressed in several recommendations of the Council of Europe such as the Code of Good Practice<sup>15</sup> which highlights the dialogue as an active form of participation and prerequisite for collaborative relationship. It requires “*a two-way communication built on mutual interests and potentially shared objectives to ensure a regular exchange of views.*”

OECD<sup>16</sup> on its part introduces three different levels of cooperation between citizens and authorities in formulating public policies:

**Access to information** – It is the first and fundamental right which is underlying the whole process of participation. It is a one-way process where the information flows from the authorities to the citizens. This type of interaction provides passive access to information upon demand by citizens and active measures by government to disseminate information to citizens (e.g., request for official documents, Official Gazette, internet pages of the authorities).

**Consultation** – This is a two-way relation in which the government invites the public to provide its opinion, comments, views and feedback on a specific document. It is a reactive way of participation – the public becomes involved because the government requests this (e.g., comments on the draft law or law proposals).

**Active participation** – It is a higher level of two-way relation in which citizens are actively included in proposing policy alternatives and in shaping the policy dialogue. It may be described as a situation where the representatives of the public share a seat at the table with the government representatives (e.g., strategic partnership, membership in working groups).

In the EU member countries the participation of citizens is largely influenced by two aspects: the legally binding documents and the good practices. In the old EU member states citizen participation relies more on nonbinding documents which have an extensive practice and significant effect<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> European governance - A white paper, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> European Parliament resolution of 13 January 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Civil Participation in the Decision-Making Process: The Code Of Good Practice.

<sup>16</sup> Citizens as Partners: OECD Handbook On Information, Consultation And Public Participation In Policy-Making, 2001.

<sup>17</sup> Citizen Participation, Best Practices in the Western Balkans and the European Union, 2011.

Overall participation<sup>18</sup> in Greece is quite high with nearly 47% of citizens being a member of at least one association (professional, cultural, sports, community, agricultural, etc.) or organization (political party, religious, non-governmental). Professional/labour organizations have the highest levels of participation while political participation is at 7% which is considered high percentage if one takes into account the 27 EU members states' participation rate which is 4.7%. Men traditionally have higher participation rate than women. Yet, urban centers, such as Thessaloniki and Athens<sup>19</sup> for example are starting to transform in some sort of "living laboratories" where citizens and civil society experiment taking multiple roles to cover for the changed functioning of the state and the diminishing of the welfare system as a result of the financial crisis. In that way, novel tendencies for civic engagement arise and there is increased interest on behalf of citizens to take matters into their own hands. In that sense, authors note an upsurge in academic and activist interest in small-scale citizen-led initiatives such as guerrilla gardening, social groceries, creative interventions in abandoned buildings, pop-up shops and others. The synergies are created by a variety of actors from municipalities and politicians to citizen initiatives and private companies (like restaurants, bars, etc.). The reasons cited for utilization of these methods are often the wish to intervene in the urban space without going through the traditional processes that are often bureaucratic, long-lasting and sclerotic.

Bulgaria joined the EU in 2007. The process of EU integration considerably changed the contextual environment<sup>20</sup>, adding three new dimensions: a new level of decision-making; EU leverage over domestic reforms; and new partners in decision- and policy-making, in the shape of the EU institutions. This made available new impetus for CSOs, in shaping their agenda and role in society and policy-making. The country demonstrates lack of engagement, lack of willingness to get involved, a low level of trust and 'encapsulation' within family which limit the potential for building community. The social links among citizens are weak and unsustainable; trust in public institutions and in CSOs is low. These trends result in apathy among citizens concerning CSO activities, however provide for the rise of informal civic groups which seem to have the potential to mobilise civic energy for upholding citizen interests.

Overcoming estrangement and lethargy and encouraging a continuous dialogue and partnership between civil society and decision-makers are some of the major challenges that the country has faced, whether among the politicians, citizens themselves, or the mediators of civil participation.

As stated in the National Human Development Report<sup>21</sup> the willingness of citizens to participate in the country's governance is much greater than their actual participation would indicate. The main barrier to greater citizen participation is people's doubt as to the real impact they can have on the decision-making processes and the consequent development direction. Overcoming the isolation of citizens and creating conditions for their effective interaction with the government are necessary conditions for achieving consensual governance and hence sustainable development.

## Methodology

The analysis was based on a methodology developed specifically for this analysis based on the ToR and in coordination with and approved by Local Community Development Foundation Stip. The methodology included the following:

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<sup>18</sup> Citizen participation in Greece 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Evangelia Athanassiou, 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Civil Society Index 2008–2010 Civil Society In Bulgaria: Citizen Actions Without Engagement, 2011.

<sup>21</sup> Dotcho Mihailov, 2001.

### 1. Desk-top analysis.

In order to examine the situation regarding the legislation for citizen's participation desk analysis of laws and secondary legislative was conducted as well as academic and scientific literature to inform the development of the methodology. The desk analysis covered the legal framework for citizen's participation in the public policy making on local level. The following laws were analysed: Law on Local Self-Government, Law on Financing the LGUs, Law on Budgets, etc. The desk analysis also includes information on the situation regarding citizen participation in the surrounding EU member countries.

### 2. Focus groups

Between June 7<sup>th</sup> and July 1<sup>st</sup> eight focus groups were organized and held, led by the key researcher and they included representatives of CSOs, journalists and representatives from the business sector. The focus groups were organized in eight towns in the country where the planning regions are seated (except for the Vardar region where instead of Veles the FG took place in Sveti Nikole), but covered the municipalities within the planning regions in order to have national coverage. A total of 105 participants were included in the focus group discussions of which 63 were women. All the participants were contacted via CSO networks, social media and personal connections. The focus groups were held in the premises of local civil society organizations' offices except for the focus group for the Pelagonija region which was held in a hotel. Prior to the group interviews, participants were briefed and asked to sign an informed consent and permission form. Participants were paid 1.000 denars (ca. 15 Euros) for their participation. All of the participants agreed to the terms of participation and signed the form. Sessions that lasted 120 minutes were held with each focus group, with the key researcher moderating the discussion. All discussions were audio taped and notes were taken during the interviews.

### 3. Interviews with Mayors

A total of sixteen Mayors were interviewed for the needs of this analysis in the period between April 19<sup>th</sup> and July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016. Unfortunately, the initial plan to interview eight Mayors from urban and eight Mayors from rural municipalities was not achievable as convenient appointment could not be reached with the Mayors from the urban municipalities from the Polog and Pelagonija region. Consequently they were replaced by 2 Mayors of rural municipalities. Due to the number of women mayors in the country a convenient appointment could not be reached with any of the women Mayors, hence gender misbalance is reflected in the sample.

All interviews were semi-structured and held at a place chosen as convenient by the stakeholder, which in all cases were at the offices of the interviewee. Prior to the interview, they received an information sheet and a participation consent form that was signed by all of the stakeholders. Only 1 of the 16 explicitly asked for total anonymity.

The interviews were held by the key expert and were audio recorded, except in cases where the interviewee did not give consent for recording. All interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, were in free answering format and only the topic of the conversations was determined by the interviewers. Notes were taken during and immediately after the interviews.

### 3. Interviews with Municipal Councilors

In order to ensure methodological consistency a total of sixteen councillors were interviewed instead of twelve. They represent different political parties from urban and rural municipalities. The interviews took place in the period between April 19<sup>th</sup> and July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016. Eight of them were from urban and eight from rural municipalities from all 8 regions in the country.

All interviews were semi-structured and held at a place chosen as convenient by the stakeholder, which in all but two cases were at the offices of the interviewee. Prior to the interview, they received an

information sheet and a participation consent form that was signed by all of the stakeholders. Of the 16 councilors 3 were women.

The interviews were held by the key expert and were audio recorded, except in cases where the interviewee did not give consent for recording. All interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, were in free answering format and only the topic of the conversations was determined by the interviewers. Notes were taken during and immediately after the interviews.

#### 4. Poll

In order to examine the opinion of the citizens regarding their participation in the public policy making on local level in the period 25<sup>th</sup> April - 25<sup>th</sup> May 2016 a poll was conducted covering the whole country. Nine interviewers carried out a poll of 400 citizens encompassing all 8 regions. The structure of interviewers was the following:

- 2 from Shtip covering the East planning region,
- 1 from Struga covering the Southwest planning region,
- 1 from Ohrid covering the Pelagonija planning region,
- 1 from Veles covering the Vardar planning region
- 1 from Kumanovo covering the Northeast planning region,
- 1 from Radovis covering the Southeast planning region,
- 2 from Debar covering the Polog and Skopje planning regions.

Each of them interviewed 35 citizens from urban and 15 from rural areas above the age of 18. Prior to the data collection, the interviewers were instructed on interviewing about good governance and participation in order to prepare them for their task. The interviewers approached citizens to participate in the interviews in the most frequented public spaces while some were visited in their homes.

The poll was accessible also online via Google forms and 12 persons filled it in.

The questionnaire contains closed questions, and open question will be about their ideas to improve the citizen's participation in decision making processes.

The questionnaire was validly completed with 412 respondents above the age of 16. Out of the 412 interviewed citizens 49% were female. The age was distributed in the following age groups: 5.6% were between 19 or younger at the time of the interview; 26.5% were between 20 and 29 years old; 26.9% between 30 and 39; 17.7% between 40 and 49; 17% between 50 and 66; and 6.3% were 65 or older.

In total, 302 or 73.3% of our respondents were ethnic Macedonians; 62 or 15% were ethnic Albanians. In addition to the ethnic Macedonian and ethnic Albanians, there were Roma (2.2%), Serbian (1%), Turkish (2.7%), Vlah (1.5%), Bosnian (3.6%) and other respondents (0.7%).

324 respondents came from urban and 88 from rural municipalities.

The sample had a high educational attainment, with 48% of the sample either currently in higher education or with a higher education or scientific degree. 10% of our respondents had elementary school level education and 174 or 42.2% had graduated high-school.

Most of the respondents were employed (66.3%) and 33.7% were unemployed.

## **Data Analysis**

The data from the poll was analysed with the online available Google software as well as Excel sheets. The data from the focus groups and interviews was content analyzed through free listening of the tapes; note taking and notes comparison. There were no strict restrictions to the analysis.

## **Findings of the Analysis**

### **Overall Assessment of Existing Practices for Citizen Participation In Macedonia**

#### **Perceptions of Openness of the Municipality**

The first step for increasing transparency in the work of the municipalities is to allow citizens to have access to data and information regarding its work. This relies first and foremost on political will to open up and share. Therefore, the issue of openness, inclusion and readiness for use of these opportunities are in the focus of interest of this analysis. With regards to the central question about whether the municipality includes citizens in the decision making, we received mixed responses. On the one hand, as we will see below, the results from the poll survey revealed that the majority of the interviewed perceive the municipality as inclusive and involving citizens (38.8%) yet still around two thirds responded that they “do not know” or that the municipality does not involve them. Also, when the respondents were asked to grade the readiness of the municipality to include citizens in decision-making, half of them (50%) assessed it as good. The remaining half is almost symmetrically divided between bad (23%) and excellent (27%). On the other hand most of the participants in the interviews and focus groups responded that they have good cooperation with local governments and this despite the fact that we were asking the question at a very specific time when political tensions<sup>22</sup> were growing. This included public defamation of CSOs and their members as well as character assassination of certain public figures working in grassroots activism. It is important to note this context as it may have influenced the responses and opinions, i.e., the reason for the overwhelming lack of initiative and participation shown by the respondents as we will see further in the text.

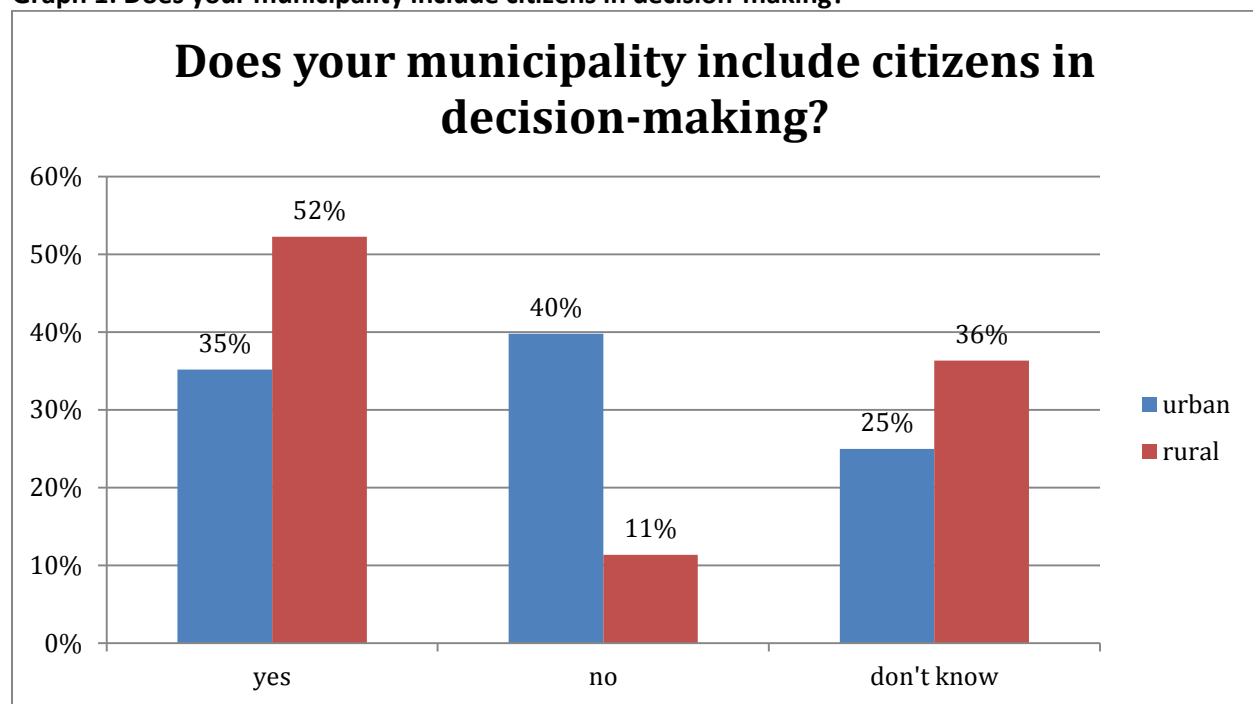
In this context, it is significant to mention that respondents from rural municipalities feel that they are more involved in decision-making in their municipality compared to those from urban municipalities which is also in line with the perceptions from the discussions at the focus groups and interviews.

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<sup>22</sup> Political crisis in Macedonia resulting from the leaked intercepted communication and legal actions following it which lead to increased tensions in the public discourse in time of preparation of the analysis.



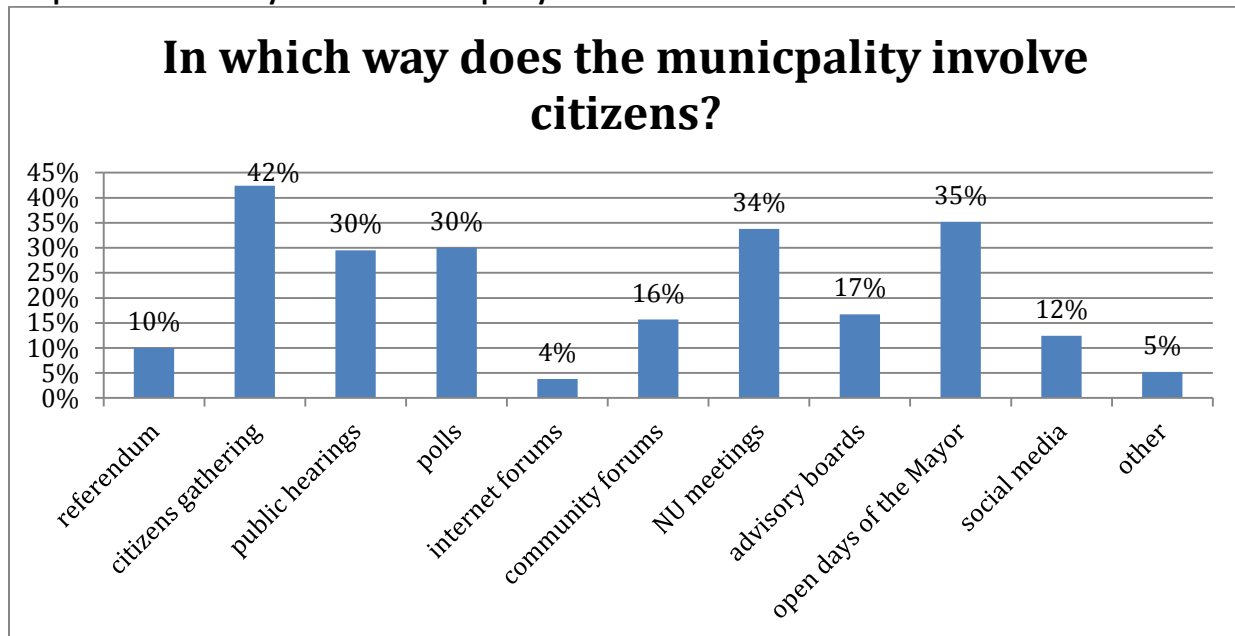
**Graph 1: Does your municipality include citizens in decision-making?**



Unlike Macedonians, whose response to the question of being involved in decision-making is almost equally spread between the three options (yes; no; don't know) among Albanians there is a higher perception of being included which is also noted among other ethnic groups with exception of the Turks.

With regard to the modes the municipality uses to involve the citizens in decision-making and going back to the interviews and focus groups, we once again noted aligning with the results with the poll. One of the most important questions in the poll, in terms of finding out how municipalities include citizens showed highest frequency in the responses which refer to direct contacts such as citizens gathering (42%) followed by open days of the Mayor (35%) and meetings in neighbourhood units (34%).

**Graph 2: In which way does the municipality involve citizens?**

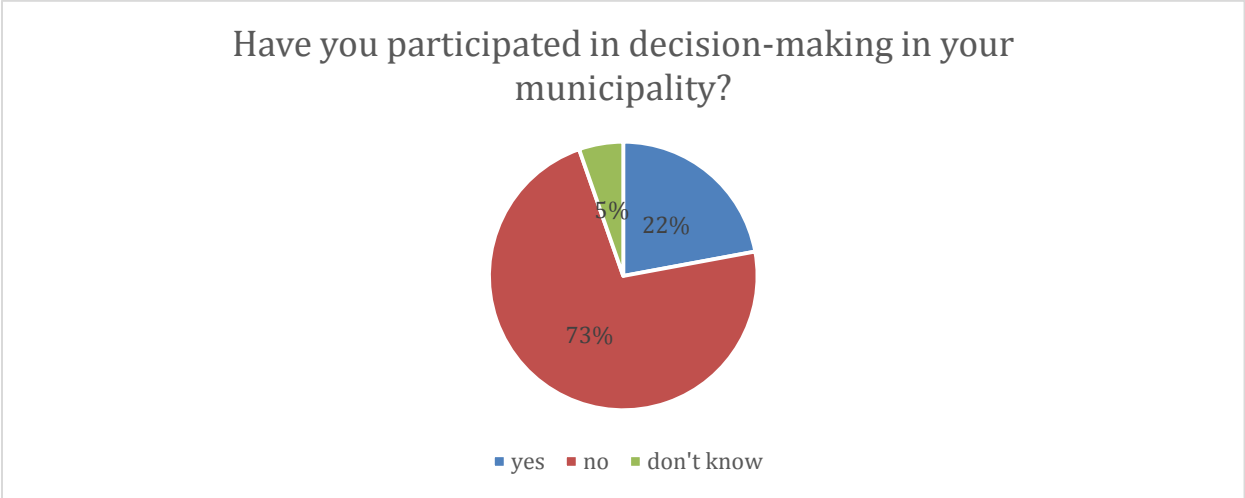


Having confirmed in the interviews with Mayors and councilors that direct contact with constituents is the most effective and useful way of communicating it is obvious that it is widely utilized. With the following question from the survey we wanted to find out what effect this involvement has and whether it is positive or negative. 49% of the interviewed perceive the involving of citizens as having effect of which 68% see it as positive effect. Going back to the grading of the involvement of citizens in decision-making at local level in terms of the effects, around half of the citizens assess as having effect and of those 68% consider this effect as positive. It is surprising that there is no significant difference in opinions on all these questions between men and women.

### **Citizens Activity**

As we can see in the pie chart below, more than two thirds of the respondents (73%) have not participated in the decision-making process in their municipality.

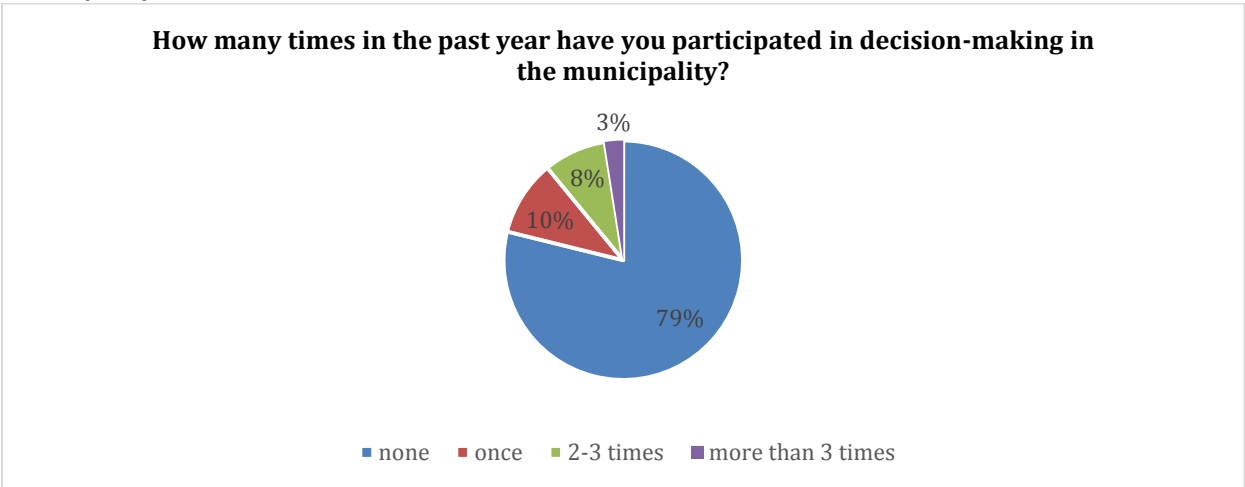
**Pie chart 1: Have you participated in decision-making in your municipality?**



There is a slight difference in responses between citizens from urban and rural municipalities, in favour of rural ones which tend to be a little bit more active, however this does not change the overall picture of lack of willingness to get involved.

When asked how many times in the past year they have participated in decision-making process in their municipality, an overwhelming 79% reported to have not done it at all while 10% have participated only once. Only 3% reported taking more than 3 times to participate in events undertaken by the municipality for consulting with citizens.

**Pie chart 2: How many times in the past year have you participated in decision-making in the municipality?**

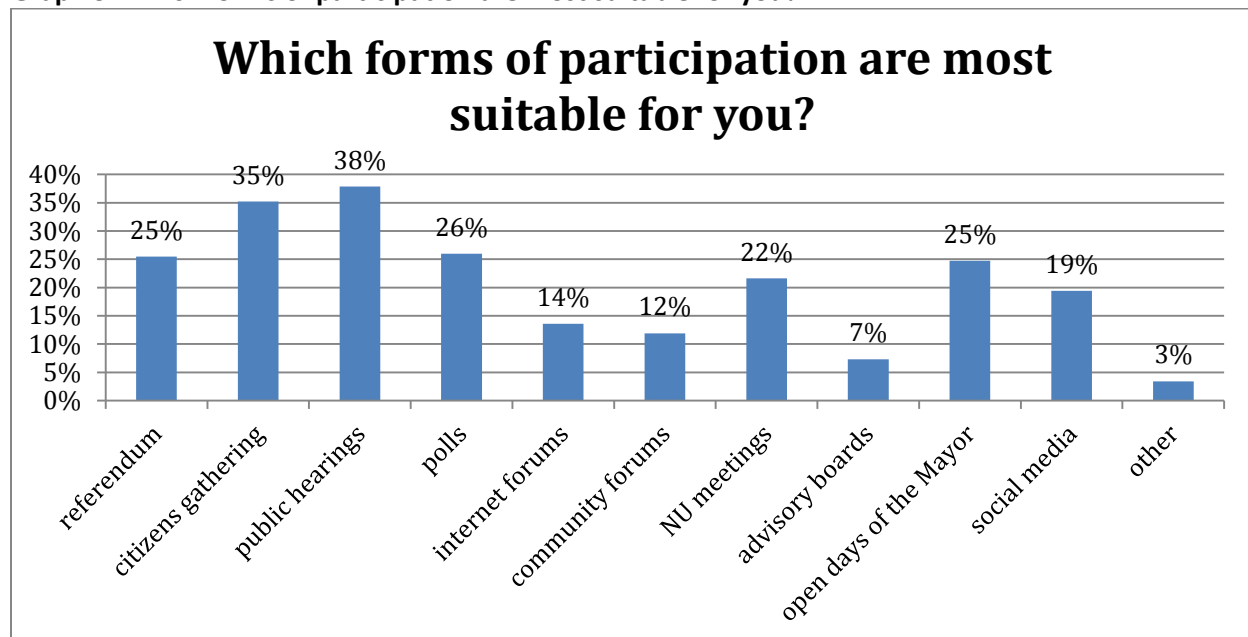


In order to identify whether the tool for participation used by the local governments impacts the percentage of inactivity of the citizens we asked them which participatory mechanism they consider most appropriate for them. Majority of respondents prefer direct communication methods such as public hearings (38%) and citizens’ gatherings (35%) being pointed out most frequently by respondents as the most appropriate tools that would motivate them to participate as well as open days of the

Mayor (25%), neighborhood unit meetings and community forums. Referendum was also frequently chosen by the respondents as an appropriate tool for providing their input (25%).

With regard to the interview and focus group respondents not indicating gender as a factor in their perception of citizen's participation, we once again noted differences in the results of the poll. One of the aspects we looked at was what forms of participation were mostly chosen by women respondents. The two leading responses we got to this question were "internet forums" and "social media", followed by "polls". These responses verified the obvious difference in ways of participation suitable for men and women. While men tend to be more directly involved in community matters through public gatherings/hearings, women, especially those from rural areas, are interested to participate but in a way that does not create additional burden on their time and divert them for their regular every-day obligations.

**Graph 3: Which forms of participation are most suitable for you?**

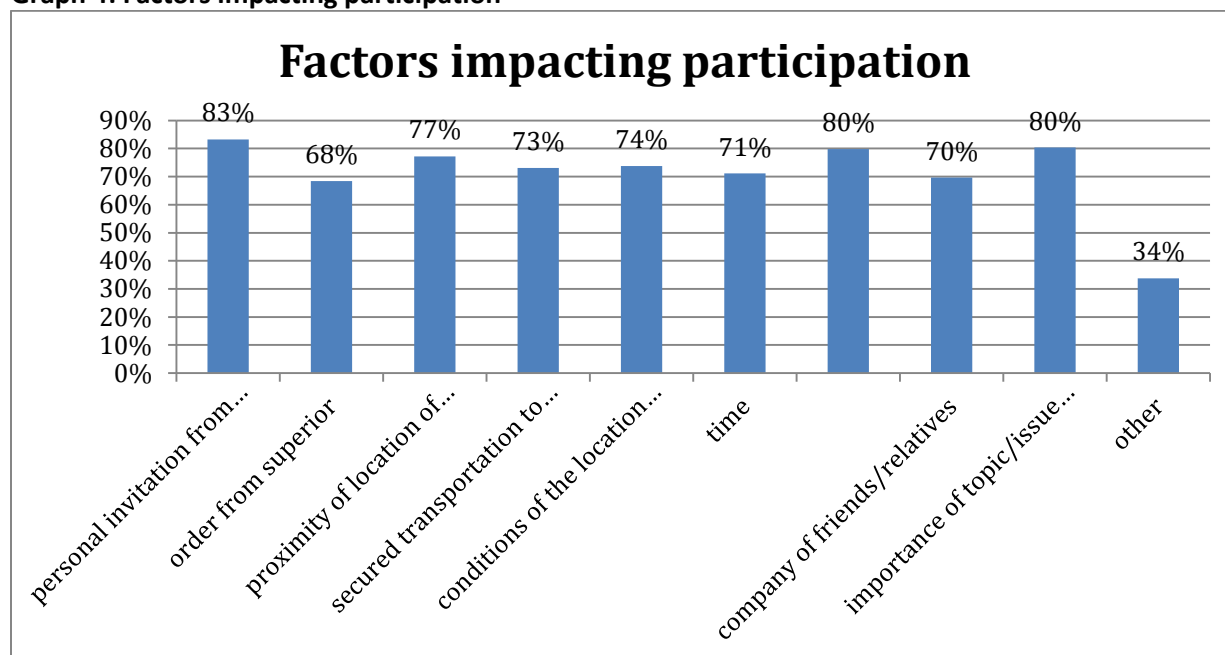


Attempting to assess the factors that have most direct impact on deciding whether they will participate in a consultation process organized by the municipality we offered respondents several options and asked them to grade them on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being least and 5 being most frequent reason which contributes to motivating them to participate. The respondents rated the following three factors as most important when deciding whether to get actively involved in consultation with the local authorities:

- Importance of topic to be discussed,
- Attendance/presence of Mayor and councilors,
- Personal invitation by the Mayor.

Other relevant aspects include proximity of location where the consultation takes place and availability of transportation as well as the time of the event.

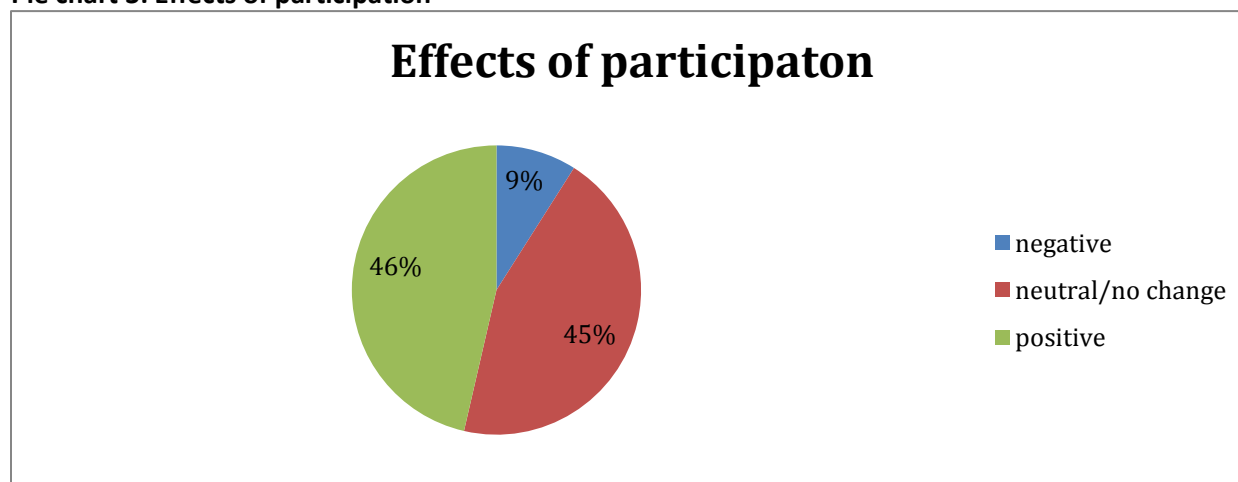
**Graph 4: Factors impacting participation**



The *perception* of openness and municipal initiative for consulting citizens is no less important than the actual consultation processes taking place in a community, because these perceptions will impact the activity of the citizens and their right to participate in general, as we confirmed with both the survey and interviews and focus groups. In that context, it is difficult to interpret the data in a straightforward way since the interviews and focus groups confirm that the most utilized and preferred tools by Mayors for soliciting citizens input directly correspond to the options preferred by the majority of citizens. Then, the only justification for the low participation rate of respondents (confirmed also by frequent choice of polls as method by respondents) in decision-making processes could be found in analyzing the effects of the participation.

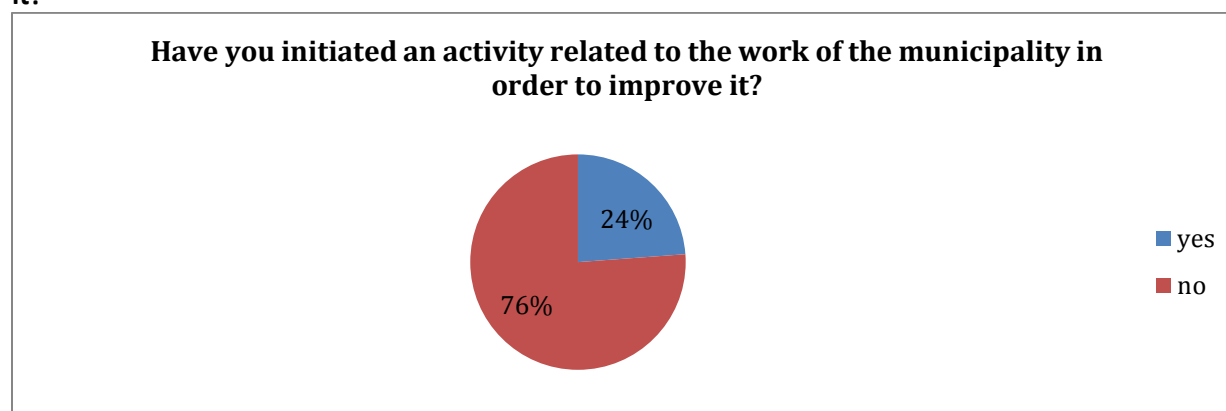
Asked again about the effects of the participation almost half of those answering the question see their participation as not producing any change and 9% see it as having negative effect.

**Pie chart 3: Effects of participation**

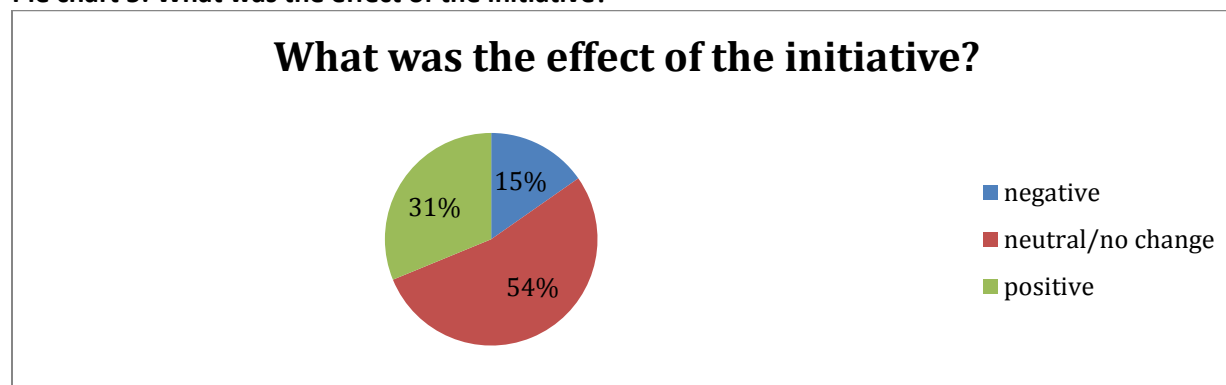


Even those respondents (24%) that confirmed having initiated themselves some activity related to the work of the municipality in the direction of improving the same, report that the results/effects have not brought about any change.

**Pie chart 4: Have you initiated an activity related to the work of the municipality in order to improve it?**



**Pie chart 5: What was the effect of the initiative?**



Comparing the results of the poll with the focus groups we noted the citizens are disillusioned and disappointed by the lack of effect from their actions. On one hand this is understandable since everybody deserves recognition for their effort and wants to see results in a reasonable amount of time. On the other hand, the low rate of activity and interest to initiate change poses the question whether citizens have too high expectations in terms of demanding immediate results in the rare occasion they decide to take action.

## Quality of Cooperation Between Citizens and Municipalities

The cooperation between the CSOs, citizens, businesses, academia and journalists is in the focus of interest of this analysis. With regards to the central question about what is the quality of cooperation with the municipal authorities, how all the relevant stakeholders perceive the cooperation and whether or not they cooperate freely with local authorities, we received mixed responses. On the one hand, the

majority of respondents in the FGs stated that they have good cooperation, except CSOs from Southeast region which stated that their cooperation is excellent. The latter is probably due to the fact that most of the participants at the FG in the Southeast region come from the municipality of Strumica. It is important to note this context as it may have influenced the responses and opinions, i.e., the reason for the overwhelming perception of quality of cooperation representing the whole region. The same is reflective of the CSOs in the Polog region where most of the participants pointed out lack of cooperation and came from Tetovo municipality. Within the regions CSOs noted differences in quality of cooperation varying from one municipality to another on the scale from not having any cooperation to having excellent cooperation. For example in Eastern region representatives from Shtip and Delchevo stated complete lack of cooperation with their local governments as opposed to those from Vinica stated very good cooperation. This points out that the cooperation depends on the personality of the Mayor and the political commitment to establish partnerships and joint initiatives rather than established institutionalised systems and processes.

Both CSOs and Mayors as well as Councilors pointed out that the municipalities have established some kind of cooperation. All interviewed Mayors stated that they consult citizens regarding the work of the municipality. Majority of them do it in a formalized manner on a regular basis at least 2-3 times a year, while all of them consult citizens continuously in an informal manner, depending on the need and the complexity of the raised issues. This is especially true for the rural municipalities where communities are more tight-knit and contacts between people are close. Some of the meetings are organized within and have a political background, usually with directives of the central government or the political parties.

*Mostly we go organized through our councilor group (Coalition of VMRO-DPMNE) to the local communities / settlements.*

(municipal councilor, Probishtip)

*As a requirement from the central government or our political party directive we have established practice of visiting at least three settlements per month, with a special agenda and together with our council members and the mayor to organize meetings and collect data and proposals from citizens.*

(municipal councilor, Novaci)

A part of the municipal councils have also special offices and reception days for citizens. Regular field activities are another option that is used for citizen's consultation. Consultations and meeting also are organized on demand by citizens, often for their individual problems, but in other cases also for community issues in general. By far the most utilized form of consultation is meetings within rural and urban neighbourhood units as well as formal and casual meetings while special gatherings are organized for specific topics.

CSO's also indicated the existence of basic cooperation with relevant stakeholders such as providing letters of support or MOUs for the applications submitted by the CSOs to donor programs, free use of facilities for a limited number of CSOs, in-kind contribution for certain events or initiatives (free of charge spaces, sound system, mechanization, etc.).

*We will sign a memorandum but don't ask for funds, is the main thing they say.*

(Focus group participant, Skopje region)

Some municipalities provide financial support for the CSOs activities. This is implemented in a variety of modes ranging from allocation of a certain sum of money without public procedure or dividing it equally for all CSOs in one municipality regardless of their needs and mission, to using an elaborated and transparent system for allocation of funds to CSOs based on public calls and assessment procedures (Strumica, City of Skopje). Many of the interviewees explained that very often decisions are taken and funds are allocated to CSOs however they never receive them. With a rebalance of the budget the money is then re-allocated for certain more pressing municipal matters.

CSOs in Skopje region indicated that municipalities are interested to hear what CSOs have to say but are not willing to undertake more than that. Most of the CSOs in the country state that local authorities are interested to cooperate with CSOs on matters of lesser importance or undertake jointly smaller projects or activities, while larger important issues raised by CSOs such as recycling (Skopje region), waste management and illegal landfills, air-pollution (Tetovo) are left unaddressed. Hence the results of the joint collaboration are effective on a micro level.

*We had a project where we conducted trainings for the gender committees and they accepted even though it was a free-of-charge service, they just gave the space nothing else, not even a coffee. They could have refused that too.*

(Focus group participant, Skopje region)

*As a citizen you can collaborate with the municipality up to the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor from 5 floors. They undertake regular works but when you start dealing with bigger money and issues such as GUPs, DUPs, selection of school directors etc. then NO!*

(Focus group participant, Skopje region)

CSOs complain that very often if they receive funding for initiatives or project ideas from their local governments they seem not to be interested in the results. One CSOs from the Southwest region explained how they applied for funding for one of their ideas from the local government and received money only for part of the project. Nevertheless, they implemented it and shared the report, including the results and recommendations, with the LSG. However, there was no reaction nor follow-up of their initiative. Another CSO from the same region explained how they were organizing an art-club and filming a documentary. They managed to secure the participation of the Mayor through personal contacts however he never came to the public presentation and debate of the same.

There is a difference in the quality and openness between the Mayor and local government departments. Representatives of CSOs explain that the cooperation can also vary between the different sectors. With some sectors/departments in the municipality CSOs have good cooperation and this is especially due to the fact that the staff has knowledge about specific issues (such as environment, for example or gender equality). Some of the CSOs from the Northeast region pointed the issue of the capacity of human resources in local governments which impacts the opportunities for cooperation.

*They need education, those that want to cooperate with CSOs. It depends a lot on the people, for them to know what democracy is, domestic violence victims etc. In the past the institutions had people with knowledge.*

(Focus group participant, Northeastern Region)

Some CSOs who have been working for 10-15 years in the community feel excluded from their local authorities. They also point out a deterioration of previously established relations with local



governments and a trend towards cooperation decrease. They feel the intensity of cooperation has been decreased with selective approach towards CSOs and conducted only formally, very often on an ad-hoc basis depending on the needs of the municipality (especially as proof for applying to donor funding).

*.... they are not including us in anything. They have their own CSOs which they work with.*

(Focus group participant, Eastern Region)

*In Shtip there used to be an officer for Roma issues and we organized info-sessions for Roma scholarships in the municipality and everything went well. Then it started with requests by e-mail and then they asked for money for the space and we gave up.*

(Focus group participant, Skopje region)

Most of the local governments have appointed staff for communication with CSOs but the organizations do not seem to find this of any relevance for their work.

Representatives of academia were present only in the Eastern region and clearly stated that there is no collaboration between the University and the local government.

*There is no cooperation and the local government is not using the resources of the University.*

(Focus group participant, Eastern Region)

CSOs faced with the inaccessible local authorities very often revert to personal contacts and relations in order to establish cooperation and communication with the local government.

In that context, the CSOs were also critical of themselves pointing out that they need to be better organized, to form wider alliances in order to advocate for important issues in the community. One of the reasons for lack of cooperation with local governments some CSOs locate in the fact that they do not include municipalities when developing their projects, others state that the main fault is in election campaigns when (political party) candidates give unrealistic promises which are not based on sound economic logic so citizens have raised expectations which are not feasible to be met.

Citizens are generally informed about the work of their municipality. Some municipalities produce their own electronic bulletins or municipal newspapers. Some of them broadcast council sessions on local/regional media. Majority of journalists stated that they have regular and good cooperation with the local governments, they receive timely information and some even invitations for council sessions and municipal committee meetings. However, the quality of the information received depends on the topic.

All local governments are generous in providing information which promotes their activities and Mayors. This is even the case in some of the smaller municipalities where there is no local media. Local governments are keen to be included or associated with CSO events which will increase their visibility such as large cultural or sports happenings.

As many of the journalists put it, when the municipality wants to share something it does that without difficulty using all existing channels. They send written invitations, call them on the phone, send text messages, pay travel expenses to media and share materials. However the situation differs when the journalists ask for information. In those cases the information can be very basic without any details or

the media are asked to submit written requests for information which can pose difficulty in daily journalism. As the interviewees explained the generosity of information on the side of the municipality usually relates to events which have already taken place so it is information “post festum”.

Almost all local government units have appointed public relation officers which communicate with media.

*They have good relations with the media, the public relations office is the only thing working there.*

(Focus group participant, Polog region)

Many of the interviewees complained about municipalities’ keenness for showing results and end up creating a false reality with this type of informing. This in turn creates frustration and decreases trust in authorities. As one pointed out:

*For example it says that the road which is reconstructed is in its final phase, and I am driving on this road and see that only one minimal part is being worked on.*

(Focus group participant, Eastern region)

Often CSOs use the Law on free access to information to obtain information from municipal institutions. This is especially so when the local authorities are not too keen to cooperate with CSOs but have to respect the legal obligation under this Law. In that case, CSOs complain about the information being very basic.

At present, the situation is especially dire in Bitola where due to the current political situation<sup>23</sup> there is no communication between the media and the local government and they only periodically receive written information. Regarding all inquiries from the media the response of the municipality is “don’t know”.

The reporters are open to state that there can be no investigative journalism in Macedonia. If one delves deeper into the matter it is obvious that this is directly linked to the fact that almost all regional media are financed by the local governments. Some of the interviewed journalists are employed in municipality or institutions under municipal competence (such as public utility companies) and work as reporters for local or national media.

*Our fate depends whether the Mayor will sign funding for my media, and so we cannot talk about transparency. When I want to investigate I do not need the municipality, I can find the information by myself but I am auto-censoring myself because my media will be ruined if I publish it. Investigative journalism is not possible in Macedonia. We are forced to act that we believe in what they say.*

(Focus group participant, Pelagonija region)

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<sup>23</sup> As a results of the political crisis in Macedonia resulting from the leaked intercepted communication and legal actions following it, the Mayor of Bitola is currently under house arrest and there is no appointed official replacing him in the municipality.

One CSO representative shared the results of their analysis of the municipal websites in their region pointing out that majority of them have a lot of information which is useless to the ordinary citizen. There is no citizen's budget and there is no comprehensible public procurement plan.

## **Municipal Mechanisms for Consulting With Citizens and Experience of their Use**

CSOs are mostly consulted and involved by local governments when strategic documents are being developed. Other type of participation depends on the needs of the municipality, such as proof that it included the civil society in decision-making when applying for donor funding.

Many of the CSO are invited by local authorities to participate in processes of strategy development. There are such cases in all the regions and mostly involve CSOs depending on their field of expertise such as strategies for youth and youth issues, volunteerism, gender equality, environment protection, drug prevention, sexual health. In this way the municipalities are capitalizing on the local expertise and fresh ideas provided by citizens.

Part of the municipalities do not have specific documents or development strategies such as municipal strategic plan or local economic development strategy. These municipalities usually take actions according to yearly action or budget plan. In some of the municipalities this documents have expired as they cover 3 to 5 years and often financial means are required for the preparation of such new documents. The municipalities which are in the period of preparation of new strategic plans state that citizens are continuously involved through the usual forms of consultation as well as through special public meetings.

*Our municipal administration services are in open and active communication with citizens and all possible ways of communication are used to inform the citizens as well as other meetings and community forums are organized for the preparation of our municipal strategic plans.*

(Municipal councillor, Makedonski Brod)

Some CSOs such as the Community Centers in Struga, Strumica and Centar represent a link between citizens and local governments. They assist local governments in developing strategic documents through participatory processes using the community forums model. However even these deliverables are not always unitized by the municipal authorities such as the communication strategy or the database of CSOs in Struga.

In terms of the referendum as a tool, only the Mayor of Centar reported to organizing a referendum for protection of the old city mall in Skopje from receiving a baroque façade. The referendum was initiated by a CSO however it was finally approved upon the initiative of the council without waiting for the 20% of signatures to be collected, in order to save time. Two other Mayors informed about unsuccessful referendums in the past, Novaci (2003) for introduction of a sewerage system in the village of Novaci and Radovis (2009) for self-financing by the citizens for city market.

Of the other tools laid out in the Law (citizens proposals/appeals, public gatherings and polls/surveys) citizens appeals and proposals are used in all municipalities. Usually they are used by citizens for requesting financial support in cases of natural disasters, severe social needs as well as for financial

support to sports and cultural events. Often they are used for different issues such as construction inspection, urban planning and matters pertaining to the work of the municipality. These proposals and appeals are resolved by the different departments in the municipality or the Mayor (especially in rural municipalities) and then presented and verified at council sessions.

Part of the municipalities use polls for soliciting the citizens' needs referring to "softer" issues such as choice of performers on municipal events, selection of municipal emblem or level of satisfaction with a municipal activity. Usually they are executed online through the municipal websites.

With regards to the polls and the public gatherings the interviewer sometimes found difficulty in separating municipal from political party involvement. While it is obvious that public gatherings are a legal requirement for adopting urban plans and as such organized for this matter, they are also used for presentation by national institutions (ministries, agencies) of their programs and funds, upon initiatives of CSOs for topics relevant to their cooperation with the local governments as well as for political parties for consulting with their constituents on their needs and problems. The Mayors and municipal administration, as well as councilors, are present at all these events. Similarly polls are organized by the political parties 5-6 times per year in order to inform party centers for preparation of election programs.

*We do not have polls, however from the party there are initiatives frequently for the work of the municipality, for citizens' problems or their ideas, suggestions. 5-6 times per year the party organizes them and those polls are taken over by the central government in preparation of programs for Mayor's and other elections.*

(Mayor, Demir Kapija)

*Public hearings are organized together with the central government, that is the party, for promotion of political platform or various projects at which are present many citizens (up to 200). Then government representatives together with organize such public hearings in order for the functionaries to hear what are our problems and whether the requests the municipality is submitting to the government are true.*

(Mayor, Novaci)

In more or less all the municipalities are established and in function the usual municipal commissions such as Commission for LED; for Statute and Regulations; for Budget and Finance; for Urbanization and Communal actions; for Equal opportunities of women and men; for Relations between communities; for Ecology and Agriculture; etc. The municipal commissions are part of the Council and their members are counselors sometimes complemented by external members as experts. Each of the commissions usually consists of 5 members (councilors) who come from different political parties, ethnic background and gender which are represented in the municipal council. Their tasks and responsibilities are related with the facilitation of the work of municipal council, especially regarding the organization of the official sessions and preparation of the municipal decisions, analysis and other relevant documentation.

At a first glance, one can say that none of the interviewed Mayors has initiated use of the tools laid out in the Law on local self-government. Yet, the fact is that they are utilized, however devoid of their legally prescribed attributes. In that way all Mayors and Councilors have reported that they are regularly receiving initiatives mostly from neighborhood units or groups of citizens which are taken into account by the municipal council. These initiatives usually refer to resolving some specific problem in a settlement referring to transport infrastructure, water supply and wastewater, public hygiene and other communal issues. The citizens' gatherings are also organized regularly in order to meet with citizens

from different areas of the municipality and discuss current problems they face. These gathering are usually organized by the neighborhood units.

The municipal councils regarding their decisions about municipal work mostly are informed by the personal experiences and contacts of the councilors, the relevant municipal committees and rules of procedure, by-laws and other relevant documents. The citizens are consulted mostly about the more important issues which directly affect them and their community. Usually the municipal councils organize meetings with citizens about 3-4 times a year through the neighbourhood units. When necessary these meetings are held more frequently. Usually the meetings are organized in cooperation and presence of the mayor and other municipal administration officers depending on the topics of discussion. During the meetings the municipal administration keeps notes and minutes regarding in order to capture the questions and proposals given through the discussion, which are later reviewed and taken into consideration by the mayor and municipal council to be incorporated in municipal action plans and strategies.

*Besides the other forms other than direct and personal communication with the citizens, once or twice a month we meet the urban and rural neighbourhood units and we discuss with them their problems and suggestions.*

(municipal councilor, Radovish)

Additionally, as forms of consultation with citizens Mayors point out open days with the Mayor and community forums. Informing citizens is usually conducted through local and/or regional media, municipal websites and Facebook pages. Social media has been pointed out by all Mayors as very useful and direct way of communicating with the citizens.

Gender, class, ethnicity, disability are social divisions intermixed with each other, resulting in certain social relations which make members of the underprivileged groups along these lines more excluded from voicing their concerns. One of the key differences which only a limited number of Mayors grasp is that in order to hear the needs of specific groups of citizens is it necessary to utilize specific tailored approaches in order to understand their concerns. In that context, Roma population and rural women in Macedonia are most concerned as well as persons with disabilities. In the conversation one Mayor from a rural municipality shared his happiness that women are pressing likes on his Facebook profile not looking deeper into the reason for this while at the same time confessing that women tend to be difficult to mobilize for participation in public hearings and community forums in his municipality. Several other Mayors confirmed this conclusion of the interviewer as they did not seem to be aware that they report organizing meetings with citizens in mosques, tea houses, coffee shops etc. generally places not frequented by women in these communities. In those cases it seems that social media (mainly Facebook) is the outlet for women to get involved which was confirmed to us by the poll.

As pointed above, what we can additionally take away from the responses of the interviewees to this question is that actually some forms of citizen participation are being used at local level but stripped from the legal prescription for percentages and numbers. As a result of the above said, numerous initiatives have been raised by citizens / CSOs for local issues however mostly in the form of signed petitions.

Such have been initiatives in Tetovo, Bitola, Chair/Skopje regarding (air) pollution, in Kumanovo for dislocation of Center for drug and alcohol abusers, in Shtip for introduction of paid parking, in Struga for reconstruction of the river quay and the traffic solution through Galicica national park in Ohrid, as well as in Karposh and Aerodrom for saving the green spaces and many more.

One of the issues raised by the interviewees is the electoral roll which is not considered accurate<sup>24</sup> and challenges the defined numbers i.e. percentages of voters necessary for the legally implementing the procedure for citizen participation mechanisms as proscribed by Law. What is highly problematic according to our interviewees is the fact that the president of the state is elected with 40% of the voters while for referendum the necessary census is 51%. As one interviewee calculated, every 42 seconds a person needs to post a signature in the designated office of the Ministry of Justice in order to be able collect in one week the necessary signatures for initiating a referendum.

Since Macedonia's independence few local level referendums have been organized. One such has been in the municipality of Centar in 2015. The municipality of Shtip organized a referendum for the money collected as contribution from the citizens for the river Kozjacka to be re-allocated for a dam on the river Otinja. The referendum was unsuccessful and the contribution money is still kept on the municipal account and used for covering budget holes.

On several occasions the topics that have motivated people are of national importance and competence such as the citizens' initiative in Debar against building a dam on the Radika River in order to protect its natural environment. 10.000 signatures were collected by citizens in order to comply with legislation and the local government sided with the citizens in the case. The initiative was successful and the action has been stopped.

Despite opposing views on the topic whether protests are considered citizen participation tools or not it is now safe to conclude that: *"legal forms of direct action such as boycotts, citizen initiatives and demonstrations have become a standard part of the citizen repertory of political behavior in modern pluralist democracies."*<sup>25</sup> In that sense we cannot avoid to note the process of the "Colorful Revolution" which has marked the sphere of citizen's activism in Macedonia during 2016. Thousands of people in the capital Skopje and in some of the biggest cities in Macedonia have taken the streets and coloured state institutions buildings consequently during three months requesting resignation of the corrupt government.

From the interviews one can conclude that appeals and proposals are more often used by citizens individually however some CSOs have also utilized them. Individuals reported that private connections and friendships have been more fruitful in resolving their problems while CSOs have both good and bad experiences. In Vinica, for example, upon the suggestion of a CSO a public-private partnership was initiated and street lights have been replaced with energy saving ones.

Municipalities also rarely utilize polls for soliciting citizens' satisfaction of delivery of local services. Yet, one such poll provides the other side of the coin regarding the citizen's issues. Much in line with our poll results, in Sveti Nikole the municipality organized a limited poll (40 polled) which showed that none of the citizens ever requested anything from their local authorities.

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<sup>24</sup> This issue is one of the current points of debate between the four largest political parties in Macedonia under the Przino agreement following the political crisis in Macedonia.

<sup>25</sup> Kaase and Newton, 1995.

Besides the legally proscribed forms of citizen participation local governments have an array of tools and mechanism for consulting with citizens at their disposal introduced by international organizations, donor programs, local government associations and CSOs.

One of the most used tools for consultation with citizens remains the citizen's gatherings usually at the level of urban and rural neighbourhood units. All Mayors are actively using this tool for different goals ranging from communal matters to determining the municipal budget. Opinions are divided on the transparency of these public gatherings. Some see them as purely political party meetings at which decisions are taken benefiting the most loyal party members and serve as political party propaganda, while others see them as ways to deal with issues of local neighbourhood importance. The transparency is overshadowed by the opinion that most of the NU presidents are formally elected, without any legal competencies and almost all of them are men. Yet all interviewees pointed to their usefulness if organized properly and stripped from political party influence.

Community forums is also one of the most mentioned and used tools by many municipalities resulting from the 10 year implementation of the "Community Forums Programme"<sup>26</sup> supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation in around 2/3 of municipalities in Macedonia. The impact and results of this programme are evident and it's expected the community forums approach to be maintained in number of municipalities. Community forums were also mentioned by focus group participants as a good tool for involving citizens however they realize that this, for the time being, is donor-initiated and supported.

For budget planning and preparation most of the municipalities consult with citizens through the NUs. Some do it regularly several times during the year and others in the last months of the year, when the municipalities already have prepared a draft of the budget. The burden of preparing the new budget in general belongs to the department for budget and finances within the municipality which based on the inputs of the municipal other sectors and the mayor prepares the new budget plan. Some of the municipalities for municipal budgeting also use the community forums. Municipal councilors state that in preparation of the budget are important all other ways of communication with citizens which take place during the year, where every citizen demand or proposal is reviewed and considered for inclusion in the new municipal budget.

*In the last few years for the preparation of the municipal budget we practice the community forums or so called budget forums, but also the consultation with citizens for the budget is done through meetings with neighbourhood units.*

(Municipal councilor Probistip)

Municipalities rarely use external expertise or advisory committees, mostly because of lack of financial means. Mayors in that case rely on the fact that in some administrations the municipal staff is numerous and can cover the necessary duties and obligations. Only small number of municipalities uses external expertise from consultants for fundraising purposes.

The use of social media is emerging as a tool and all municipalities are attempting to follow this new trends. All municipalities interviewed have official web sites which are used to inform the public. In addition to this most municipalities have official municipal Facebook profiles and Mayor Facebook accounts. Communication through Facebook is regular, and most municipal council representatives

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<sup>26</sup> [www.forumivozaednicata.com.mk](http://www.forumivozaednicata.com.mk)

declare that communication of the municipality with citizens this way has become even more dynamic because it is a tool widely used by large parts of the population because of the opportunities offered for fast information, direct communication through messages and its digital component (photos, video, presentations).

Most of the municipalities and their activities are covered and broadcasted by local and regional televisions and radios. Also they use widely e-mail for informing citizens.

*The municipality has an official website and Facebook page through which it publishes all information related to the operation and developments in the municipality. Through the website are published official gazettes as well as any other relevant information.*

(Municipal councilor, Probishtip)

*In our municipality we use e-mail communication and communication through the official website of the municipality, also the Facebook communication is emerging as a very useful and attractive tool. Besides we have local TV that regularly covers the municipal activities, council sessions and other community events.*

(Municipal councilor, Rosoman)

Ideas days have been widely spread but assessed by interviewees as a farce. They complain that the information announcing the event is distributed at the last moment (usually one day before the event) hence people do not have time to prepare. In many municipalities this initiative has been discontinued.

Businesses mentioned the existence of the Economic and Social Council as a consultative and advisory body within the municipality which brings together the municipality, the organization of employers and the association of trade unions. These Councils (in the municipalities where they exist) usually have the aim to provide ideas, opinions and recommendations to the municipal council regarding economic and social issues. Depending on the context other stakeholders can also be part of the Council such as employment agencies, educational institutions representatives and representatives of artisans etc. The members we spoke to were not very happy with the level of activity of their Council and its initiatives.

The Law for the spatial and urban planning<sup>27</sup> which requires public discussion on the newly proposed urban plans and their modifications is respected by all municipalities. Journalists explained that they even receive written invitations which they have to sign as proof that they have received them. Yet, these debates are organized formally, just to abide by the legal provisions. The public announcement are generally placed on the bulletin board of the municipality and the time-frame for reviewing the plan is usually 2 weeks and within working hours. One such case receiving a lot of local media attention is the issue with the park in Shtip. A piece of greenery located between several residential buildings which serves as a small park for the inhabitants of this neighborhood has been sold to private investors for constructing new buildings on it. CSOs point out that formally, according to the documents, the whole procedure has been respected and even includes written support from the neighborhood unit. Yet the residents had found out about this deal when the public procurement notice for the land had been advertised and are now disputing the decision saying that they were not consulted. Examples like this

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<sup>27</sup> Law on spatial and urban planning, 2014.



have been pointed out by CSOs in all of the regions including similar cases as the one above in the municipalities of Aerodrom, Karposh and Chair.

Youth councils were also mentioned as established forms to solicit youth input in all of the municipalities. Many interviewees indicated them as form for including the political party youth in the municipal system.

Asked about the communication with the municipal councilors which represent citizens in the municipal councils responses from FGs were that councilors do not communicate with citizens since they discuss issues in their political party. The general impression of interviewees is that councilors just convey political party positions at the council meetings and do not have own opinions.

*They just do what their party asks of them.*

(Focus group participant, Pelagonija region)

Interviewed municipal councilors have stated that they accompany Mayors at public gatherings/hearings and also informally communicate with citizens. They pointed out that they do not have a special budget or support for organizing separate meetings with citizens on their own.

Some CSOs pointed the good cooperation with the municipal committees such as those for inter-ethnic relations, education, equal opportunities, patient protection committee (Delchevo), traffic prevention (Ohrid) and juvenile delinquency protection. The work of these bodies usually differs from one municipality to another and hence the varied opinions on their impact and cooperation with CSOs.

In the urban municipalities the tenants associations (kukjni soveti) were pointed out as good examples for addressing problems. People need to be connected in small communities and mobilized through them, say CSOs.

TV shows in which the mayors or LSG representatives answer direct citizens' calls and questions were also mentioned as approaches used for communication with citizens as well as open days with the municipal commissions. Some municipalities use variations of telephone lines which citizens can use to report a problem.

Many other actions and ideas were presented during the interviews and discussions which convinced the interviewer that many options exist and many can be additionally developed if there exists the political will to do so.

## **Effectiveness and Efficiency of Existing Mechanisms for Citizen Participation**

Compared to the municipal authorities of CSOs and citizens less satisfied with the effectiveness and efficiency of the existing mechanisms for citizen's participation. The high census for referendum and citizens' initiative and the necessary update of the election roll decrease the efficiency of the existing models for citizen participation.

The right of participation of citizens and public at the council sessions although is guaranteed by law and municipal statutes is very little used in practice. This is more as lack of tradition and based on the fact that municipal councilors are directly elected by the people to represent them and take decisions on their behalf. Some municipalities are trying to mobilize more citizens to participate in the municipal council sessions through timely information and using different tools of mobilization, but again citizens, they state, participate mostly when are reviewed issues which directly affect them or when their applications and requests are being considered. Sometimes the municipal council sessions are attended by representatives of NUs or CSOs. Regarding this and as a way to compensate or provide better information for their citizens regarding the work of the municipality and the council most local governments announce the agenda, minutes and decisions of the municipal council sessions. In many municipalities council sessions are directly broadcasted through local/regional media (TV and radio) or presented the following day.

*Citizens are informed, know about the sessions, but do not come to sessions even though they have the opportunity. If anyone comes, usually is from the neighbourhood units or citizens come about their personal problems or the settlement / neighborhood.*

(Municipal councilor, Demir Kapija)

*Local media on regular basis covers the municipality with information during the sessions and other activities.*

(Municipal councilor, Demir Kapija)

All interviewed have stated that the most appropriate, efficient and functional forms of communication with citizens at the local level are direct meetings and meetings with neighbourhood units.

*People want attention and conversation, even if you sometimes actually can't help to solve the problem the act itself that you're listening to them means a lot to them.*

(Municipal councilor, Mogila)

This is mostly due to the long established tradition of these forms of communication and because of the way of the organization of the community, the size of municipalities and settlements. Especially these forms of communication come into consideration in smaller and rural areas.

*We are a small municipality, so the communication with the citizens is very common and direct, especially with the citizens of the regions from which we have been elected and we belong to and live in.*

(Municipal councilor, Novaci)

Many mayors emphasize the "community forums" as a very practical and successful tool for involving citizens at the local level.

*In the last few years in our municipality is has been evident that the community forums are the best and most efficient tool for involving citizens. At the neighborhood units meetings citizens mostly present their personal and local wishes and needs while in the community forums they publicly in front of all neighborhood units and settlements first also say the same and then themselves or jointly with others choose*

*the most priority projects for the municipality and it happens that they decide to sometimes support projects from other settlements.*

(Mayor, Makedonski Brod)

On the other hand, citizens state that if the local government wants to motivate people it can use other tools. They openly state that most local governments are closed and not interested to communicate with citizens. An example that we came across illustrates this disinterest to cooperate is from a CSO in Resen which explained it developed a youth strategy which was submitted to the municipality but was not accepted. Then they proposed it through the councilor group of the main opposition party and it was not adopted by the majority. This is a clear sign that the municipality is not interested in a document developed by the citizens. On the other hand, the local government does not take the initiative to initiate the development of such a strategy under the excuse of lack of funds.

Most municipalities do not provide specific budget funds to cover the processes of consultation with citizens on the grounds that these costs are usually small and can be covered by other budget lines according to the need. Most of the meetings are held at municipal facilities such as sports halls, schools, municipal cultural centers which fall under municipal competence.

Only a few Mayors reserve sums for citizens' participation activities.

*We have a special budget item for collaboration and support to citizens which is around 200.000MKD.*

(Mayor, Makedonski Brod)

*With the strategies we have committed to increasing the budget for consultation with citizens by 7% to 10%.*

(Mayor, Centar)

Yet, even the neighborhood units are not so powerful when it comes to supporting citizens initiatives. Such was the case with the construction of buildings in the Skopje center (behind "Automakedonija" locality) when despite the protests of the citizens channeled through the NU still construction took place.

There are few other similar cases in Skopje where citizens organized on the level of settlement or municipality attempted to initiate change regarding issues that impact their daily lives. In Karposh two initiatives took place, one for the settlement Karpos 4 where citizens did not succeed in collecting the 5.900 signatures in order to stop the process of adoption of the DUP<sup>28</sup> and save the green spaces in the community and the other in settlement Taftalidze for stopping building construction on a green space used as a park by the citizens. In Aerodrom, following public pressure after a heated debate by 50 citizens that appeared at the public debate on the DUP referring to a settlement in the municipality, its adoption was suspended<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> <http://lokalno.mk/inicijativata-za-spas-na-zeleniloto-vo-karposh-4-dosega-sobra-2-300-potpisi/> last accessed on 25.09.2016

<sup>29</sup> <http://a1on.mk/wordpress/archives/595395>; <http://plusinfo.mk/vest/62014/opshtina-aerodrom-krie-od-gragjanite-kolku-novi-zgradi-kje-niknat> last accessed on 25.09.2016

As pointed above CSOs also look for responsibility within themselves stating that they do not know their rights and obligations and are not well organized and not persistent in putting pressure on local governments to act.

Joint development of strategic documents are a good example of municipality working together with the citizens however many of them assess this as non-functional in terms of impact. These strategic documents often do not include financial implications and they are not implemented. The actions plans are not respected and there is no monitoring of the process or the effects.

The idea's days can be useful if they are announced in advance with fixed dates for the whole year so that CSOs and citizens have time to prepare. The information is distributed at the last moment (usually one day before the event).

One of the challenges facing the budget transparency seems to be the lack of budget literacy. One of the interviewees pointed out that this is especially lacking among youth who are not prepared to even follow the domestic budgets, let alone the municipal one. He stated that citizen's education and awareness raising is an important aspect of budget transparency. Media representatives point out that they resist going to the council session when the budget is discussed since they have difficulty understanding the topic and not all media have journalists specialized in economic topics. Another important aspect that came up in the discussion was that the budget is already agreed at the meetings of the municipal commission where position and opposition harmonize their stances for the budget and it is only formally adopted at the council sessions. In this context it was pointed out that it is also difficult to follow the public procurement through the municipal website.

Regarding the urban plans one of the biggest challenges besides the formality of the procedure which is undertaken is the fact that citizens have difficulty understanding the drawings and technical documents which are at their disposal for review and commenting. As a result the interest to participate at these events is very low. Usually persons who are directly concerned with a specific problem are the ones that appear at these gatherings.

Capital investments are one of the topics for which citizens in the municipalities are most interested in, usually for the infrastructure projects such as roads, sewage, water supply systems etc. In some municipalities the consultation with citizens on capital investments is done within other regular meetings for general purposes, or when the budget of the municipality is prepared. In other cases, special meetings or consultations are held, for example when specific investment projects in one or more neighborhood units are planned the consultation or meetings are organized with the citizens or local community leaders from the respective neighborhoods.

In the interviewed municipalities very rarely are organized special consultation processes regarding the efficiency and citizen satisfaction of municipal public services. The eventual issues or problems usually are reported by the direct meetings and citizens' complaints addressed to the municipality. Only in some municipalities this question is as part of public gatherings or meetings.

*This question continuously is reviewed on regular meetings of the Mayor with the neighbourhood units. Also I think there is a public poll ongoing on the work of municipal administration.*

(Municipal councilor, Probishtip)

When we analyses deeper the reason for the dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of the utilized tools for citizen participation we realized that very often there is public debate about important projects and interventions in the community however the results are different from the agreed outcomes. Citizens have a feeling that they are manipulated since the final decisions never reflect their concerns and needs. One of these examples that was shared with us is the bicycle path in Bitola since following the debate the final solution differed to what was agreed with citizens.

Many issues for which citizens have petitioned seem to not have the outcome desired by the citizens. Many decisions are still pending and quite a few have been reviewed and /or modified to include the needs of all relevant stakeholders. As a result of the formality some of the initiatives start to die off such as the ideas days or the meeting of the council with the citizens (Sveti Nikole). Municipal authorities point out that citizens are passive and do not have the interest to participate, yet CSOs point out that this is a result of the abused trust.

On the other hand municipal staff has explained the lack of knowledge by citizens regarding the competencies of the local governments which restricts them in helping.

It seems that the key dissatisfaction the citizens have regarding the municipal efforts to involve citizens is that they do not perceive the local government as leading this processes. Very often it is donor initiatives which the local government is implementing.

The public debates were by far pointed out as most effective ways to deal with citizens issues and should continue. Yet, CSO recommended a more direct tailored approach focusing on different groups of citizens, not the “one-size fits all” tactic which would take into account the positioning of different social groups within the community and their specific needs. Very often, vulnerable ethnic communities are used only for voting and corrupted with food and money. After that for the next 4 years of the political mandate they are excluded from all processes. They do not have a voice nor any participation. Special mechanisms must be created in order to include these groups in decision-making at local level.

It was pointed out that the referendum and the civil initiative are not used because they are complex tools which require a lot of effort and time as well as high census for local matters. The latter should be decreased. At the same time it was stated that local governments can utilize a variety of other tools for citizen and be creative in developing approached however political will is necessary to undertake this.

CSOs also realized that they need to improve their role in society and increase constituency. Working on motivating citizens to be active in order to request accountability from the politicians provides multiple opportunities to get engaged as well as to educate citizens about the difference between policy and political parties.

In order to increase the collaboration between the local governments and the CSOs some of the organizations mentioned the establishment of the empty seat for CSOs at council sessions. Such an example already exists in the municipality of Centar which basically represents a reserved place for the CSOs at the sessions.

Media was pointed out as a very effective tool which can initiate a solution to an urgent issue and raise interest of local authorities to get involved in some regions. Journalists on the other had pointed out the need for municipal websites need to be user-friendly and more interactive.

## **Key findings, Conclusions and Recommendations**

Citizen participation is one of the key prerequisites for direct democracy and for ensuring transparency and accountability in a society. It can have various forms and norms but the main aim remains the same and that is by offering different platforms for citizens to get involved to hear their problems and needs as well as possible new ideas and solutions for existing problems in order to secure development of communities. In this analysis we have attempted to provide insight into the situation with practices related to consultation of citizens at municipal level in Macedonia. The analysis has looked at the types of existing and practiced forms of consultations, their usage by different actors and the effects they do or do not generate, focusing on both urban and rural municipalities and different experiences.

### **Key findings**

- Generally speaking, there exists a certain level of collaboration between citizens/CSOs and local governments in Macedonia.
- The focus of the local governments is more on the part of undertaking activities for informing citizens rather than their inclusion in decision-making processes.
- From the aspect of the local government authorities the inclusion of citizens is most present for issues related to GUPs/DUPs, capital/infrastructure projects as well as projects which different parts of the community request and can become part of the budget programs. Part of these consultation processes are legally prescribed (such for the developing of urban plans or capital investment with donor funding) and must follow a certain procedure. Debates within urban and rural neighbourhood units for projects/initiatives very often are not rooted in the budget. As a result it is often left to the Mayor and municipal administration following the public debates to look for ways to include these projects in the municipal budget and allocate funds for them. Participation related to municipal services is even lower.
- Most frequently used forms for consultation with citizens/CSOs are those offering direct communication such as public gatherings, public hearings and direct meetings with the Mayor, very often mostly taking place within the neighborhood units. These forms are used devoid of the legal prescriptions which they consist of and modified to serve local needs. Also frequently used by citizens are appeals and proposals, most often referring to individual requests and issues.
- Citizens/CSOs are formally included in decision-making processes in the bodies of the units if local government in a limited capacity. Usually they approach the municipality with personal concerns. The local government, when it decides to include citizens in decision-making, usually involves them in the process of development/exchange of ideas/projects but does not follow-up with feedback on the results from the exchange nor does it include citizens representatives in further process. Exception to this are municipalities which are using the community forum as a tool for citizens participation in creating the municipal budget which by its structure requires constant and active participation of citizens in the whole process of budget development, adoption and execution.
- Councilors are perceived by citizens as their representatives in the local government and very often left to take decisions on their behalf. Most of them (with some exceptions) do not formally organize separate consultative sessions with the citizens but rather are approached informally by those that have an interest or need.
- There is intertwining between party and municipal activities so very often local governments do not have a civic approach to consultation process with citizens.
- Online communication between citizens and local authorities is emerging as a form which is on the increase at both sides.
- CSOs are involved in the work of the municipalities in a limited capacity. Local authorities capitalize on the expertise and capacity of CSOs especially when developing municipal strategic documents. LSGs partly finances some activities of selected CSOs. Most often the support provided by LSGs is limited to signing MOUs for cooperation, providing some in-kind support and limited to benign issues which do not have a great impact in the life of citizens.
- Majority of LSGs do not budget separate finances for consultation with citizens. They justify this by noting that these actions do not require a large sum of money and different budget items can be used if necessary. Most often funds for organizing consultative sessions with citizens are provided from the budget line Mayor, LED, transport, printing etc. Councilors cannot lean on the municipal budget for consulting activities with citizens.

- Referendum, polls and analysis are least used as tools for soliciting citizens input. Use of public hearings as tools is decreasing and they are mostly used upon the request of the central government institutions for presenting/discussing policies/interventions related to their work which directly impact local governments as well as by political parties. Most preferred form of participation are direct communication through public gatherings usually within neighborhood units. Citizens in rural areas are keener to participate in local consultation processes.
- Men tend to be more directly involved in community matters through public gatherings/hearings, while women, especially those from rural areas, are interested to participate but in a way that does not create additional burden on their time and divert them for their regular every-day obligations. As a result they prefer internet forums, social media and polls. Few local authorities are aware of this aspect and practice specific approaches to mobilize women or to hear their voices while others are completely gender blind and not aware of this problem and consequently not making effort to consult with women. Majority of LSGs do not have a special focus on inclusion of specific/vulnerable groups of citizens in decision-making and do not use special adapted approaches towards these target groups.
- Only a limited number of Mayors understand that in order to hear the needs of specific groups of citizens is it necessary to utilize specific tailored approaches in order to understand their concerns. In that context, Roma population and rural women in Macedonia are most concerned as well as persons with disabilities.
- LSGs very rarely use external expertise in the form of advisory bodies. Since many of them do not have internal expertise and budgets they do not review and update their strategic documents.
- Models for consultation with citizens offered by the law are not efficient and are unusable because neither citizens nor local governments cannot fulfil the legal requirements to practice them.
- Citizens are frequently disempowered to create change in the community due to manipulations and lack of results of their participation. Lack of trust towards the institutions of the system results in citizens reacting to participation by refraining to use the institutional mechanisms.

## **Conclusions**

This analysis of the extent and existing policy approaches to the issue of practices for consulting citizens when taking decisions at local level, many shortcomings have been detected that need immediate attention on part of the national and local institutions.

The main conclusions are the following:

- Current legislation and policies fail to provide user-friendly mechanisms for citizen participation which will also take into account needs of different groups of citizens.
- Gender, class, ethnicity, disability are social divisions intermixed with each other, resulting in certain social relations which make members of the underprivileged groups along these lines more excluded from voicing their concerns. In order to hear the needs of specific groups of citizens is it necessary to utilize specific tailored approaches in order to understand their concerns. In that context, Roma population and rural women in Macedonia are most concerned as well as persons with disabilities.

- Citizen participation is seen more as a process of informing citizens of the work of the local government and participation in decision-making is minimized as individual behavior and not a larger societal issue.
- Each municipality is not limited by law and can develop its own mechanisms for involving citizens according to the circumstances in the community.
- CSOs are not powerful to make a larger impact on issues of well-being of citizens.
- Citizens are demotivated to be active citizens as they are often manipulated and their initiatives are sidestepped.

## **Recommendations**

The recommendations rising from the analysis can be grouped as follows:

### **1. Legislative changes**

#### Recommendations:

- Modify/ adapt legal obligations for implementation of all forms of citizen participation. For example accepting majority of persons casting a ballot on the referendum regardless of the number of those voting.
- Conduct a census at national level. This will assist the implementation of the legally defined tools and mechanisms for citizen participation by allowing the criteria for the participatory tools to be adequately applied. For example it will provide the exact number referring to the 10% of registered voters in a community.
- Develop and include additional forms of citizen participation in the Statutes of the local governments in order to generate obligation for their utilization and for citizens to be able to hold local officials accountable. There are no legal limitations for the municipalities to be creative in devising models to involve citizens. Such a process has already begun with the community forums.
- Regulate/revise the status of the urban/rural neighbourhood units within new legal frameworks and provide detailed updated guidelines for their work including legal obligations and consequences.
- Provide impetus for accelerating the process of decentralization and moving it from the current status quo condition.
- Create conditions and mechanisms for strong delineation between political party and municipal activity in order to limit possibility of abuse of municipal funds for political party activities.

### **2. Local governments**

Our analysis shows that changing the organizational culture and the commitment towards real citizen participation is a challenge structurally rooted in institutions of the system, and we expect that the changes proposed here will be the hardest part to implement, since this is the area where most of the shortcomings were identified.



### Recommendations:

- Initiate and apply a variety of tools for citizen participation not only those mentioned in the law. This provides the opportunity for LSGs to be creative and innovative in their consultation with citizens. Also, create tailored approaches for hearing the needs of specific groups of in order to understand their concerns. In that context, Roma population and rural women in Macedonia are most concerned as well as persons with disabilities.
- Enable easier access and use by citizens and CSOs of existing tools for citizens participation by improving them. For example amend the practice of presenting detailed municipal urban plans in an overly mechanical manner and ensure that discussion is not very technical in order to leave space for citizens to place their concerns, and ensure that sufficient time is allocated for discussing and presenting urban plans; provide comfortable and wide locations for public gatherings, develop citizen friendly formats of key documents such as municipal budgets etc.
- Increase the participation of citizens in the bodies of the LSG. This could be done by supplementing the existing committees such as committees for equal opportunities of men and women or the committee for relations between communities with representatives of CSOs and citizens. In addition these committees should work within their mandate to review all work plans of the municipality and its enterprises in order to incorporate the principle of gender /ethnic equality, as well as monitor their implementation. This goes in line with the adoption and application by LSGs of specific approaches to specific social groups in the community.
- The annual work plans (their main activities) of the public communal enterprises should be presented and discussed with the public.
- Shift focus from informing citizens to actually involving them in the whole process of decision-making from identification of problems, offering and discussing solutions, implementing jointly agreed solutions, monitoring and reporting.
- Improve partnerships with CSOs.
- Councilors to educate themselves on the competences of the local government and their roles and responsibilities within it.
- Mayors and Councilors to make a strong delineation between their political party engagement and function/position within LSG.

### **3. CSOs**

- CSOs should build their own expertise on local government competences and tools for citizen's participation. They should also educate their constituents on their rights and ways for exercising these rights.
- CSOs should be more proactive in their communication with LSGs and take over their role as watchdogs in order to increase their influence. They need to articulate citizen's requests and transfer them to LSGs since they have advantage in advocating their interests.
- CSOs (individually or with government) should employ awareness raising activities and carry out public awareness campaigns, which refer to mechanisms and rights of citizens to be included in decision-making processes. They need to condemn authoritarian practices in a non-partisan way and send the message that all people are free and have the right to demand better lives.

#### **4. Donor Agencies**

- Donors' policies, should correct their preference for channeling funds through international organizations and instead redirect funds to CSOs. Otherwise, donors will contribute negatively to the sustainability of CSOs and consequently will decrease their possibilities to advocate for citizens interests and rights and to focus on their core missions.
- In addition, when funding local government initiates especially infrastructural investments, donors should require substantial proof that these actions have been prioritized by citizens. They should also incorporate assessment of the impacts of these actions on the local communities especially specific social groups.
- Donors should shift back their interest to the topic of decentralization and support projects which include both infrastructural and legal aspects of the process.

### **Limits of our analysis**

With this analysis we have attempted to provide insight into the practices used by the local governments to consult citizens in areas under direct competence of the local authorities which impact their wellbeing and to understand the specific local manifestations of these practices, their use and their effects.

A major difficulty was the time-frame for the analysis which stipulated 22 working days for performing 32 interviews, 8 focus groups and poll as well as processing and analysis of results placing strain on the researcher. Response of the planned and required institutions was difficult to obtain in such a short period of time. Hence Mayors from the urban municipalities from the Polog and Pelagonija region could not be reached and had to be replaced by 2 Mayors of rural municipalities. Linked to this is the inclusion of women Mayors. Due to the number of women mayors in the country a convenient appointment could not be reached with any of them, hence gender misbalance is reflected in the sample. Also, in order to ensure methodological consistency a total of sixteen councillors were interviewed instead of twelve.

This work is attempting to analyse the practices of consulting citizens at national level. It should be noted that the data it is based on does not stand for a representative sample hence conclusions are indicative and enable coming to general conclusions regarding the consultations with citizens process.

Despite all limitations, we expect that the analysis will contribute to raising awareness about this issue and inspire further research in the area, as well as consequent actions. We expect that the findings and the recommendations provided above will become part of amore strategic framework that will guide interventions to increase citizens activeness and municipal response, enabling citizens from diverse backgrounds to fulfill their fundamental right to well-being in their own communities.

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