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Authors: Kristina Hadji-Vasileva, Elena Timcheva, Aleksandar Kolekeski, Kristijan Panev

Copy editor: Marija Ivanova

Translation: Dalibor Sandev (mac-alb), Ana Miteva (mac-eng)

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GLOSARY OF ACRONYMS

BS	BUSINESS SECTOR
SCO	CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATION
DUP	DETAILED URBAN PLAN
EU	EUROPEAN UNION
FG	FOCUS GROUP
LCDF	LOCAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION
GUP	GENERAL URBAN PLAN
LED	LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
LGU	LOCAL GOVERNMENT UNIT
LESW	LOCAL ECONOMIC SOCIAL WORLD
LG	LOCAL GOVERNMENT
LC	LOCAL COMMUNITY
NGO	NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATION
UC	URBAN COMMUNITY
MOU	MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING
OECD	ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC COOPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ther consultation with citizens remains a cornerstone of participatory and transparent governance, enabling citizens to actively contribute to their social and local development by means of their own ideas and participation. Although the bases for this consultation are elaborated in the country legal framework, yet the practice shows that significant improvements can be made in their implementation at the local level.

This analysis, primarily based on a complex methodological approach that includes citizen surveys, interviews with local stakeholders and focus groups, aims to provide a complete insight into the current practices and local governments' and citizens' perceptions on civic participation.

The analysis shows that the local governments are making efforts to involve citizens, especially when it comes to informing them about the work of the municipality. In that context, local authorities actively use all means of communication available to them, enabling citizens to have a general picture of what their local government is doing.

However, challenges arise when citizens need to be equally involved in the decision-making processes. Despite the the existing mechanisms and tools in the legal documents, they are often seen as quite complex and binding to be applied with minimum criteria. As a result, the citizens refrain from using them while the local governments use them selectively.

Citizens mostly prefer direct contact with decision-makers, which is an approach considered to be the most effective by the local governments. Therefore, the forms of direct consultation such as citizens' gatherings and face-to face meetings are the most common methods of involvement.

Citizens are mainly focused on crucial topics such as the budget, development of urban plans as well as capital investments, but it seems that these consulations with citizens are often superficial and serve more as a formality. Civil society organizations feel that local authorities mostly involve citizens when they can directly benefit from it.

On the other hand, citizens show very low level of participation and they rarely approach the local government for any issues of their concern which strongly indicates the need to improve the approaches and mechanisms for citizens' participation as well as to increase the awareness and motivation of citizens to participate.

Although there is a legal basis and a will for citizen participation,

still additional efforts and improvements are needed for effective implementation and real inclusion of citizens in decision-making processes at local level. This analysis provides a set of recommendations for local authorities, citizens and other interested parties in order to improve the processes of citizen participation at municipal level, with the ultimate goal of achieving greater transparency, accountability and effectiveness of the local governance.

The analysis from 2023 is based on the previous analysis from 2017[1] of the current practices of using the mechanisms for consultation with the citizens in public-policy making at local level and its effectiveness. Both analyses reflect similar observations and challenges in the context of citizens' participation in decision-making at the local level, but they also indicate some evolutionary changes over time. Summarizing the data, we come to the following conclusion:

Both analyses indicate that there is a significant need to increase the awareness and active involvement of citizens in decision-making at the local level. However, despite the existing mechanisms for participation, the problem of low interest and action still remains visible.

Both analyses emphasize the need for improved communication and spreading information among citizens by the local governments. The effective communication is considered a crucial challenge in enhancing participation and transparency.

There is a tendency to focus the consultations on specific topics, such as infrastructure projects and urban planning. Over time, the consultation topics need to diversify in order to respond to a wider range of citizens' interests.

There are various participation tools available, but both analyses indicate problems with their effectiveness and acceptance by citizens.

Although there is a general belief that citizens' participation can have a positive effect, still there is a feeling of frustration when the participation does not result in visible changes or improvements.

It is evident that there has been a continuous process of developing and changing the practices and perceptions of civic participation, particularly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the basic challenges and trends remain consistent between the two analyses. Thereby, the analysis emphasizes the need for continuous adaptation and innovation of the methods and tools used to involve citizens in decision-making processes on local level.

[1] Analysis of the current practices of using the mechanisms for consultation with citizens in public policy-making and its effectiveness. Electronic source / Kristina Hadji-Vasileva/ - Shtip:Local Community Development Foundation, 2017

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this analysis, carried out within the project "Organizational support for strengthening local democracy", is to review and update the current practices of civic participation, that is, the effectiveness of the mechanisms for ensuring direct participation of citizens in the processes of creating public policies and adopting decisions on local level in the past few years, including the pandemic period of Covid-19. Taking the previous analysis from 2017 as a starting position, this research shows an updated cross-section of the stakeholders behavior regarding the topic in order to find mutually acceptable solutions.

Through the obtained data and conclusions, this project strives to put more pressure on LGUs for more frequent use and strengthening of the mechanisms for direct democracy of citizen participation, but also to raise the citizens' awareness about the importance of their participation in the creation of local policies.

The project focuses on fulfilling the following specific objectives:

Improving the position of civil society for effective representation of the target group interests

Strengthening institutional and financial sustainability of local CSOs (grass roots);

Increasing citizens' involvement in public policy-making.

These objectives are also in line with the EU and the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia commitments to support and promote democracy and human rights by enchancing participatory and representative democracy, strengthening the overall democratic cycle in particular by reinforcing an active role of the civil society and the rule of law and establishing a structural dialogue with the civil society that will contribute and provide support to the path of reforms for the country's integration into the European Union.

The involvement of citizens in decision-making processes is more intensified and is becoming synonymous with successful decentralization and democracy in action. The basis of this process is the idea of active citizen participation, where citizens are not only consulted but they also actively contribute to the creation of policies that affect their communities. In that sense, effective communication between citizens and local authorities is key to identifying priorities and using municipal resources in the best possible way.

However, in order to achieve maximum effectiveness of this process, it is necessary to improve the communication and to build and strengthen institutional mechanisms that will enable wider and more substantial participation of citizens. This includes the citizens opportunity to express themselves and to influence decisions that directly affect them, as well as for local authorities to receive full support and legitimacy for their policies.

In order to evaluate and analyse the current state of mechanisms for citizen participation at the local level, this analysis takes into account the experiences and practices of local authorities and citizens. The main objective is to identify the areas for improvements and to propose concrete steps for their implementation, which will increase participation and democracy in Macedonia.

Having this in mind, the specific objectives of this analysis are:

To analyse the current situation regarding the mechanisms for citizens' consultation in the process of public policy-making on local level

To enable discussion between local stakeholders (LGUs, CSOs)

To stimulate the sharing and replication of good practices for consultation mechanisms between the LG

To lobby the LG units for the institutionalization of the proposed mechanisms

Considering the current challenges and potentials, the analysis aims to serve as a basis for creating a more open and inclusive local government in the Republic of North Macedonia, which will actively involve its citizens in decision-making processes, and contribute to more sustainable and efficient local communities.

MACEDONIAN LEGAL CONTEXT

Active and transparent involvement of citizens in the creation of regulations is a prerequisite for the development of democratic society whose postulates are democratic values, transparency and accountability. The modern, democratic concept of active citizen participation expects citizens to vigilantly monitor the work of their elected representatives and to be constantly involved in the local policies development, not just to react to them after they are enacted. Accordingly, civic participation is defined as any activity of the citizens to come together, get informed, discuss the problems of their community, actively participate in the decision–making processes on local level and offer potential solutions to create policies that would improve the quality of their life and the life of their fellow citizens. By involving different stakeholders, the Government will access new ideas, information and resources which are important in the policy-creation processes and will contribute to building mutual trust and developing democratic principles.

This type of engaged citizenship, referring to the citizens who are actively involved in the improvement processes of their communities and their country, is of a great benefit to civil society and it is the main indicator of the "health" of communities, the state democracy and the degree of satisfaction among citizens.

The Law on Local Self-Government of the Republic of North Macedonia from 2002 enumerates several opportunities for citizen participation, but it also leaves space to the municipalities for new and additional possibilities of citizen involvement. However, the research of the Local Community Development Foundation - Shtip on civic participation in the pre-pandemic period showed a challenging situation when it comes to including citizens as equal partners in the decision-making process. Both citizens and local authorities have at their disposal tools and mechanisms laid out in the legal documents, they refrain from using them because they are quite complex, and citizens rarely initiate them while the local authorities selectively use them and devoid of their legal binding features meaning that they use them in a simplified and adapted mode[2].

The purpose of this analysis carried out within the project **"Organizational support for strengthening local democracy"** was to review and update the current practices of citizen participation, and the effectiveness of the mechanisms for direct participation of citizens in policy-making on local level in the last few years, including the pandemic period of Covid-19. Taking the previous analysis from 2017 as a starting position, this research shows an updated cross-section of the behavior of concerned stakeholders in relation to the topic in order to find mutually acceptable solutions.

By the obtained data and conclusions, this project aims to put pressure on LGUs for more frequent use and strengthening the mechanisms for direct democracy of citizen participation, but also to raise the awareness of citizens about the importance of their participation in the policy making on local level.

The project is aiming at fulfilling the following specific objectives:

Improving the position of civil society for effective representation of the target group interests

Strengthening the institutional and financial sustainability of local CSOs (grass roots);

Increasing citizens'participation in the public policy-making.

These goals are also in line with the commitments of the EU and the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia to support and promote democracy and human rights by enchancing participatory and representative democracy, strengthening the overall democratic cycle in particular by reinforcing active role of the civil society, the rule of law and establishing of a structured dialogue with civil society that will contribute and provide support on the path of reforms for the country's integration into the European Union.

MACEDONIAN LEGAL CONTEXT

Citizen participation is closely related to the process of decentralization, which requires organizing the local self-government system in the country and transfering the large number of responsibilities from central to local government level. A successful process of decentralization also implies civic inclusion, that is, the inclusion and constant communication between the local

[2] Analysis of the current practices of using the mechanisms for consultation with the citizens in policy-making on local level and itsr effectiveness - Kristina Hadji-Vasileva, Local Community Development Foundation, Shtip, 2017

community and the government in the decision-making and policy-creating processes, by which the local authorities are in a position to better recognize the local needs and to manage public expenses more efficiently.

The legal framework for direct participation of citizens in decision-making at the local level in the Republic of North Macedonia is regulated by **the Law on Local Self-Government**[3] as "individual or collective involvement of municipality residents in decision-making on matters of local importance at different levels of decision-making". The law foresees the possibility of immediate citizen participation in decision-making processes on matters of local importance through citizen initiative, citizen gatherings and referendum (Article 25) as well as through submission of petitions and proposals (Article 29) and public forums, surveys and proposals (Article 30). In addition, in municipalities in which at least 20% of the total number of residents determined by the last population census belong to a certain community, a Commision for Inter-Community Relations is established and its task is to consider issues regarding the relations between different communities in the municipality and gives opinions and suggestions to solve them (Article 55).

In compliance with the Law, the costs for direct participation of citizens in decision-making processes are covered by the municipal budget (Article 25).

According to the Law, the statute is defined as the document with the greatest legal power in the municipalities. The statute regulates the entire organisation and operation of the municipal bodies, as well as other important aspects related to the citizen involvement in decision-making, spreading information among citizens, in what cases the public will be excluded from council sessions, citizens pettitions and proposals and acting upon them, organizing public forums, conducting surveys and collecting proposals from citizens. Each municipality can, in its Statute, propose other ways of direct citizen participation in accordance with the Constitution and this Law.

In order to consider issues and proposals related to the quality of the municipality public services, the council can also establish a Consumer Protection Commission, consisting of representatives of larger groups of public services users.

The Law on Local Self-Government also mandates that the council sessions are public and the citizens are not excluded from participating in the debates on the municipal budget and annual municipal financial accounst and reports.

The Law on Referendum and other forms of direct citizen participation[4] additionaly regulates the mechaninsm for direct citizens participation, which includes announcing and conducting referendum, convening and holding citizens meetings and launching citizen's initiative on issues of national or local concerns.

This law lays out the procedures for announcing and implementing referendum, civic initiative and citizens gathering.

[3] Law on Local Self-Government, 2002 - "Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia" no. 5/2022 of January 29, 2002

[4] Law Referendum, - (Official Gazette of the Republic of Moldova No. 81/2005); Decision of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Macedonia U. No. 195/2005 of December 21 and 22, 2005, (Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia No. 81/2005 No. 3/2006)

A Referendum on local level is announced by the Council, for issues under its authority, upon its initiative or at the request of at least 20% of the municipality citizens, whereas it is not allowed to be announced for issues related to the budget or the final account of the municipality's budget. The decisions are considered adopted only if they are voted by the majority of the total number of citizens who voted, and if more than half of the total number of citizens registered in the extract from the municipality Electoral List turned out to vote. The decision adopted on the referendum is binding for the Council. The council is obliged within 60 days of the announcement of the referendum results, to regulate the issue in accordance with the results obtained on the referendum.

A citizens' initiative on local level can be launched for the adoption of certain municipality acts and for the announcement of a referendum on local level.

In order to use citizen's initiative tool at the local level it need to be supported by at least 10% of the voters in the municipality with their own signatures. Then the municipality council is obliged to discuss the proposal at the latest within 30 days after the raising of the intiative and to inform the citizens on its decision. The proposer is obliged to implement the civil initiative at the local level within one month from the day of receiving a notice of its regularity.

A gathering of citizens is convened in order to express citizens view on particular issues of local importance and issues of importance for LC or UC and for the purpose of launching initiatives foir resolving issues of local importance. At this type of gatherings, local citizens review the issues, take positions and prepare proposals regarding topics of directy and everyday importance on the life and work of the municipality or local community.

The citizens gathering is 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

The citizens gathering is convened by the mayor of the municipality, upon his own initiative, at the request of the council or at the request of at least 10% of the voters in the municipality, or of the local or urban community for which the assembly is convened. The mayor is due within 30 days of receiving the intiative to organive the gathering. The municipal bodies are also obliged within 90 days to review the conclusions made at the citizens gathering and inform the citizens on their decision.

Every citizen has the right, individually or jointly with others, to submit appeals and proposals regarding the work of the municipal bodies and the municipal administration. In that case, the mayor has to create conditions for submitting of appeals and proposals, to provide a detailed reply for the appealer at the latest within 60 days after the receipt of the appeals, and to submit the appeals and proposals that are not under the municipal competence to the relevant body and notify the appealer about it.

While drafting the municipality regulations, the council or the mayor may previously organize public forums, conduct surveys or request proposals from citizens.

In the past ten years, these forms of citizens' consultations on local level have been supplemented by the so called community forums. Most municipalities in North Macedonia provide for forums in their statutes, primarily as a result of the development program of the Swiss Embassy, which promotes them as one of the most effective forms of citizen involvement in building and making decisions in local self-governments.

Existing analyzes and evaluations indicate that most of the provisions relating to transparency, participation and accountability are not fully applied due to the lack of LGU capacities. For the implementation of certain tools for direct participation of citizens in the decision-making process, the census is extremely high and it is an obstacle to the implementation of these tools. The lack of capacity in the municipalities, the lack of a separate budget for the implementation of the Law provisions and not having precise rules for their implementation reinforces the impression that the implementation of the provisions is left to the will of the donor community and that there is a lack of will from the local stakeholders for all these processes at the local level[5].

The latest changes in **the Law on financing the local self-government units**[6], the emphisized importance of transparency in the work of the municipality. **The Law on Budgets**[7] and **the Law on Budget Execution**[8] also emphasize the transparency in budgeting processes at the local level. In addition, the Law on Budgets stipulates that "municipalities at the local level should establish a mechanism for citizens' participation in the process of proposing new initiatives in when preparing strategic plans and fiscal strategy of the municipality".

Another important legislation and a powerful tool for realizing the right to information and ensuruing transparency and openness of the municipalities and institutions is **the Law on Free Access to Public Information**[9]. This Law enables natural and legal persons to exercise the right of free access to information of a public nature, and the holders of information are obliged to provide the public with the information regarding their work. In 2018, the OSCE published a Legal Analysis of the proposed amendments to the Law on Free Access to Public Information, which, among other things, emphasized the need to comply with international standards, that is, to oblige public authorities to proactively publish information of public interest, even when there is no specific request for it. It also mandates that the procedures for accessing information be simple, fast and cheap, and that the privacy protection should be one of the priorities[10].

In that direction, the Ministry of Local Self-Government in 2023 prepared the **Transparency Code at the local level**[11], which regulates the standards for ensuring minimum transparency of the local government. When creating these standards, the interest of citizens / civil society organizations regarding issues that are important to them for ensuring transparency and accountability, their involvement in policy-making processes at the local level, as well as

[5] Report on the evaluation of the implementation of the Law on Local Self-Government - Ministry of Local Self-Government, April 2020 /Analysis of the existing practices of using mechanisms for consultation with citizens in the creation of local policies and their effectiveness – Local Community Development Foundation, Shtip, 2017

[6] The Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Law on Financing Local Self-Government Units ("Official Gazette of RSM" No. 173/22)

[7] Law on Budgets (Official Gazette of RSM, No. 203 of 19.9.2022)

[8] Law on the budget execution (Official Gazette of RSM, No. 282 of 27.12.2022)

[9] Law on free access to information of a public nature (Official Gazette of RSM, No. 101 of 22.15.2029)

[10] Legal analysis of the proposed amendments to the Law on Freedom of Access to Public Information - OSCE, 2018

[11] Local Transparency Code, USAID, September 2022

information that citizens believe will facilitate their access to public services, are all taken into consideration. According to the latest research, i.e the Active Transparency Index, the active transparency of municipalities in 2023 was 74%, and the most transparent region in the country is the Eastern region, right behind which are the Southeastern and Southwestern regions. Skopje has been the least transparent region in the country, for years[12].

As for the openness of the municipalities, i.e. the Openness Index, last measured in 2022, shows 27%, which is an indication of a low level of openness for cooperation with the local government in Republic of North Macedonia. Among the municipalities with the highest level of "openness" are Valandovo (62%), Prilep (59%), Bitola (57%), Ohrid (54%) and others, while the lowest ranked are Butel (6%), Sopishte (5%), Arachinovo and Zelenikovo (3 %) and the municipality of Krivogashtanis with 0 %[13].

In order to ensure continuous development of the local self-government and at the same time to harmonize the system with the normative, institutional, political and administrative criteria and standards of the EU, in line with the framework of the Decision to start the negotiations of the Republic of North Macedonia for accession to the EU, a new **Program for Sustainable Local Development and Decentralization 2021-2026**[14] was also created. The program results at the end of the planned period envisage essentially positive changes in the functioning of local governments, among other things, transparent and accountable implementation of competences and consistent inclusion of citizens and citizens associations in the processes of preparation, adoption and implementation of important decisions, policies and local economic development measures.

The principles of transparency and participation are included in **the Law on Balanced Regional Development**[15] and the new ten-year **Strategy for Regional Development of the RSM - 2021-2031**[16] and they refer to the need for regular, timely and objective information to the public regarding the policy measures, encouraging balanced regional development, enabling free access to information for all interested parties (transparency) and active involvement of all citizens in the process of creating and implementing regional policy.

The Ministry of Local Self-Government, the Bureau for Balanced Regional Development and 8 other Centers for the Development of Planning Regions are in charge of implementing the Law on Proportional Regional Development and the Strategy for Regional Development of the RSM. They carry out activities which contribute to the policy objectives set out in the planning documents for balanced regional development.

[12] Active Transparency Index 2023 - Open Society Foundation and Center for Civic Communications, July 2023

[13] Assessment of the good governance of the local self-government units in the Republic of North Macedonia, the index of openness - Metamorfosis Foundation, August 2022

[14] Program for Sustainable Local Development and Decentralization 2021-2026 - Ministry of Local Self-Government

[15] Law on balanced regional development ((Official Gazette of RSM, no. 24 of 29.01.2021)

[16] Strategy for regional development of RSM - 2021-2031

In order to increase citizens participation when adopting the programs for the development of planning regions, as well as to provide solutions that will address the real needs of citizens at a regional level, the Bureau developed a concept for regional community forums as a tool for identification, prioritization and preparation of projects financed by the Ministry for local government and Bureau for regional development[17].

POLITICAL REVIEW AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION

During the last few years, due to political and economic changes caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the economic and energy crisis have increasingly continued to shape the socio-economic and political life in North Macedonia. Following the local elections in October 2021, the political terrain in the country has undergone serious changes after the Coalition between the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) and the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), which led the country since the last parliamentary elections in July 2020, had lost its political majority and leadership mainly in larger cities, including the city of Skopje. The Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization - Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) managed to win the majority of votes in 42 municipalities which resuts in the resignation of then Prime Minister Zoran Zaev from all political positions[18].

The election campaigns and promises of the two leading political parties in the country were mainly oriented towards the country's long-standing commitments to EU membership and the multiple delays in the beginning of the negotiations due to the unresolved conflicts with Bulgaria, the disagreements of the Government regarding the handling of the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the economic situation followed by an increasing percentage of unemployment and immigration[19]. The local elections in 2021 also offered a "colorful" range of councilor lists and composition of municipal councils, that is, in addition to the large parties, candidates / councillors from smaller parties as well as from independent lists took their places on the elections. Out of a total of 67 independent council lists, candidates from 44 independent lists with almost 55,000 votes managed to enter the municipal councils, out of which 3 candidates were also elected mayors. This shows that the citizens channeled the growing dissatisfaction of local problems solutions and mistrust in the big parties by taking concrete steps for participation and taking control over the decision-making processes in their municipalities[20].

[17] Regional Community Forums tool for identification, prioritization and preparation of projects for financing by MLG and BRD-BRD, 2020

[18] Civil Society Sustainability Index for North Macedonia in 2021, USAID, FHI 360

[19] ODIHR Election Observation MissionFinal Report from Local Elections October 17 and 31, 2021

[20] Revised report on the conducted elections for members of municipal councils and the Skopje Trad Council and mayors of municipalities and the mayor of the city of Skopje - State Election Commission/https://rb.gy/pkjuo

With the latest changes in the Electoral Code[21] from March 2024, the threshold for collecting signatures for the candidacy of independent MPs is increased to 1% of the registered voters in the electoral unit, which makes it more difficult for citizens, civil associations and independent lists to run. The law was passed without prior public debate and discussion.

Additionally, according to the general analysis of gender representation, out of a total 1347 elected councilors, 491 or 36.45% are women. Out of a total 80 municipal and 1 city councils, only in one municipality (Konche municipality) women councilors are more represented than men councilors, and in two municipal councils (Centar Župa and Plasnica municipalities) only one woman was elected. Although the gender quota, that is at least 40% of the candidates on the electoral lists for municipal councils should be persons of the underrepresented gender, has not been met, yet little progress could be seen in the gender balance in political participation compared to the quota of 30% previously anticipated by the legislation.

Referring to civic participation as an indicator of the "health" of the community and democratic development of the country, the research in the last few years have shown that the Covid 19 health crisis and its consequences on the lives of citizens, institutions and economy, however, have had a great impact on the level of citizen satisfaction with the local government and their engagement in the decision-making processes[22].

Thus, compared to the period before the pandemic and the research conducted in the period from 2012 to 2016[23], during and post-Covid period, no major changes have been observed in the level of citizen satisfaction and their sense of belonging to place of residence (city or village), but there has been a decline in the general satisfaction with the country - the Republic of North Macedonia as a place of residence[24].

The citizens satisfied with the overall operation of the local government (41%) believe that the municipalities work well and are generally satisfied with the services they provide (44%), including the availability of information from the municipality (municipal newspaper, website, local television \ radio...) and information about municipal services and activities.

On the other hand, the main aspects of citizens' dissatisfaction regarding the work of local authorities are: the lack of available information regarding the work of the municipal council, information about state services and activities, the opportunity to participate in making strategic decisions of local importance (42%), information about the spending of the municipal budget (highest 48%), promoting cooperation between different ethnic communities and dealing with corruption[25].

The average rating on the overall operation of the local government was measured at 3.2, out of 5, while satisfaction with local democracy, transparency and accountability was rated at 2.81.

21 Electoral Code, March 2024, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ZJMruqcNI-yC5VuWSzpfT9BFeKphm5An/view (accessed on April 5, 2024).

22 Civic participation in the Republic of North Macedonia 2020-2022 - Open Society Foundation - Macedonia

23 Citizens and their communities: Civic participation, activism and volunteering in the Republic of Moldova. Macedonia - FOOM, Reactor - Skopje, 2016

24 Civic participation in the Republic of North Macedonia with an additional review of the Covid-19 pandemic - Open Society Foundation, Reactor, Center for Civic Communications, Eurotink, 2021

25 Public opinion survey report on citizens' satisfaction with local services - UNDP, Indago, September 2022

These data obtained in the period 2019-2022 confirm the unchanged flow of citizen opinion with the pre-pandemic period (2016-2017), where analyzes[26] show that local authorities focus more on undertaking activities to inform citizens, rather than involving them in decision-making processes.

The citizens' general satisfaction with the local authorities is directly related to the citizens' perception of their possibility to influence the decision-making on local level. That is, over 80% of the population who were dissatisfied with the work of the local government believes that they cannot influence the decisions made at the local level, although it is important for them to be part of this process (65%). Such dissatisfaction and negative perception of their small impact on decision-making on local level results in the negative "trend" of citizen participation. This means that there has been a decline in the number of citizens who were actively involved in some kind of organized initiatives for improving their place of residence, from 20% in the period from 2019-2020, to 15% in 2021, and continues with a negative tendency in 2022[27].

The most common forms to actively involve citizens in organized activity or public policy-making on local level were: citizens' gatherings (60%), civic initiative (35%), public hearing (32%), mayor's open day (27%), public opinion polls (26%), the Community Forum (18%), Council meetings (13%), and referendum (10%). Compared to 2021, in 2022 there was a greater participation in citizen gatherings and communities forums, but also lower participation in civic initiatives, public opinion polls, Council meetings and referenda. Unlike 2021, when about 22% of the proposed proposals / initiatives were accepted, in 2022 this percentage is higher and amounts up to 34%. The percentage is higher (increase from 19% in 2021 to 33% in 2022) of those proposals / initiatives that were in the procedure or awaiting a decision, and the number of rejected proposals / initiatives decreased (from 49% to 30%). Most of these initiatives were for solving communal problems (36%), actions to preserve and improve the environment (25%), initiatives for urbanism and infrastructure repairs (20%), education (12%), social policy and employment (3 .3%), culture, public order and peace, etc[28].

The condition with the other forms of civil activism over the years continues to follow an unenviable level. "Contact activism", that is, direct contact with the concerned institutions to solve certain issues, compared to previous years, shows a slight increase of 10% (2020 -18%, 2021 - 28%), which means that there is a slight increase in the number of citizens who made direct contacts with the representatives of local institutions (mayors, councilors) and political parties, as well as in the percentage of citizens who participated in public hearings, public meetings, working groups, signed petitions, used their opportunity to file a petition or submitted a proposal to the institutions. However, such tendencies are more noticeable when certain political or social events were held, such as the local elections in 2021, which in certain periods cause an increase or decrease in the intensity of using the tools for participation.

[26] Analysis of the current practices of using the mechanisms for consultation with the citizens in public policy making on local level and its effectiveness - Kristina Hadji-Vasileva, Foundation for the Development of the Local Community, Shtip, 2017

[27] Civic participation in the Republic of North Macedonia 2020-2022 - Open Society Foundation - Macedonia

[28] Public opinion survey report on citizens' satisfaction with local services - UNDP, Indago, September 2022/Citizen participation and EU perspectives: Analysis of public opinion - Reactor - Action research, 2021

Despite the minimal increases in the use of some of the tools for direct citizen participation as well as contact activism, the general conclusion still prevails that there is still a relatively low use of the existing participation mechanisms in the processes of making policies or decisions of local importance and there is a real need for greater involvement of citizens. But it is worth noting the data that the percentage of interested citizens, especially women, is constantly increasing, and in the future they would like to be informed or directly invited by the municipality to get involved in some organized civic activity[29].

According to the citizens, there are several different reasons for their low interest in civic participation and currently low engagement in decision-making and problem-solving processes in local communities. As a general remark, it is considered that the organizational capacities of the municipalities in general or to a very low extent allow inclusion of citizens in the decision-making process on local level. This indicator shows improvement in 2022, when there was a slight decrease in the percentage of citizens who believed that the way in which the municipality is organized does not at all or to a very small extent allows the inclusion of citizens in the decision-making on local level (a decrease of 59% in 2021 to 50% in 2022)[30] . The citizens who have already taken part in some civic activity, think that the reduced civic interest and its constant decrease over time is due to the poor results of the civic initiatives, that is, the lack of confidence that something will change; the fact that the institutions remain passive and often pass their responsibility to other bodies and institutions; empty and unfulfilled promises of the government and not undertaking any actions in response to the citizens' needs. In addition, the lack of time, unfamiliarity or lack of information regarding the processes, little or no initiative by the institutions are also considered the main "culprits" for the low civic interest[31].

From a demographic perspective, the analyses have confirmed the multi-year "dominance" of male gender in decision-making and issues-solving on local level, as well as the persons with higher levels of formal education and better social status.

Analysing the separate categories - women and women from rural communities, there is less interest among them in taking part in events or initiatives that can have an effective impact on the community where they live. According to women interviewees, this is a "man's world" where the women's voices are not taken seriously and women's initiatives are less effective compared to men's or mixed initiatives.

Women from rural areas consider that their limited time and insufficient assistance in performing their daily duties, which in turn indicates unrecognized and unappreciated labor, additionally limits their civic participation. Furthermore, the gender prejudices and stereotypes, as well as poorly developed awareness, are cited as a demotivating factor.

[28] Civic participation in the Republic of North Macedonia with an additional review of the Covid-19 pandemic - Open Society Foundation, Reactor, Center for Civic Communications, Eurotink, 2021

[30] Public opinion survey report on citizens' satisfaction with local services - UNDP, Indago, September 2022

[31] Civic participation in the Republic of North Macedonia 2020-2022 - Open Society Foundation - Macedonia/The impact of demographic factors on citizen participation in public life and voter education in North Macedonia - Support for electoral reforms, 2021

If we compare the rural and urban population, the urban shows more actions, probably due to easier access to resources, non-governmental organizations and generally more opportunities for participation. But it is notable that people living in rural and remote communities and people with disabilities have a greater interest in participating in civic life, although they are less active due to the lack of access.

In urban communities, the population prefers to be informed by reading brochures and leaflets, discussing social issues that concern them with their colleagues and/or friends and answering questionnaires. They would least participate in political party rallies, public debates or online meetings.

On the other hand, the population in rural communities shows low motivation for civic participation, that is, 61% of the rural population does not believe in achieving positive changes through individual engagement or the engagement of non-governmental organizations, and 20% have no interest in politics at all. Seven out of ten people living in rural settlements have never been involved in an event, activity or process that could affect the community or their local environment, nor are they interested in more active civic participation[32].

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

In terms of civil sector, that is, the civil society organizations and their sustainability during and post-pandemic period, certain changes have been observed from several different aspects. Initially, the legal framework for the civil sector was significally improved by the adoption of new strategies and legal amendments, whereas the reduction of state funds and current restrictions due to the pandemic negatively affected the financial sustainability of the civil sector, which was already fragile, especially the smaller CSOs and organizations outside Skopje. Some of the negative legal aspects included: the new provisions of the Law on Protection of Personal Data and the Law on Prevention of Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism of 2021 which have complicated the work of CSOs and may impose costs that are disproportionate to the size and

[32] The impact of demographic factors on citizens' participation in public life and voter education in North Macedonia - Support for electoral reforms, 2021/Citizen participation and EU perspectives: Analysis of public opinion - Reactor - Research in action, 2021

capacities of some CSOs, other provisions of the Law on Prevention of Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism which imposed additional administrative burdens on NGOs, such as the requirement to provide additional information on their ownership structure, etc. Another significant challenge was the reduced opportunities for the organizations to represent themselves and have an open discussion with the state institutions. More to this, the role of CSOs in creating new ideas for initiativesactivities has slightly decreased. The crisis contributed to bringing to light the deficiencies in the CSOs capacities, regarding the equipment they needed for functional operation of their organizations, which additionally limited their opportunities for networking and coordinating during the crisis[33].

On the other hand, the state authorities did not find a way to include the organizations in repairing the damages caused by the crisis, which may have long-term effects on the trust of the civil sector to participate in the long run.

The continued absence of publicly available information regarding the financing of the civil associations continues to indicate non-transparency of the procedures for the allocation of funds, lack of insight into the spending of the municipality budgets and especially the lack of feedback and evaluation on the effect of the spent funds in the community. Each year, the municipalities allocate funds for CSO activities, in a separate budget item 463 - Transfers to NGOs. This budget item is also divided among several other categories and entities that are not registered as associations or foundations and are often financed from it. Durong the pandemic period, but also in any situation where the municipalities do not have properly planned funds, they immediately resort to the budget allocated for CSOs. Municipalities keep this budget item as insurance that covers other expenses, and during budget rebalancing, this item is usually reduced.

This is one of the indicators of to what extent the municipalities are really interested in development, support and cooperation with the civil sector regarding the important issues such as the improvement of the living conditions in their municipalities and the low level of perception of associations as significant actors and long-term partners in the process of community development[34].

This conclusion is in accordance with the findings in the Analysis of the Local Community Development Foundation Shtip[35] that CSOs are involved in the work of municipalities with limited capacity, that is, the local authorities benefit from their expertise and capacities, particularly in the preparation of municipal strategic documents. Most of the time, the support from the local self-government is limited only to signing Memorandums of Cooperation, providing some kind of small support, and is limited to less important issues, which do not have a great impact on the citizens' lives.

[33] Civil society sustainability index for North Macedonia in 2021, USAID, FHI 360/Civil participation in the Republic of North Macedonia with additional reference to the Covid-19 pandemic - Open Society Foundation, Reactor, Center for Civic Communications, Eurotink, 2021

[34] TO WHAT EXTENT THE MUNICIPALITIES SUPPORT THE CIVIL ORGANIZATIONS - COMMUNITY Network, Shtip 2022

[35] Analysis of the existing practices of using mechanisms for consultation with citizens in the creation of local policies and their efficiency - Kristina Hadji-Vasileva, Local Community Development Foundation, Shtip, 2017

During 2021, there were some positive changes which included the adoption of the new Strategy for Cooperation and Development of Civil Society for the period 2022-2024, the National Strategy for the Volunteering Promotion and Development 2021-2025, the successful involvement of CSOs in the creation of several drafts laws, the absence of reported cases of harassment of NGOs by state institutions, the absence of legal restrictions regarding the possibilities of access to various sources of funding, including economic activities, donation campaigns, foreign donors, or public procurement tenders, etc. In addition, in 2021, over sixty civil society organizations joined together to sign the first Code for civil society organizations for North Macedonia[36]. This initiative, led by the CSO, recognized the recommendations for civil society action and it aimed at preserving the quality of the activities within the sector and its achievements. This document was adopted voluntarily, showing CSOs willingness to maintain high standards of transparency and accountability, and at the same time to strengthen the public confidence in the civil sector progress.

In addition to the direct impact on civil society organizations, the Covid crisis also had a negative impact on the citizens' awareness about civil participation and activism in the municipalities in which they live. In 2022, the lowest level of citizens' awareness of non-governmental organizations in their municipalities was measured (17%), as well as the highest level of lack of motivation to participate in the CSOs activities (55% of participants).

According to the quarter of citizens (29%), the civil associations / NGOs in the municipality encourage citizens to propose local problems solutuions and to get involved in the work of local self-government, but opinions are divided as to whether civil associations actually act according to the priorities of citizens or not (25%- 26%). In general, part of the citizens agree that it is a good idea for the municipalities to completely hand over some services to the civil associations and they believe that this will result in better services, while part of them believe that some services would be improved if the municipality completely handed them over to the companies.

According to the research and analysis of the citizens' interest and their engagement, in the last few years there has been a decreasing tendency in the citizens' interest and their faith in the local institutions as well as in the effectiveness of the citizen influence on decision-making. However, certain data show increased interest and desire of some citizens to get involved in such processes. This is so called civic optimism which gives hope that the state institutions will become aware and use this potential to find mechanisms for greater involvement of citizens in decision-making, which would additionally increase the citizens' trust in them. The non-utilization and non-involvement of the citizens could bring additional disappointment among the citizens but also an additional outflow of the civic potential from the country.

[36] Code for civil organizations - MCMS, 2021

METHODOLOGY

The analysis is based on a combined methodology that includes desk-top analysis, focus groups, and interviews with mayors, municipal councilors, representatives of planning regions, as well as a survey. Each of these components provides a different perspective and depth to this research, giving a complete insight into the mechanisms for citizen participation on local level.

A desk-top analysis was conducted to review the legal framework and academic literature, focusing on laws governing citizen participation in policy-making on local level.

The focus groups provided direct insight into the attitudes and experiences of citizens, NGOs, journalists and the business community. They were organized in eight towns in the country where the planning regions are seated, with a total of 105 people participating. One of the things that additionally burden this research was the difficulty to involve participants, such as citizens, the media and especially businesses.

The interviews with the mayors and municipal councilors from the political parties[37] provided a detailed insight into the attitudes of local authorities towards citizen participation. A total of 16 mayors and 16 councilors, from all planning regions and political parties, were interviewed. All representatives of the Centers for the development of planning regions were approached and interviewed, except for the southwestern region.

The survey which was conducted during the period of September 26, 2023 to January 11, 2024, collected data from 197 citizens. Its main objective was to understand the citizens' attitudes, experiences and perceptions regarding their participation in decision-making at the local level. The demographic structure of the participants was diverse, including representatives from all planning regions. It showed a significant representation of women (63%), highly educated persons (more than 80% with a university or postgraduate education) and employees (79.8%). The respondents were of different ethnicity: Macedonian, Albanian, Roma, Turkish, Serbian and other ethnic groups.

The analysis covered the following key aspects regarding civic participation:

- do municipalities involve citizens in decision-making, and if so, how they do that and what tools they use. This category takes into account the municipality perspectives and covers issues that are focused on mechanisms and platforms for citizen participation.

[36] VMRO-DPMNE, SDSM, DUI, BESA, AA, LDP, Levica and GROM

- topics /areas or issues the local government consults the citizens about. This includes the specific issues or agendas in which the municipality seeks interest from the citizens.
- interest or lack of interest among citizensto take part in decision-making on local level, as well as the degree of their participation. This category is the key to understanding the motivation and barriers for civic participation.
- citizens' perspective on how the citizens participate in decision-making processes, the success and effectiveness of various tools and methods used. This includes citizens' experiences and perceptions of different forms of participation.
- the effect of citizens' participation in decision-making processes, including whether there was any effect, and if so, whether that effect was positive or negative. This category is important for measuring the impact of citizen participation on local policies and decisions.

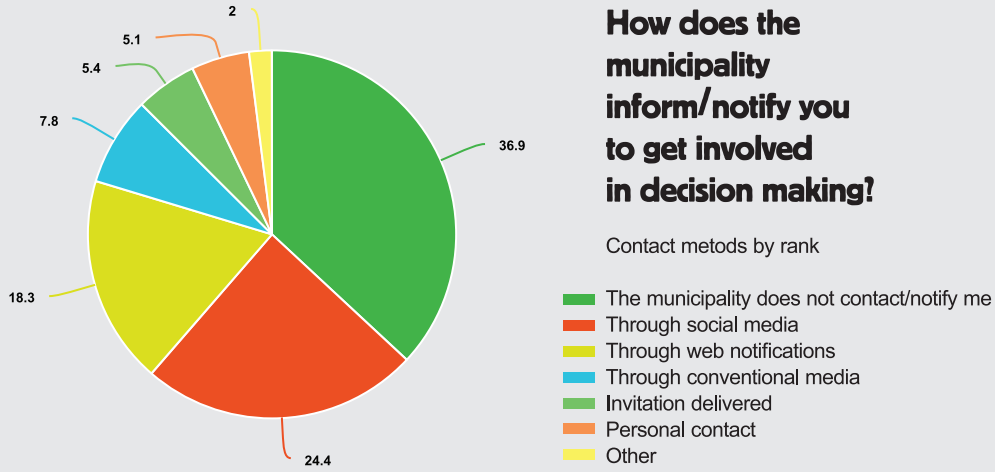
Each of these categories allows a detailed consideration of the different aspects of civic participation and interaction between the local government and citizens. By using this methodology, the analysis will provide a complete insight into the levels of democracy and citizens' participation in decision-makingon local level.

INVOLVEMENT IN DECISION-MAKING

In this section, the views of the citizens are measured on whether and in what way the municipality involves the citizens in decision-making and which tools are used.

The question: "With a score from 1 to 5 (1-bad, 5-excellent) how would you rate the readiness of your municipality to include citizens in decision-making at the municipal level?", was rated with an average score of 2.34 (on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is poor and 5 is excellent) for the readiness of the municipality to include citizens in decision-making at the municipal level.

Analysing the replies to the question "How does the municipality contact/inform you to share your opinion and get involved in decision-making processes that affect the municipality (Please select all relevant answers)?" we have almost 37% of the respondents saying "the municipality does not includes us", 24.4% mentioned social media, and for 18.3% it is through notifications on the municipality website.



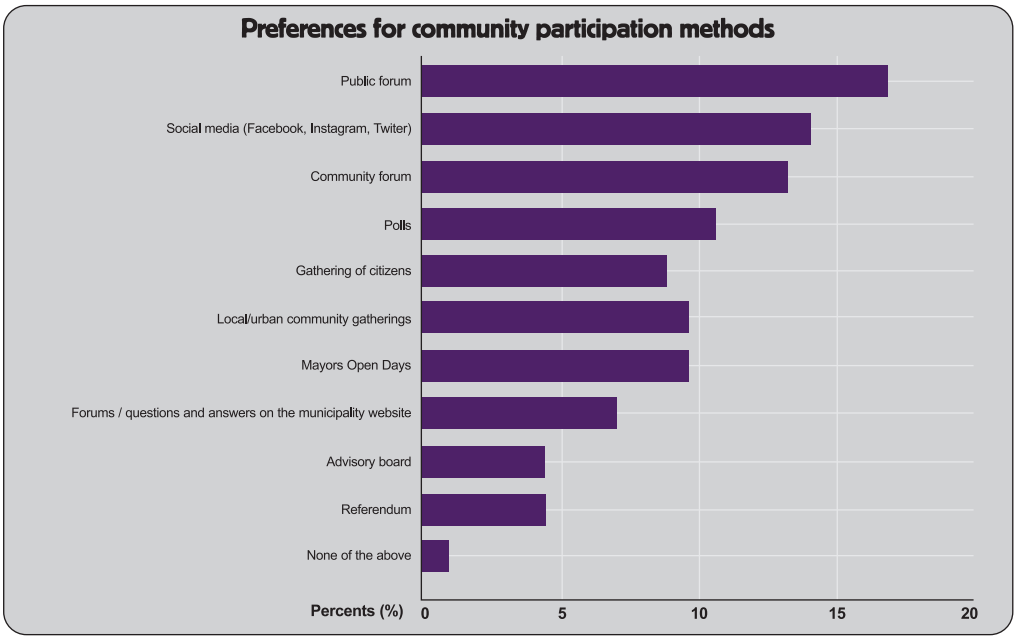
The replies to the question: “Do you think that your municipality involves you in decision-making?” show that 82.21% of the respondents consider that their municipality does not include them in such processes, while 17.79% of respondents believe that their municipality includes them in decision-making processes.

This indicates a significant deficiency in the engagement of municipalities to include citizens in decision-making, which, on the other hand, emphasizes the need for improved communication

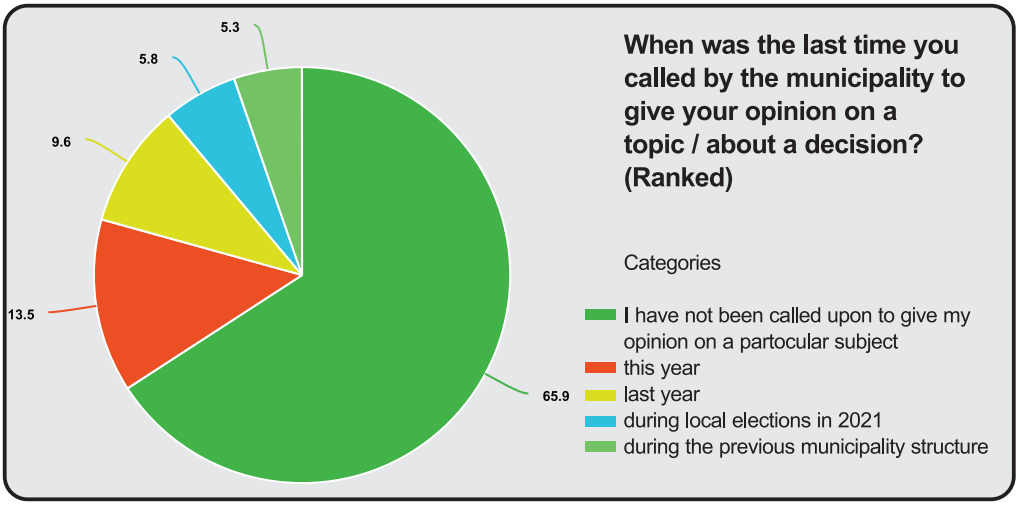
and inclusion opportunities, in order to strengthen the citizens' participation in decision-making on local level.

Methods of involvement: The question: "How does the municipality involve you in decision-making?" was replied by 54%, and this guiding question was intended only for those who answered positively to the previous question. There were a variety of responses which included surveys, social media, public forums, mayor's open days and others. However, it seems that there is no single method that is dominantly used in all municipalities. The ranking of the received answers according to frequency is as follows:

Public Tribunes: 16.81%
Social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter): 14.16%
Community Forum: 13.27%
Surveys: 10.62%
Local/Urban Community Gatherings: 9.73%
Mayor's Open Days: 9.73%
Gathering of Citizens: 8.85%
Forums / Questions and answers on the municipality website: 7.08%
Advisory Boards: 4.42%
Referendums: 4.42%
None of the above: 0.88%

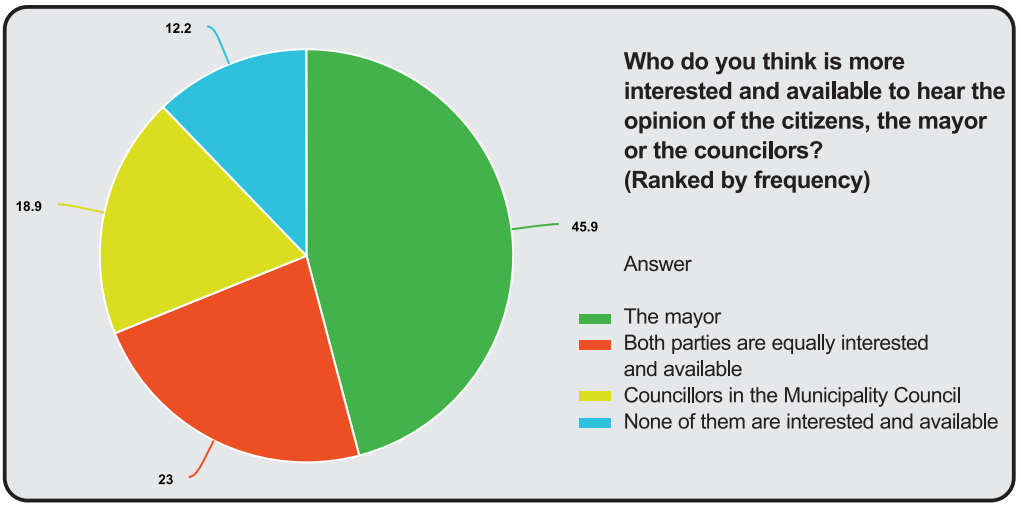


When asked about when was the last time they were called by the municipality to give thier opinion on a topic/about a decision?" 66% of the respondents answered that they were never called at all.



Perception of inclusion: Identifying whether the citizens consider that their opinions and needs are taken into account by the municipality.

When asked "Who do you think is more interested and available to hear the opinion of the citizens, the mayor or the councilors?" 46% of the respondents answered that it is the mayor/mayoress, and 19% that it is the councilors.



A large proportion of respondends, 74%, stated that they were not involved in decision-making processes during the Covid pandemic.

This analysis also focuses on the dynamics of cooperation between various interested parties-civil society organizations (CSOs), citizens, the private sector, the academic community, and journalists with the local municipalities. The cooperation is considered in the context of the their perceptions and experiences when interacting with the municipal authorities.

Data obtained from the focus groups and interviews with mayors and councilors reveal variability in the quality of cooperation, which depends on a range of factors including the two key ones, the geographic location and the political will of municipal authorities. According to the data, there are different levels of cooperation, from close partnerships to complete lack of partnership.

On the one hand, some of the interviewees in the focus groups declared that they have good to excellent cooperation with the municipalities, especially in municipalities where there are already established channels for dialogue and participation between the citizens and NGOs in decision-making on local level. On the contrary, other intervieews point to significant obstacles and lack of cooperation, especially when it comes to essential topics or needs that require greater involvement and openness on the part of municipalities.

The data indicates that local authorities make attempts to inform citizens about their activities, using different methods of communication. However, there are significant challenges when it comes to involving citizens as active participants in the decision-making process. Despite the existing mechanism in the legislation, they are rarely used to their full capacity, partly due to the complexity and procedural requirements.

The answers obtained from the interviews with the mayors provide an insight into the tools and methods for consultation with the citizens which are used by the mayors for effective communication and decision-making.

"Up-to-date notification of citizens... door-to-door information to the citizens, NGOs, events and tribunes" – mayor of an urban municipality from the southeast region

The main methods include personal contact, open days, citizens' initiatives, citizens' gatherins, public forums, and proposals. In addition to traditional methods, budget forums are also mentioned. They are held mainly in urban centers and include various stakeholders such as the business sector, non-governmental organizations, urban communities and advisory groups. The mayors also state that the personal contact has proven to be the most effective method. In addition, although more than 50 municipalities have included the forums in their statutes, yet it is mentioned that the forums are not included in the Statute of the municipality, with rare exceptions. This means that there is no institutional memory for the processes and protocols for communication and consultation with citizens. The mayors reported that, in addition to direct communication, Facebook is the most frequently used tool for communication by citizens. After the Covid-19 pandemic, there have been changes in the interest of citizens and consultation methods. Some of the mayors think that it is important to increase the openness of the municipality in order to increase citizens' interest in participating in local decision-making processes. Financing these processes and activities is also extremely rare. The mayors are aware of the importance of cooperation with the civil sector, the media and the business community for efficient management and development of the municipality.

The perceptions of local authorities regarding the citizens' involvement in decision-making processes indicate that they prefer:

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communities. However, the quality of these interactions is often related to the individual characteristics of the mayors and their ability and willingness to establish a productive dialogue.

„ We are a very small municipality by and territory. Gatherings of citizens are quite frequent" – The mayor from the South-west region.

„Personal meetings and visits of the local communities" – The mayor from the Vardar region.

Some municipalities practice other forms of participation such as: open days, regular meetings in local communities as well as the use of digital platforms to increase transparency and improve communication with citizens. At the same time, initiatives are emerging to support CSOs by providing rooms for events or even financial support for certain projects.

However, the absence of a systemic approach and complete institutionalization of the processes for citizen participation is quite evident. In many cases, the cooperation is superficial, carried out as a formality without real involvement and commitment to community development. The lack of resources, capacity and political will are highlighted as the main obstacles for more effective and meaningful cooperation.

There are some positive examples of cooperation among municipalities that successfully establish platforms for dialogue and joint project planning with interested parties. For example, certain municipalities, have successfully implemented projects for urban greening and improvement of public spaces by the active involvement of local communities and the business sector. There are also examples where CSOs and municipalities worked together on education and inclusion programs, which shows that when there is political will and openness to cooperation, significant results can be achieved that directly improve the lives of citizens.

Despite certain positive examples, the need for increased openness, transparency and active involvement of all relevant stakeholders in decision-making processes remain key challenges that need to be addressed to improve the quality of cooperation between the citizens and municipalities.

1. Geographic location

The geographical location plays a significant role in quality of the cooperation between citizens and municipalities. In urban municipalities, due to the larger population and complexity of urban life, there are often more institutions, non-governmental organizations and private entities that can influence and participate in local decision-making. This creates more opportunities for cooperation, but also the need for a more organized approach to coordinating the interested parties. In contrast, in rural communities, where the population is smaller and the community tighter, the cooperation can be more intimate and direct, with informal forms of communication often occurring.

Political will of the municipal authorities

The political will of the municipal authorities is perhaps the most critical factor affecting the quality of cooperation. Municipalities which are led by authorities that actively encourage and value forms of citizen participation, show greater openness and transparency in their work process. In

those municipalities, there are clearly defined mechanisms for citizens' participation and strong efforts have been made for inclusive decision-making.

Regarding the cooperation between the non-state stakeholders and the municipalities, the situation is different by regions.

Vardar region: The cooperation between citizens and non-state stakeholders with the Vardar region municipalities varies; in some municipalities such as Veles and Kavadarci it is rated as very good or excellent, while in others such as Sveti Nikole, Negotino and Čaška it is more difficult.

Eastern region: the citizens and non-state stakeholders have developed a good cooperation with municipalities, especially in the creation of strategies and plans. CSOs are mainly the ones who involve the municipalities in various activities and the initiative for cooperation with the municipality usually comes from them. However, the quality of cooperation depends on the specific people employed in the municipalities and their knowledge and expertise on a specific topic.

Southwest region: The cooperation here is assessed as difficult, especially in the municipalities of Struga and Kichevo, where it mostly depends on personal connections and, if it exists, is mostly declarative.

Pelagonia region: The citizens and non-state stakeholders say that the cooperation could be better, but it varies from municipality to municipality. In some cases, the cooperation depends on the mayor's attitude towards the CSO.

„ The question is whether the door will be completely closed or it will be opened a little and we will be listened to. That's the end of the matter." – an NGO from the Pelagonia region.

Polog region: The cooperation varies considerably and depends on many factors, including changes in the local government. There are also significant problems with the communication and transpansparency.

Northeast region: The citizens and non-state stakeholders are mostly satisfied with the municipalities' cooperation, though it often depends on personal connections.

Skopje region: The cooperation between citizens and non-state stakeholders and municipalities in the Skopje region shows different experiences, with an emphasized need for improving communication and formalizing cooperation.

Southeast region: As in other regions, the cooperation here varies and faces similar challenges. It also depends on the topic, that is, how well the interests of the municipality are aligned with those of the CSO for the specific topic, as well as on the capacities of the municipality.

TOPICS ON WHICH CITIZENS' CONSULTATIONS ARE FOCUSED

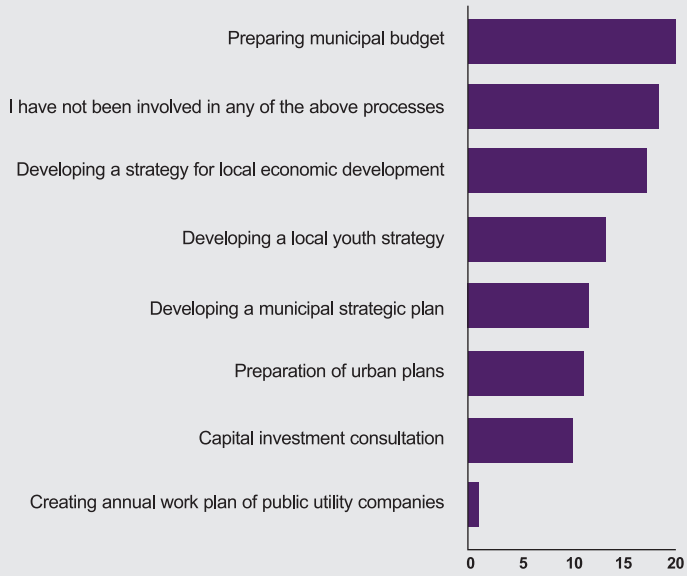
This part refers to identifying the most common topics on which consultations with citizens are focused.

The question "Which of the following processes have you been invited to participate in during the last 3 years", was answered by 35.5% of the total respondents. It can be noted that the largest number of participants answered that they were not involved in any of the mentioned processes, while the rest of the answers are divided among the different options with different representation.

The following options were offered:

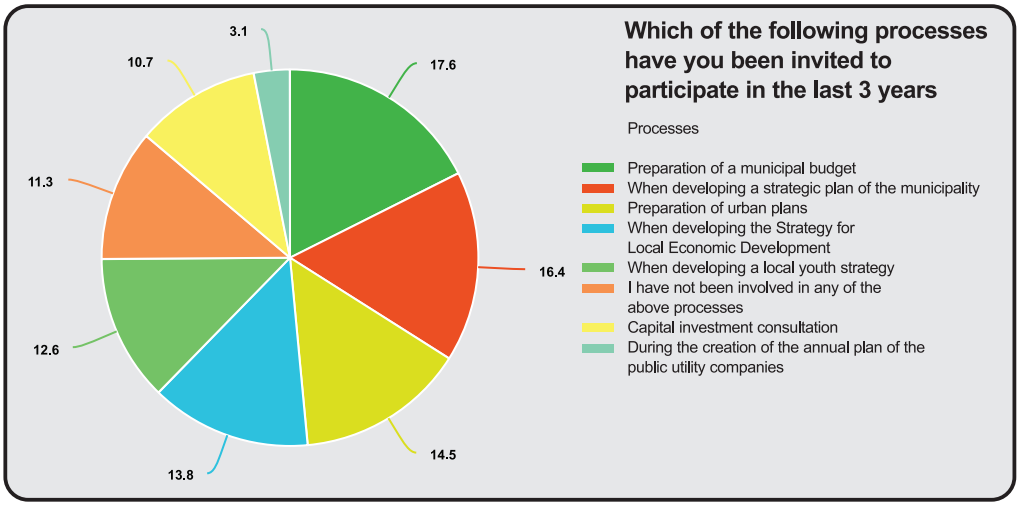
When developing a municipality strategic plan
Capital investment consultation
Developing a strategy for local economic development
Developing a local youth strategy
I haven't been involved in any of the mentioned processes
Preparing a municipal budget
Creating an annual plan of public utility companies

The most common answer is "Preparation of a municipal budget" with 17.6%, "I have not been involved in any of the above processes" with 17.1%, "Development of a municipality strategic plan" with 16.4% , "Preparation of urban plans" with 14.5%, etc.



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The analysis on the questions related to the topics or areas that the local government asks the citizens about, reveals a diverse range of answers. However, it seems that a significant number of respondents stated that the municipality does not often ask for their opinion on any topics or they were not consulted on certain decisions. Here are some key findings:

There is a significant number of responses indicating that citizens consider that they are not consulted by their municipalities on any specific topics.

There are also individual answers that point to specific areas, but they are very diverse. However, the budget preparation is a dominant topic in all municipalities.

These findings may indicate the need to improve communication and engagement between municipalities and citizens, as well as the need for municipalities to more actively include citizens in conversations about local issues and decisions. They also suggest that there should be room for increasing transparency and openness in local governance.

The answers to the question "As a citizen, what topics does the municipality most often ask for your opinion?" can be grouped into the following several categories according to the mutual proximity of the topics and the content of the answers:

1. Communal and urban development

Infrastructural issues and urbanism: "Urban development."

Communal problems: "Everyday problems related to the environment where we live."

Budget and capital investments: "Budgeting, communal problems .."

„for capital investments"

2. Environment protection and ecology

Ecology and environment protection: "environment protection and ecology, needs for new infrastructure works, needs for new projects and ideas"

"related to the environment and local development".

3. Political and election topics

Political, for voting and choosing a political party: "Political, for voting and choosing a political party or when the mayor is elected."

“They only need me for elections"

4. Social and youth policies

Youth policies: "Youth policies"

Persons with special needs: "Persons with disabilities"

Youth and sports infrastracture"

5. Lack of inclusion

Absense of request for opinion: "On no topics at all."

Scepticism towards inclusion: "They don't ask for an opinion on any topic, they make their own decisions and don't listen to citizens' demands”

" Never asked for an opinion on any subject"

This grouping shows diversity in the topics on which municipalities can involve citizens, as well as the disappointment and skepticism among some citizens regarding their involvement in the local decisions.

The analysis of the mayors and councilors’ responses to this specific group of questions offers an insight into the topics and areas where citizens are most often consulted, as well as into the processes of citizen involvement in the creation of local policies and strategies.

The mayors point out that citizens are often consulted on topics related to local development, urbanism, social issues and the environment. In certain cases, the issues may include infrastructure projects, green space development, social and educational services, as well as initiatives to improve the quality of life in the community. There is also a negative example of organizing consultations to redefine the notion of gender equality.

„ Gender equality – changing the notion” – mayors from the South-eastern region

The mayors claimed that the citizens are involved in developing the local budget through public hearings and surveys, usually organized before the adoption of the annual budget.

"Proposal investment program for creating a budget for hygiene, sewage, water supply, stray dogs, lighting and culture" - mayor of an urban municipality from the Pologsk region.

„Investment program proposal for creating a budget for hygiene, sewage, water supply, stray dogs, lighting and culture" - mayor of an urban municipality from the Polog region

Development of urban plans, where the consultations, as a legal minimum, usually take place through public presentations and publication of plans for comments and suggestions by citizens.

Strategy for local economic development and other strategies, where only declaratively, citizens are involved through public debates.

Consultation on capital investments, declaratively through public meetings and surveys to gather citizens' opinions and proposals for large capital projects.
The mayors emphasize that the cooperation with the civil sector is the key to a successful implementation of local initiatives and projects. This cooperation often includes partnerships with non-governmental organizations on topics such as education, health, ecology, and the promotion of youth policies.
Civic organizations often act as a bridge between local authorities and citizens, providing a platform for effective dialogue and joint participation in community development.

„Consultations focus on specific areas such as ecology, gender equality, social issues, and needs of people with special needs" – a focus group participant, CSO from the North-East region

„Consultations with citizens include topics such as drafting strategies for local economic development, plans for agriculture and work with youth." – a focus group participant, CSO from Eastern region

The responses of the mayors show that the local authorities try to find different ways to involve the citizens in the process of creating local policies and strategies. Citizen involvement and cooperation with the civil sector are recognized as important elements for increasing transparency, improving decision-making and ensuring sustainable local development. The need for continuous communication and citizen engagement is the key to building inclusive and prosperous local communities.

„The municipality organizes community forums with the support of international donors... where citizens can participate and propose projects" – the mayor of the Vardar planning region.

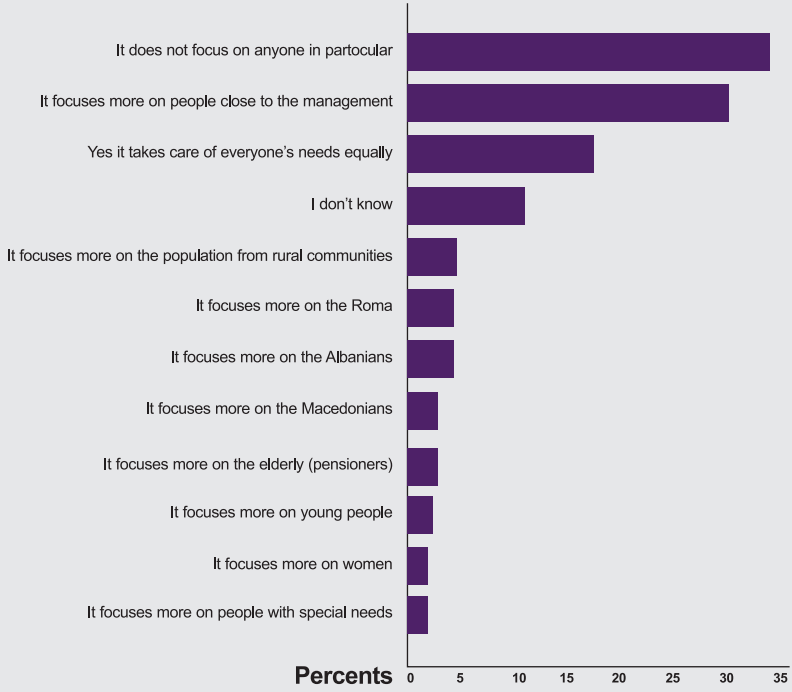
„The topics include environment protection, mosquitoes and polluted air." "Animals - protection after cases of poisoning" – the mayor of a municipality from the southeast region.

Based on the interviews with mayors and councilors, the citizens mostly focus on infrastructure problems, such as street lighting, sewage, water supply and roads, which stand out as the most common issues for which the citizens seek solutions.
The problem with the emigration of young people and the attempts to keep them in local communities is recognized in most municipalities, especially in smaller and rural ones, where there is a significantly low interest among citizens.
The citizens are mostly interested in topics such as the budget, urban planning and capital investment. The local authorities are aware of this, and often use consultation as a formality. Civil organizations point out that the authorities tend to involve citizens in cases where they directly benefit from it.

CITIZENS' INTEREST FOR PARTICIPATION

In this section, it is very important to understand the levels of engagement of citizens in local decisions and the reasons for their interest or lack of interest. This group of questions refers to citizens' (dis)interest in participation and how many of them participated in decision-making processes.

In the citizens survey, the question "Do you think that your municipality equally takes into account the needs and opinions of different groups of citizens in the community?" aims to identify how their municipality takes into account the needs and opinions of different groups in the community. Participants were asked to express their views by repying to specific categories. With a total of 208 responses, the data analysis reveals significant differences in the participants' perceptions of which groups the municipality's efforts are aimed at. The percentages show how often each of these categories was mentioned, giving insight into how citizens view the inclusiveness and focus of their local government. The smallest part of the answers are that the municipality takes care of everyone equally (17.79%), a larger part of the the respondents thinks that there is a specific focus on certain groups (people close to the management 30.29%), and the majority believe that the municipality does not focus on anyone in particular (34.13%)

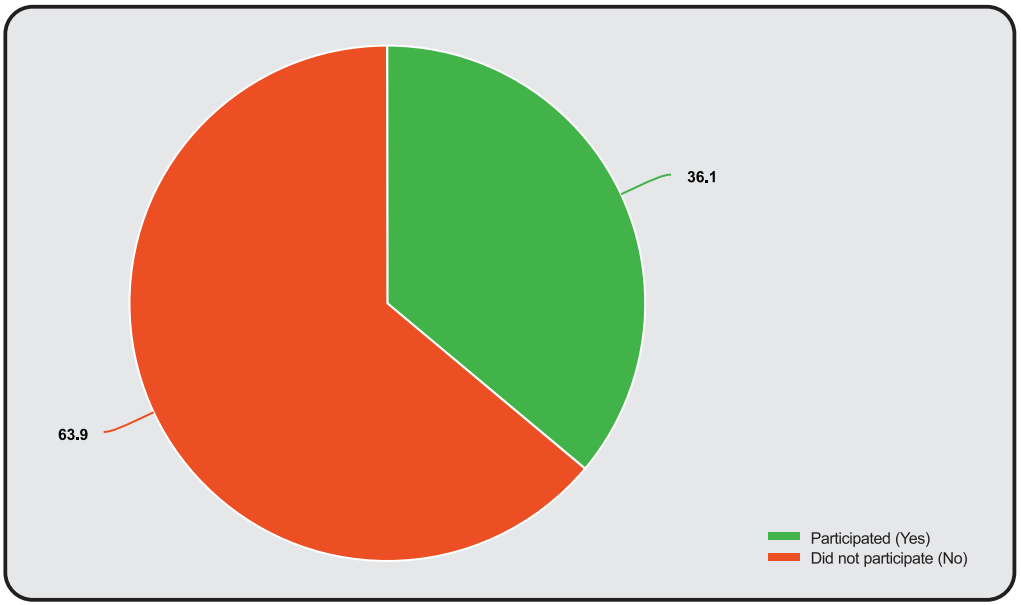


Percentages for each category in relation to the total number of responses (197):

- Yes, it takes care of everyone's needs equally: 17.79%
- It focuses more on young people: 2.40%
- It focuses more on women: 1.92%
- It focuses more on the Roma: 4.33%
- It focuses more on Albanians: 4.33%
- It focuses more on Macedonians: 2.88%
- It focuses more on the population from rural communities: 4.81%
- It focuses more on people with special needs: 1.92%
- It focuses more on people close to management: 30.29%
- It focuses more on the elderly (pensioners): 2.88%
- Does not focus on anyone in particular: 34.13%
- I don't know: 11.06%

The processed data show that the most of the participants **(34.13%) believe that their municipality does not focus on anyone in particular. This is followed by significant percentage of respondents (30.29%) who believe that it focuses on persons close to the leadership**. Only 17.79% of the participants believe that the municipality takes care of the needs of all groups equally.

From the total answers to the question "Did you participate or in some way contribute to the decision-making processes in your municipality?", 36.1% of citizens stated that they participated or in some way contributed to the decision-making processes in their municipality, while **63.9% of citizens stated that they did not participate**.



This category of questions refers to the levels of citizens' engagement, as well as the frequency of participation, that is, to see how often the citizens are involved in decision-making at the municipal level.

Only 37.5% answered to the question "How often have you participated in decision-making processes in the municipality in the last 3 years?". This question is only those who answered positively to the previous question. The answers are as follows:

17.79% stated that they participated only once in the last 3 years,

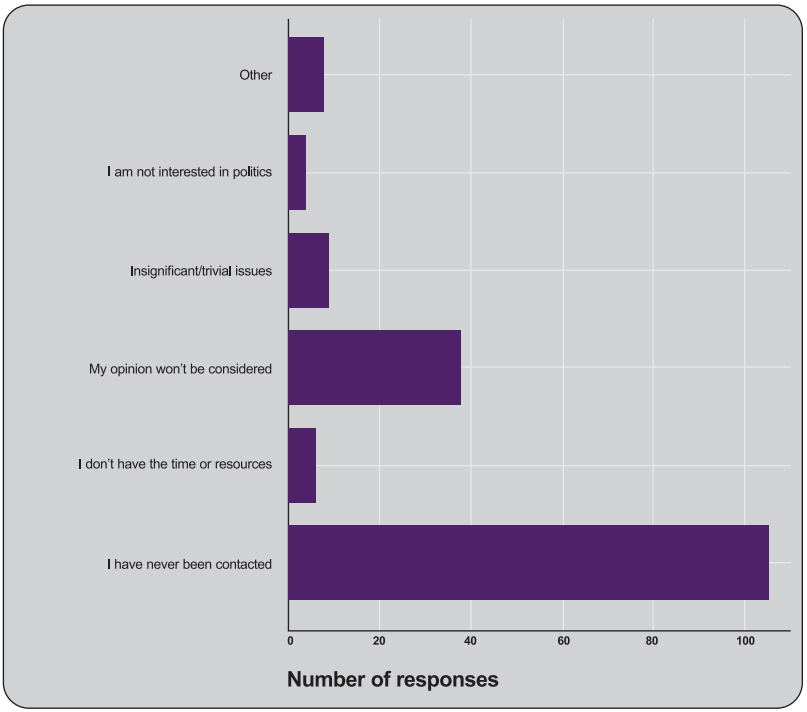
2.98% stated that they participated 2-3 times,

6.73% stated that they participated more than 3 times.

These percentages show us that **there is a noticeable difference in the participation of citizens in decision-making processes, with significantly more citizens declaring that they did not participate in such processes**. Those who participated, most often state that it was once in the last three years, which indicates the need for greater efforts in engaging citizens and increasing their frequency of participation.

Reasons for participation or disinterest: Some of the most common reasons for disinterest in participation include lack of time or resources, and the belief that their opinion will not be taken into account or have no effect on municipal decisions. Also, some **citizens state that they have never been asked for an opinion or that the issues for which an opinion is sought are secondary or insignificant.**

These insights point to the potential challenges in engaging citizens in decision-making on local level. Analysing the reasons for the lack of citizens' interest, we come to a conclusion that something needs to be done to improve the communication between municipalities and citizens and to raise awareness about the meaning and the effect of civic participation. Municipalities may need to think about future strategies to improve transparency and find practical ways to more easily involve citizens, especially those who feel they do not have enough time or resources to participate.



The question "If you have not participated and have no interest in participating in decision-making processes in your municipality, what is the reason for that?" aims to find the reasons why citizens have not participated or do not want to participate in decision-making processes in their municipality. This guiding question from the previous question "Have you participated or in some way contributed to the decision-making processes in your municipality?" gave the following percentages for each reason given out of a total of 130 responses:

No one from the municipality asked for my opinion or contacted me for that purpose: 76.92%

I know that my opinion will not be considered or will not have any effects on the municipality's decision: 15.38%

I don't have enough time and/or resources for such activities: 3.85%

I am not interested in politics: 2.31%

I was asked to give opinion on isssues which are secondary/insignificant: 1.54%

Other: 0%

This shows that the majority of citizens who did not participate in the decision-making processes in their municipality highlighted the lack of initiative by the municipality to include them in such processes as the main reason. This comes with **the perception that their opinion will have no effect on the decisions that are made.**

The answer given by the mayors and councilors to the questions related to citizens' interest to participate in decision-making processes reveal a complex picture that varies depending on the context of each municipality.

„ There is a lack of interest in participation due to the politicization of the processes." - Mayor of Skopje municipality.

„ Emigrants in cities and other places started to show interest" – Mayor of a smaller municipality.

The mayors point out that there is a variable interest among citizens for participation in decision-making. In certain cases, for particular topics or when it comes to specific projects that directly affect them, they may show increased interest and active participation. However, there is a general tendency toward passivity, especially for less visible or complex issues that do not elicit immediate emotional or practical responses.

„The citizens show lethargy and are not motivated to participate due to the LGU's attitude towards them, pointing out that LGUs have their own favorites to show participation through them" **– focus group participant, CSO from South-West region.**

„The citizens' initiatives such as "Bitola on a wheel" show attempts for participation in local processes, although often without visible effect" **- focus group participant, CSO from the Pelagonia region**

Some of the main obstacles for active citizen participation identified by mayors include lack of

time, interest or understanding of local self-governance processes. In addition, distrust in local authorities and the perception that citizen participation does not bring about real change may further reduce interest in participation.
The interviewed mayors point out that there is a need to improve communication between local authorities and citizens in order to increase interest in participation. This includes presenting information in a clearer and more accessible way and using different communication channels to reach different groups of citizens.

***„The citizens are proactive in their participation, although sometimes their demands may be directed at the wrong place."*– Mayor of an urban municipality from the eastern region.**

There is general recognition that information and raising public awareness play a critical role in increasing the activity and interest of citizens to participate in decision-making.
Mayors' perceptions of the citizens' interest in participating in decision-making processes at the local level suggest that there are significant possibilities for improvement.

EXISTING PARTICIPATION TOOLS AND THEIR EFFECTIVENESS

This group of questions refers to the assessment of various existing tools and methods for participation, from the perspective of citizens.
The analysis of the questions gives us an insight into the tools used to make citizens participate in decision-making and the citizens' perception on the effect of their participation.
Regarding the tools for participation, the responses seem to be quite varied and specific, with multiple mentions of surveys as one of the tools used for participation. This may indicate that the polls are a popular method of involving citizens in decision-making processes. However, other tools are also mentioned, including internet forums, social media, public forums, and attendance at municipal council meetings, which indicates a diversity in the ways of participation.
The analysis of the answers to the question "If you have participated or would like to participate in the decision-making processes in your municipality, which form of participation from the following do you think is the most suitable for you?" show that the respondents are interested in different methods of participation. Answers ranked by percentages are as follows:

Public forums: 13.06%
Polls: 11.32%
Attendance at the sessions of Municipality Council: 10.30%
Maypr's open days: 9.58%
Community forums: 8.99%
Referendum: 8.42%
Citiozens' gathering: 7.98%
Social media: 6.97%
Gathering of local and/or urban community: 6.68%
Advisory Boards: 5.52%
Municipal websites: 5.22%
Internet forums: 4.79%
Other: 1.16%

This shows that public forums are the most popular form of participation with 13.06%, followed by attendance at sessions of the Municipal Council with 10.30% and the mayor's open days with 9.58%. These data indicate that participants prefer direct and interactive forms of participation where they can personally participate and express their views.

The analysis of this question is based on the preferences expressed for different forms of participation, and not on the exact number of participants who responded because multiple-choice responses were offered.

Public forums are the most popular form of participation with 13.06%, followed by polls (11.32%) and attendance at sessions of the Municipal Council (10.30%). This indicates that **citizens believe that direct participation and the opportunities for dialogue with municipal authorities through physical gatherings and surveys are the most appropriate for their participation in decision-making processes.**

Regarding the perception of effectiveness, the question "Through which tools/instruments were you involved in the decision-making processes in your municipality?" could be answered only by those who replied positively to the previous questions. They listed different forms of participation:

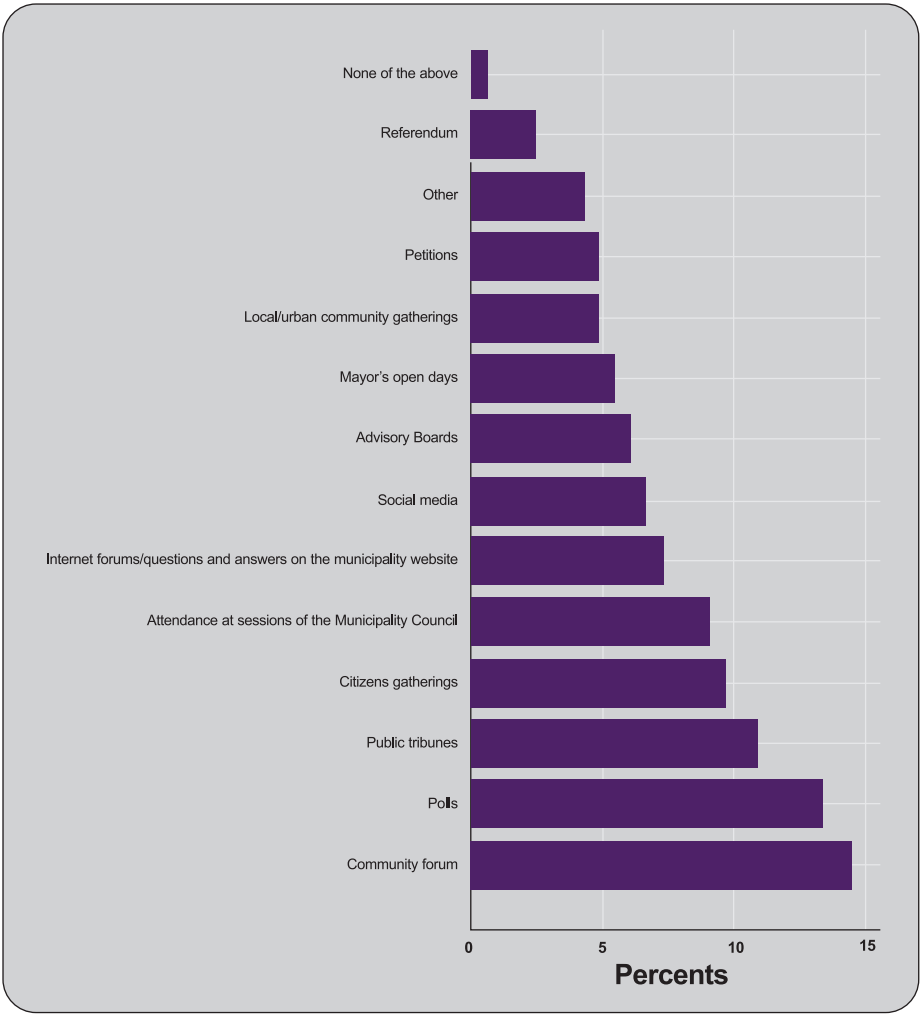
Referendum: 2.42%
Citizens gathering: 9.70%
Public forums: 10.91%
Polls: 13.33%
Internet forums/questions and answers on the municipality website: 7.27%
Community forum: 14.55%
Local/Urban Community Gathering: 4.85%
Advisory Boards: 6.06%
Mayor's open days: 5.45%
Social media: 6.67%
Attendance at sessions of the Municipality Council: 9.09%
Petitions: 4.85%
None of the above: 0.61%
Other: 4.24%

The most popular instrument for involving citizens in decision-making processes in their municipality is a community forum with 14.55%, followed by polls with 13.33% and public forums with 10.91%. This shows that citizens prefer direct communication and engagement platforms where they can actively participate and express their views.

The citizens mostly value forms of participation that allow them direct communication and interaction with decision makers, such as community forums, surveys, and public forums. This shows that **there is a strong need for mechanisms that enable visible two-way communication**.

The use of surveys as a participation tool indicates that **citizens want to be consulted and to contribute to municipal decisions in a way that is accessible and does not require significant time or resources.**

Although internet forums and the municipality website are less represented as responses, their use suggests that there is a space for including improved online platforms as a tool for citizen participation.



Municipalities should invest in organizing and promoting **more community forums and public forums to increase citizen participation in decision-making.**

To meet the needs of a wider range of citizens, **municipalities should develop and improve online platforms for participation**, including improving online forums and social media as engagement tools.

Municipalities should use surveys as a standard instrument for collecting opinions and priorities from citizens, especially when developing policies and programs that directly affect their lives.

In addition to increasing visibility, municipalities should ensure that information about open days and sessions is easily accessible and to encourage citizens to actively participate.

Municipalities should be open to ideas and suggestions from citizens for new and innovative ways of participation, which may include technological solutions or alternative formats of gathering and debating.

Analyzing the responses of the mayors and councilors to specific questions from this category, we can identify key topics related to methods and tools for consultation with citizens, as well as ways to improve this process in different municipalities.

In terms of consultation methods and tools, the mayors use a combination of face-to-face meetings, public gatherings, local communities, social media, and digital platforms for citizen engagement. The direct communication method through gatherings of citizens and local communities is often mentioned as an effective way of obtaining immediate feedback from citizens and ensuring their participation in local decision-making. Social networks and other online tools are also used to reach a wider audience and encourage dialogue between the citizens and the municipality.

„ Social media and face-to-face meetings are the most effective methods for involving citizens." - Mayor of an urban municipality from the southwest region

„ Citizens' meetings are, in my opinion, the most effective method for consultation." – Mayor of a rural municipality

„ Gathering of citizens - announcement at a store, social media are ways of spreading information" - a councilor from a rural municipality

„Digital platforms and social media are used for efficient communication and engagement of citizens"– mayor of Skopje municipality

"Forums, polls, budget forums – 4 forums – with the business sector, with non-governmental organizations, with urban communities and with advisory groups that had their own requirements"– mayor of an urban municipality from the Pelagonian region

In addition to traditional methods, some municipalities have introduced innovative approaches such as digital platforms for reporting problems or suggestions, surveys and applications that

enable simplified communication with citizens. These digital tools have proven to be effective in increasing transparency and facilitating the process of obtaining civil entry.
There have been many positive examples of using tools by municipalities, such as:

"My municipal manager" is an online tool related to the municipality services. It has been operating since December 2017 and it enables detection and problem-solving of citizens in the territory of Kavadarci. It includes a call center an is closely connected to the Public Enterprise "Komunalec" for more coordinated action.
„System 48" set up in the Municipality of Strumica is a tool that allows citizens to report local issues by phone or online applications, in order to quickly solve them. "System 48" has been operating on the territory of Strumica for more than 10 years.
Online application "mZaednica": This application has been introduced in several municipalities and enables citizens to use local services digitally, to report communal problems, participate in problem-solving on local level and to participate in community policy making.
Archiving citizens' requests in the municipalities. Municipalities archieve electronic requests from citizens, which helps them in timely and efficient addressing of citizens needs and requests.

Nevertheless, the need to improve the effectiveness of the participatory tools of CSOs in decision-making on local level has not diminished yet. Improved communication and transparency, as well as the introduction of innovative digital solutions can significantly contribute to increasing the effectiveness and quality of cooperation between CSOs and local governments.
In regions across Macedonia, civil society organizations (CSOs) face various challenges in cooperation with local governments, and the effectiveness of existing participation tools varying significantly. From the analysis of the focus groups discussions, we will highlight several key aspects related to the existing participation tools and their effectiveness

Polog region - although there are memorandums of cooperation between CSOs and local authorities, they are often considered a formality without real implementation. The effectiveness of the cooperation often depends on personal connections, which indicates a lack of a systematic approach to inclusiveness in decision-making processes.

Skopje region - different municipalities in this region show significant differences in their commitment to introducing and using new digital tools to improve cooperation. While some municipalities are open to innovation and implementation of new tools, others are resistant due to lack of capacity.

Northeast region - there are examples of successful cooperation where CSOs and municipalities initiate joint activities and projects. One of the successful examples is the introduction of an electronic system for communication between citizens and councilors, which shows that efficiency can be increased by the use of modern technology.

Vardar region – the cooperation in some municipalities is an example of good practice, where municipalities support CSOs by providing resources and premises for their work. However, experience varies and shows that effective cooperation requires a transparent process and openness to dialogue with the various stakeholders.

Eastern region - although CSOs are active in initiating cooperation, there is a lack of capacity among local governments to understand and support their initiatives. Unprofessionalism and lack of knowledge are frequent obstacles to effective cooperation**.**

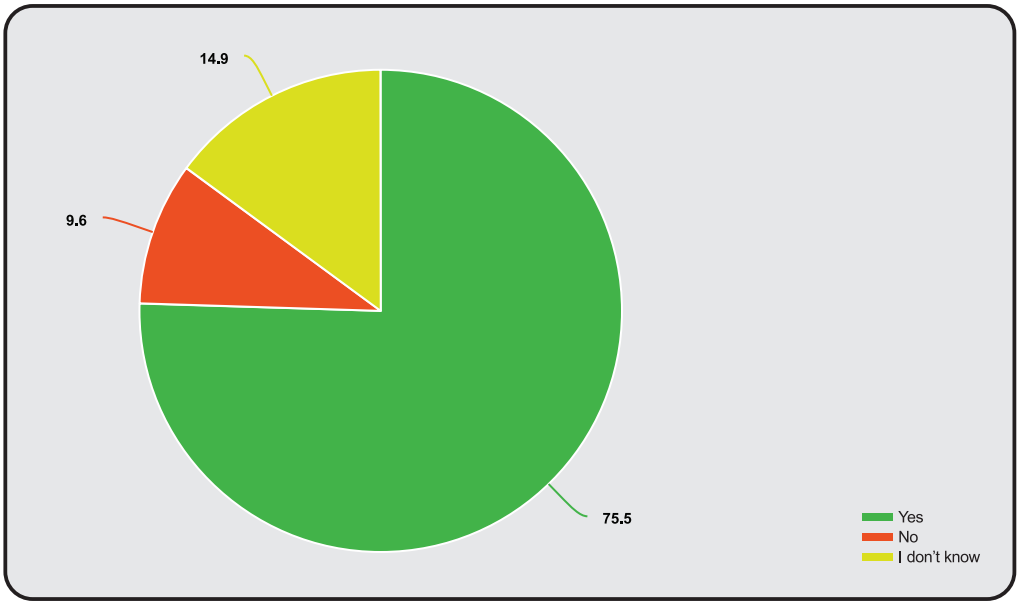
Southwest region – the cooperation is often dependent on individual contacts and personal initiatives. CSOs face challenges in communicating with municipalities, especially when it comes to more serious issues that require substantial support and resources.

Pelagonian region - in this region, the lack of capacity in the municipalities to understand and support the demands of CSOs is highlighted. Despite the existence of some successful initiatives, CSOs are often used by municipalities to carry out their tasks without real involvement in decision-making.

EFFECT OF CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

This category is very important for measuring the impact of citizen participation on local policies and decisions. The questions explore the effect of citizen participation in decision-making processes, including whether there has been any effect, and if so, whether that effect is positive or negative.

The question "Do you think that the involvement of citizens in decision-making has an effect?" could be directly answered by all participants. 75.48% of them answered "yes" and believe that the involvement of citizens in decision-making has an effect, while 9.62% think that it has no effect, and 14.90% are not sure whether the involvement of citizens has an effect or not.



The pie graph shows the opinion of the respondents on whether the involvement of citizens in decision-making has an effect. The majority think that it has an effect, with a smaller percentage of those who disagree or are undecided. This shows that a significant majority of citizens see civic involvement as a positive contribution to the decision-making process.

The data analysis on the question "What effect does it have?" referring to the effect of citizen involvement in decision-making shows that 51.92% of citizens believe that the effect is positive, 0% of citizens think that the effect is negative, and 6.73% of citizens are not sure.

These results clearly indicate that the majority of citizens believe that the involvement of citizens in decision-making is perceived as having the potential for a positive effect on the society, which additionally confirms the importance for civil participation in democratic processes.

The data shows that the majority consider the effect to be positive, while a small number are not sure. There are no answers that indicate a negative effect.

The data analysis on the effect of **the personal participation of citizens** in the decision-making processes in their municipality through the question "What was the effect of your participation in the decision-making processes in the municipality?" shows that:

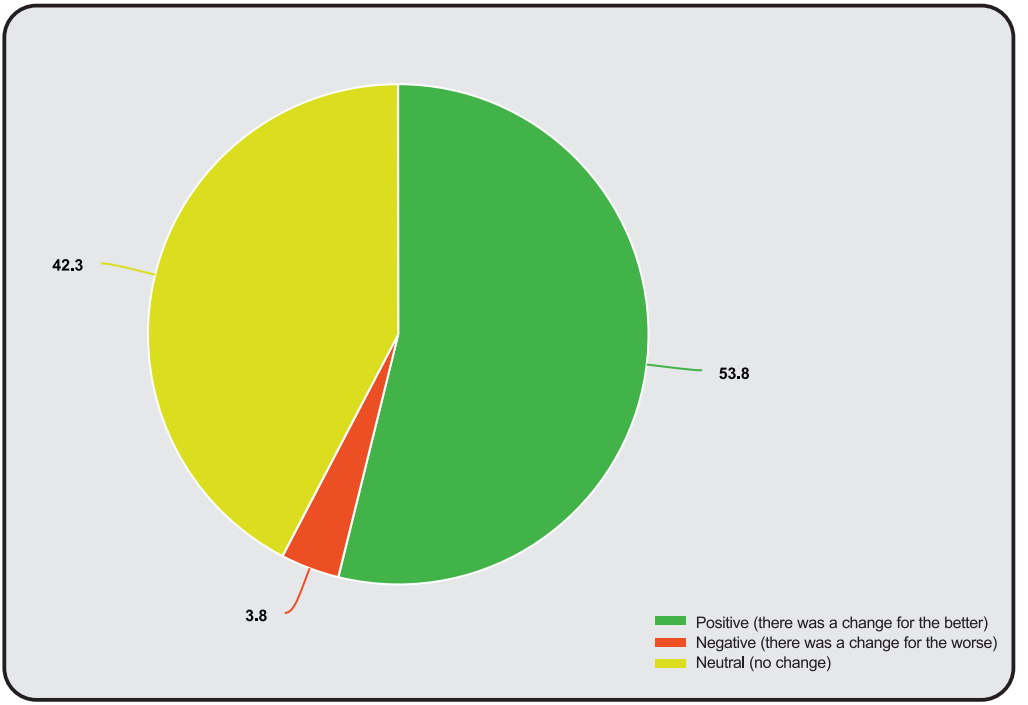
25% of citizens believe that their participation had a positive effect, that is, there was a change for the better.

17.78% of citizens believe that their participation had a negative effect, that is, there was a change for the worse.

1.44% of citizens believe that their participation had a neutral effect or there was no change.

The pie graph shows the effect of citizens' participation in the decision-making processes in the municipality. According to the answers received, most believe that their participation had a positive effect (there was a change for the better), while a small percentage noticed a negative

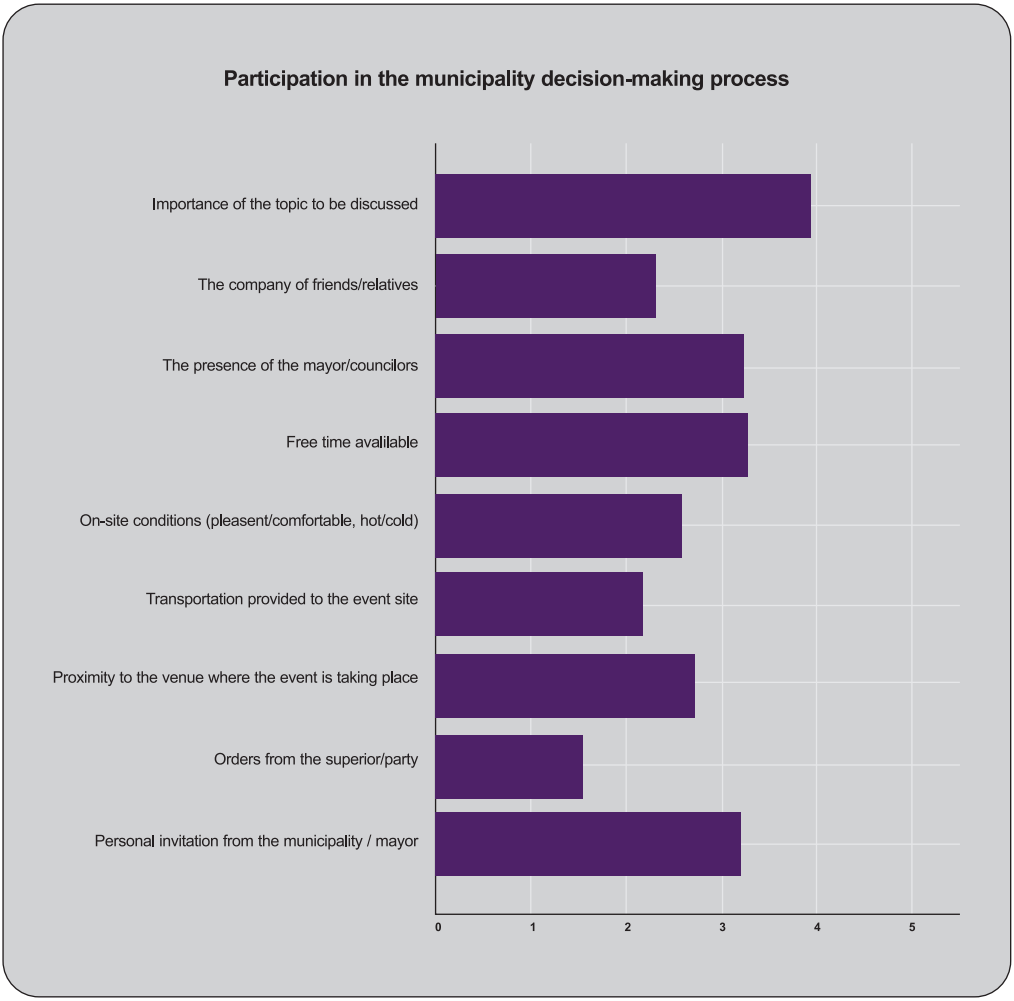
effect (there was a change for the worse), and a significant part of the respondents believe that their participation did not bring a change or the effect was neutral.



Most citizens see their participation in local decision-making processes as something that has a positive effect, while a significant number believe that their participation has not led to any significant changes.This indicates that the participation is just a formalilty and does not add to any significant civic involvement on local level.

By analysisng the replies to the question "With a score of 1 to 5, rate to what extent each of the following factors contributes to your participation in the decision-making process at the municipal level? (1-least, 5- most) we come to the factors that contribute to the increase citizens participation in decision-making. They are ranked by the size of their average value, with the highest value at the top.

Importance of the topic/issue to be discussed: 3.94
Free time available: 3.25
The presence of the mayor/councillors: 3.22
Personal invitation from the municipality/mayor: 3.21
Proximity to the place where the event is held: 2.72
The conditions in the place (pleasant, comfortable, hot/cold): 2.56
The company of friends/relatives: 2.31
Provided transportation to the venue: 2.15
Order from the superior/party:1.52



The analysis of the results indicates that the topic/issue that will be discussed is the most important factor that contributes to the citizens' participation, with the highest average score of 3.94. On the contrary, orders from the superior/party is the factor with the lowest average value (1.52), which indicates that it has the least influence on the motivation of citizens to participate in decision-making processes.

Analyzing the answers of the representatives of the local authorities, we can conclude that there are different perceptions about the effects of the inclusion of citizens in the decision-making processes and the influence of policies at the local level.

The mayors generally appreciate the effects of citizen participation as positive and beneficial for the municipalities. They state that the involvement of citizens provides valuable insights and proposals that can contribute to the local service improvement, community development and project implementation and directly address the needs and priorities of citizens.

„Direct communication and community forums are successful examples of citizen involvement in decision-making" – Mayor from the Vardar region

Some mayors point out that direct communication with citizens through public meetings, surveys and digital platforms is the most effective way to achieve this involvement, and according to them, the basis of any effective cooperation is direct communication. Organizing community forums, especially those supported by international organizations, has been highlighted as an effective mechanism for involving citizens in decision-making and identifying local priorities.

Furthermore, the cooperation with non-governmental organizations and groups, including the marginalized, in realization of projects that address their needs and interests, is also recognized as the key to successful inclusion of citizens in local governance.

The mayors shared different practices for financing citizen consultation activities. Funds are usually allocated from municipal budgets, specifically for this purpose or through general budget lines intended for civic participation and community development. There are differences in the amount of funds allocated, depending on the size of the municipality and available resources. The COVID-19 pandemic has in some cases caused changes in funding, with budget adjustments to respond to the increased need for digital tools and consultation platforms.

When it comes to the allocation of funds to civil society organizations, many municipalities have formalized procedures that ensure transparency and fairness in the process. These procedures often include public calls and evaluation of proposed projects by civil society organizations according to established criteria. Regarding the funding of sports associations compared to other associations, the ratio of funds varies, with some municipalities allocating significantly more funds to sports compared to culture or civic participation, while others try to provide balanced support for all types of activities.

Financing and allocation of funds for activities and organizations that support citizen participation and consultation are the key elements for effective engagement of citizens in local governance and decision-making.

However, in practice, the mayors face various challenges that can affect the effectiveness and effects of citizen participation. Among them are the lack of resources, political polarization, and insufficiently informed and active citizens. They also state that there is a need to increase transparency and improve communication with citizens in order to increase their participation and influence on local decisions.

The mayors believe that citizen participation is essential for the development of local communities and that successful mechanisms for inclusion can significantly contribute to improving the quality of citizens' life.

At the same time, they recognize that there are challenges and that a continuous effort is needed to improve the existing practices and to introduce new ways to strengthen participation and dialogue with citizens.

Compared to municipal authorities, civil society organizations, non-state stakeholders and citizens are more reserved towards the efficiency and effectiveness of the existing mechanisms for citizen participation.

Although there are mechanisms such as the budget forums and public tribunes, they are often

reduced to formalities without the citizens having real power to influence the decisions.

Direct meetings and gatherings in the local communities are also highlighted as the most effective way of communication by both CSOs and non-state stakeholders. This confirms that personal contact and attention to citizens play a significant role in building trust and active participation.

Here are some positive examples:

Inclusiva from Kumanovo, a member of the social protection council, works with people with special needs and is a good example of how local policies can successfully improve the conditions of vulnerable group.

In the Southwest region, the Rural Coalition from Kichevo developed a program for women's economic empowerment in cooperation with the municipality of Debar, which contributes to the economic empowerment of women.

In the Northeast region, the projects and initiatives of CSOs are included in the municipality program documents and set as priorities in the program of the social protection council, which directly affects the local policies.

A boy from Shtip developed a timetable application for public transport, which was then accepted and implemented by the municipality. This is a positive example of how the creative solutions from the community can be effectively integrated into local services.

In the Eastern region, CSOs use Viber community for better communication with citizens, which led to increased transparency of the municipalities when sharing information and activities.

In the Vardar region, in Kavadarci, the cooperation between CSO and the local government resulted in the creation of a youth center, which provides space and resources for activities and programs aimed at young people. This partnership not only provides support for young people but also increases their involvement in the community.

In the same region, a vehicle for transportation of persons with physical disabilities has been provided in Veles, which is a direct result of the cooperation and contribution of CSOs in improving the access to public services for persons with special needs.

In the Pelagonia region, CSOs initiated a civil initiative for constructing a water supply system in the village of Drenovci, which will successfully improved the living conditions of the locals. This shows that the participation of CSOs may have significant effects in solving specific local problems.

In the North-East region, the cooperation between CSOs and municipalities has led to several successful projects such as snow removal in Lipkovo, with the help of volunteers and municipal machinery.

A positive experience has been noted with the municipal forums where citizens actively participate in determining the priorities of their municipality. This indicates the need to develop inclusive platforms for a dialogue between the municipalities and their citizens.

However, there are still problems with the mobilization of citizens to participate in council sessions and in other forms of participation. Very often, citizens are active only when they are

directly affected, which indicates the strong need to improve the awareness and motivation of citizens for greater participation.

It also seems that most councilors are not very interested in consultation with the wider citizenry and stick to communicating and gathering interests among the party membership. Moreover, the citizens do not consider the councilors as relevant stakeholders in the decision-making process in their municipality, despite the fact that formally and legally they are the ones who make the decisions. The perception of citizens and non-state stakeholders is that the mayors have the main say in decision-making.

Despite the fact that the media play a key role in informing citizens about municipal activities, they still face challenges when trying to get information and statements from the municipality, which means that there is a resistance to open communication between the media and local authorities. It is stated that not all sessions and activities are always covered by the media because the media do not have the capacity to reach everywhere and they mainly rely on the information from the municipalities, but in this way, the other side of the information is missing. On the other hand, it is emphasized that in certain regions, the referendums initiated by CSOs would not have been successful without the support of the media. This suggests that improved media coverage and the use of digital platforms can significantly increase the level of transparency and citizen participation.

The business sector has a correct cooperation with the municipalities, but this mainly refers to basic matters (e.g. waste collection), while it is more difficult for more serious issues. Some of the processes in the municipalities, in the interest of the sector, take place too slowly (eg the adoption of urban plans or water supply), which directly affects business. The information is very often obtained through personal acquaintances with people from the municipality, and the organized forms of cooperation (LESW or business clubs) are less active and successful.

Although there are efforts to increase citizen participation in local decision-making, there are still significant challenges to more substantial participation. The lack of quality participation, the need to improve communication channels, and the need for more effective use of media and digital platforms for informing and engaging citizens are the key areas where significant improvements can be made.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM COVID 19

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on every aspect of social life, including decision-making and civic participation on local level. From the moment it was declared in the early months of 2020, COVID-19 has caused unforeseen challenges for societies everywhere in the world, forcing local and national authorities to quickly and efficiently adapt to new realities.

Here are some key aspects of the impact of COVID-19 on civic participation and decision-making processes on local level:

By introducing the restrictions for physical distancing and the increased need to stay at home; the digital platforms have become the primary way of communication between authorities and citizens. The pandemic situation accelerated the process of digitalization and offered new opportunities for civic participation by oorganizing virtual meetings, online polls and debates.

The health crisis and the economic consequences put new challenges on the local authorities, which changed the priorities in decision-making. Decision-making processes had to be adapted to urgent needs, such as health care and socio-economic support of affected citizens.

Local authorities had to show great flexibility and adaptability to respond to rapidly changing conditions. This includes the rapid introduction of new policies and protocols to protect health and the economy.

The pandemic has also intensified the demand for transparency and accountability on the part of the authorities regarding their decisions and ways of spending public funds. Citizens are looking for accurate information and answers to their questions about crisis management.

Citizen participation has taken on a new dimension with a focus on health and safety issues. Citizens and civil society groups were actively involved in the distribution of humanitarian aid, promotion of health protocols and support for threatened groups in the society.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also exposed some critical weaknesses in the systems of citizen participation and local decision-making, pointing to the need for more resilient and adaptive mechanisms that can deal with future crises.

„During Covid, we used more strategic communications because the municipalities did not go to work, there was no communication and in principle there was no big difference in their work." - focus group participant, CSO from the Southeast region

KEY FINDINGS

There is a significant difference in the degree of participation among different demographic groups in decision-making processes at municipal level. Certain groups are more actively involved or better informed about participation opportunities than others. This is primarily based on:

Political affiliation - people with an active political affiliation or interest are more motivated and better informed about participation in local municipal processes. They have better access to information through their networks or political parties, which may encourage them to participate more in decision-making on local level.

Loss of the line between the party and the public sphere - especially in the context of taking part in decision-making processes. There has been a visible trend, where the consultations with citizens, in local communities or in various public gatherings, are sometimes used in a context that does not allow a clear division between what constitutes party influence and what is considered authentic public participation. This can lead to situations where the decisions that should be solely of public interest are, unintentionally or intentionally, directly influenced by party interests.

Use of digital tools - individuals who actively use digital tools and social media are better informed about opportunities to participate. Digital literacy and internet access can provide easier access to municipal information, surveys, and participation platforms, making these groups potentially more engaged.

Education and age - people with higher education often have a deeper understanding of the meaning and importance of civic participation and may feel more responsible to contribute to their community. Similarly, adult groups may have different degrees of participation compared to younger generations, with potential differences in the interests and modes of participation.

Socioeconomic status – individuals with higher socioeconomic status have more resources and time to participate in municipal processes. They may also have more channels of influence and be more motivated to use their resources to contribute to the community.

Geographic location - there are also geographic differences in participation, where the residents of urban areas have different access and opportunities to participate compared to those in rural areas. Here are some key differences:

Access to information. Residents of urban areas typically have better access to information through a variety of media and technologies. In rural areas, the lack of broadband internet and limited media sources can make it difficult to access up-to-date information on municipal initiatives.

Participation opportunities. Urban areas often offer multiple platforms and venues for participation, such as public gatherings, workshops and meetings with municipal officials. Rural areas may face limitations due to greater geographic distance and less organized opportunities for participation.

Digital participation. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the shift to digital forms of participation. While this presents an opportunity for urban dwellers with easy access to the internet, it remains a challenge in rural areas due to limited digital infrastructure and digital literacy.

Organized representation. Urban areas often have a greater number of organized groups, including NGOs, that can facilitate participation and advocacy. In rural areas, citizens may depend more on individual initiatives or smaller local group.

Specific local issues. The type of issues that motivate citizens to participate may differ by geographic location. Urban residents may be focused on topics such as urban planning and public transport, while rural residents may focus on issues such as agriculture, access to basic services and the maintenance of local roads.

The quality and availability of information that municipalities provide to citizens can significantly affect their ability and willingness to participate in municipal processes. More effective communication channels improve the citizen participation. Various groups are engaged differently:

The young and digitally literate. These groups often use the internet and social media as their main source of information. If municipalities actively use digital platforms for communication and engagement, young and digitally literate citizens can potentially be more engaged due to easier access to relevant information.

Business participation in local decision-making. Businesses, especially those that are significant employers in the municipality, have indirect relationships for direct and informal communication with the municipalities and they should increase their interest in participating in municipality decision-making on a regular basis. This may include participation in public consultations, working groups or councils dealing with economic development. .

Active community members and NGOs. Individuals who already participate in community activities or are members of non-governmental organizations may be more engaged because they actively seek information about local initiatives and opportunities for participation. This group may be better informed and motivated to contribute to decisions at the municipal level.

Citizens with higher education and professionals. Individuals with higher education or those in professions that require critical thinking and analysis may be more inclined to engage in local municipal activities because they tend to value information and want to contribute to their community improvement.

Ctizens with access to local media. Individuals who regularly follow local media (traditional or online) are better informed about municipal events and initiatives and potentially more engaged in decision-making processes due to a better understanding of local issues.

Citizens in urban versus rural areas. Citizens in urban areas may have different levels of engagement compared to those in rural areas, partly due to different access to information. Urban residents may have better access to digital tools and local media, while citizens in rural areas may depend more on traditional methods of communication.

Improving citizens' perception of the effectiveness of existing mechanisms for [participation can have a significant impact on their future involvement. If the citizens believe that their contributions will have a real effect, they may be more motivated to participate. The perception of the

effectiveness of participation increases with:

Citizens who have previously had a positive experience. Individuals who had positive past experiences with participation in municipal initiatives and whose contribution is visibly accepted or valued may be more motivated to continue participating. Positive experiences can encourage them to believe in the effectiveness of civic participation.

NGOs' activists and members. Individuals who are actively engaged in NGOs or activist groups may be more motivated to participate because they are committed to change and believe in the power of collective action on local level. This group usually has a high perception of the potential effectiveness of their participation.

Citizens who have faced specific problems. Citizens who have directly encountered problems or challenges in their community may be more motivated to participate in the hope of contributing to their resolution. Personal experience on specific issues can significantly enhance their perception of the effectiveness of participation.

Educated and informed citizens. Individuals with a high level of education or those who actively seek information and are well informed about local issues may have a more developed awareness of the significance of their participation. This group can believe that their educated and informed opinions can contribute to better decisions at the municipal level.

Citizens with a strong sense of community. Individuals who feel a strong sense of belonging to their community and are committed to its improvement may be more motivated to participate. This group sees participation as part of their responsibility to the community and believes that their contributions can make a difference.

There are significant differences in the practices and initiatives for citizen participation in different municipalities. The transparent and inclusive practices not only increase the level of citizen participation, but also strengthen the trust between citizens and municipal authorities, creating a more favorable atmosphere for joint cooperation and community development. Municipalities that apply more transparent and inclusive practices usually enable better participation of citizens in decision-making processes, through:

Open sessions of the Council – a practice where the sessions of the municipal council are open to the public, with the possibility of direct monitoring or via internet transmission. It enables greater transparency and encourages citizen participation.

Platforms for e-participation - development of digital platforms that allow citizens to make proposals, comment on municipality proposals, and vote for certain initiatives. They increase inclusiveness and active participation.

Public consultations and workshops - organizing regular public consultations and workshops where citizens can participate in the early stages of planning and decision-making for local projects and policies.

Citizen budgets - introducing mechanisms such as citizen budgets, where citizens have a role in deciding how the municipality should spend its finances, especially for certain projects or initiatives.

Access to information - municipalities that actively publish information about their activities, plans, budgets and decisions, in an easily accessible and understandable way, improve transparency and facilitate citizen participation.

Feedback mechanisms - development of systems through which citizens can easily provide feedback to the municipality on various issues, including mechanisms for complaints and suggestions.

Role of local media and NGOs - cooperation with local media and non-governmental organizations to increase awareness and engagement of citizens in the municipal processes.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the mechanisms and opportunities for citizen participation, with a shift to more digital forms of participation. Such a transformation represents both a challenge and an opportunity for municipalities to adapt and improve their strategies for citizens inclusion. Some of the key digital forms of participation that have been applied during the pandemic include:

Virtual sessions and public meetings, through platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or Webex. Municipalities organized council sessions and public meetings in which citizens could participate remotely. This allowed continuity in participation even when physical gathering was limited.

Online platforms for e-participation, the development of specialized online platforms that allow citizens to submit proposals, vote on local initiatives, and provide feedback on municipal plans and projects. These platforms have increased opportunities for broad participation.

Digital tools for reverse information, introducing applications and websites where citizens can directly report problems (such as road potholes, lighting, waste), which makes municipal services more reactive and open to the citizens needs.

Social media for engagement and information, during the Covid-19 crisis, municipalities increased their use of social media to inform citizens about the current issues, to share important information and to encourage dialogue and participation in the online space.

Digital surveys and research, conducting online surveys and research to collect opinions and perceptions from citizens regarding various local issues, which allows quick and effective data collection and improvement of policies and services.

Although the transition to digital forms of participation offers significant opportunities for increased civic engagement, it also poses challenges related to digital literacy, access to technology and the Internet, as well as the need to protect privacy and data security. Municipalities must work to adapt and improve their strategies so that they are inclusive and accessible to all citizens, and to ensure that all segments of the population can effectively participate in decision-making on local level.

There is considerable scope for building partnerships with other stakeholders at the local level, which is key to the successful implementation of policies and projects aimed at the common good of the community. Involving different stakeholders can offer a broad perspective and resources that can significantly improve the quality and effectiveness of local initiatives through:

Inclusion of local businesses and industry, there is considerable scope for cooperation with local businesses to improve the economic and technical resources with joint projects. This may include support to local events, investment in shared infrastructure, or partnerships in development programs.

Partnerships between the public and private sectors, collaboration between the

municipalities and local businesses on projects that improve infrastructure, public services or the local economy. Such partnerships not only increase opportunities for businesses, but also contribute to improving the quality of life in the community.

Regulatory policies influence, businesses may be particularly motivated to participate in discussions about local regulations and policies that directly affect their operations. Active engagement can help shaping policies that support the business climate while protecting the community and the environment.

Digitization and innovation, municipalities can promote digitaliization and innovation to create a favorable environment for businesses to grow and develop. This includes support to startups, development of technology parks and provision of resources for digital transformation.

Cooperation with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations, NGOs and civil society organizations often have specific knowledge and experience in certain areas such as the environment, social justice, and cultural heritage. They can contribute to project design and implementation, as well as assist in community mobilization.

Development of multi-sectoral forums and working groups, the creation of platforms where different local stakeholders can meet, discuss and plan joint activities is key to building strong and lasting partnerships. This allows all interested parties to contribute and feel part of the decision-making process.

Building partnerships with other stakeholders on local level not only increases the capacity to implement projects, but also increases the sense of community and ownership among citizens, which is the basis for sustainable development of the local community.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Low readiness of the municipalities to involve the citizens, the citizens gave an average score of 2.34 for the readiness of the municipalities to include them in the decision-making processes, which indicates insufficient readiness and activity of the municipalities in this aspect.

Limited involvement through direct communication, a large percentage of respondents stated that they are not involved in decision-making processes or that the municipality does not contact them to share their opinion.

The need to improve the methods of inclusion, although there are different methods of inclusion such as public forums, social media, and surveys, the results indicate that there is a need to improve the methods in order to make them more easily applicable.

The existing practice of inclusion, although the municipalities have different methods for the inclusion of citizens in decision-making processes, there is a particularly evident lack of consistency and effectiveness in their implementation. Citizens often feel that they are not sufficiently informed or involved in critical decision-making.

Citizens' interests and priorities, there is a clear interest among citizens for participation in decision-making related to communal and urban development, environmental protection, and social and youth policies. This indicates the need for greater focus on these areas when planning consultation activities.

Considerable lack of interest in participation, a high percentage of citizens expressed lack of interest or lack of participation in decision-making on local level. This indicates the need for better inclusion and engagement of citizens in democratic processes.

Reasons for disinterest, the most common reasons for disinterest include lack of time, resources, or a belief that their opinion will not be taken into account. More to this, a significant number of the citizens stated that they did not feel sufficiently informed or invited to participate.

Community forums, surveys and public forums are the most popular methods of participation, indicating a high value of direct communication and interaction between citizens and decision makers.

The citizens consider polls to be an important instrument for expressing their opinions and priorities, which indicates the need for municipalities to use polls as a standard mechanism for consulting citizens.

There is potential to improve online platforms for participation, such as online forums and social media, which can increase participation opportunities for a wide range of citizens.

Potential for a positive effect from essential participation, the majority of respondents consider that the essential involvement of citizens in decision-making has the potential to cause a positive effect. This shows that citizens believe that their more significant participation can contribute to better decisions and positive changes in their community.

Citizen participation is considered important for local governance - The majority of citizens see citizen participation as a positive contribution to decision-making, which indicates a high value that citizens place on their participation.

There is a need to increase the efficiency and visibility of citizen involvement - Although most citizens believe that their participation has the potential for a positive effect, there is still a need to improve the mechanisms of engagement in order to increase the efficiency and visibility of their contributions.

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