

# “BiH municipalities and the EU: Direct participation of citizens in policy-making at the local level”

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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**Present direct participation rates of citizens in BiH are worryingly low. The next challenge on the road to the EU will be closely tied to the local level governments, due to the subsidiarity principle which is the cornerstone of the EU. Hence, participation of citizens will have to be brought to the EU standards.**

**Present regulation on direct participation of citizens in BiH, is up to the standards set by the European Charter on Local-Self Government. However, the municipalities, or the higher levels of government, do not have direct citizen participation high on their agenda. In line with that, the mechanisms for direct participation of citizens are not well developed and widely available.**

**Municipalities with higher percentage of rural population have an especially important role to play as the citizens in rural areas tend to be left out of the decision-making process more often than the ones in urban centers. Reasons lie in the inability/unwillingness of the municipalities to reach out to them and bring the participation opportunities closer to them.**

**MZs are the traditional mechanisms for citizen participation in BiH. Even in the post-war BiH citizens most often use and recognize the MZs and the Public discussions as mechanisms for participation. Despite this, the municipalities have not followed up on this trend by strengthening these mechanisms in their municipalities. This is especially true in the RS where over half of all municipalities do not utilize MZs. Generally, the citizens look favorably on direct participation, but are most often not properly informed due to weak information dissemination on the local level.**

**The specific recommendations on the MZs are:**

- 1. Funding of MZs as a mechanism of participation should be predictable and constant. A serious capacity problem of the MZs is caused by irregular and improper funding by the municipalities. Favoritism of**

certain MZs based on political affiliation has to be diminished by introduction of fixed funding for MZs costs.

2. Conditions for utilization of MZs' capacity are closely related to the mentioned legitimacy of leadership. To minimize this problem, it is necessary for municipalities to take as an example Centar municipality which has organized elections for representatives in the MZ Council.
3. The definition of issues that have to be discussed/consulted with the public. The present practice of discussing the budget plans with MZs on a selective basis should not continue.
4. Information dissemination channels need to be governed by clear guidelines and need to provide space to issues that are related to community needs nor issues of general political importance.
5. There should be coverage of the equal parts of municipal territories with MZs. Decrease of discretionary powers of the Municipal Assembly regarding the registration of the MZs. Liberalization, or setting clear standards which are not subject to decisions by the Assembly, are key to allow the citizens to exercise their liberty/rights in a way that is well known to them.
6. MZs should be used in combination with other mechanisms. The establishment and strengthening of the MZs should not mean the abolition of other mechanisms for participation. This is especially true with citizens' initiatives which can not shoulder the responsibility of being the main mechanism for citizen participation, but have the potential as they are a kind of mechanism which relies on citizens taking advantage of the freedom of democracy.
7. Record keeping on the correspondence with the MZs and other direct participation events needs to be maintained and improved. This will enable the citizens' and the NGOs to demand accountability for their initiatives and create a foundation for receiving feed back from the officials.

