

Policy Brief: Alternative forms of civic initiatives has a higher potential to mobilise diverse groups of citizens - European Western Balkans

by EWB

VIENNA – Inclusive decision-making processes that prioritise citizens and their needs, allowing their voices to shape the decisions that affect them, are at the core of democratisation from below, concludes the [Policy Brief „Kosovo: Democratising democracy“](#), published within the WB2EU Network.

The authors recommend that government should ensure full implementation of legal framework to enable the participation of citizens in public affairs. It is added that there is a need for building the capacities of the decision-maker at all level to adhere to legal requirements for inclusive policy making. Policy Brief also recommends developing public spaces and funding instruments for citizens participation in decision-making through civil society.

Authors explain that when Kosovo was preparing to declare its independence in 2008, it was facing a unique challenge and opportunity – pursuing internal reforms for national state building while simultaneously putting itself on a path of Europeanisation.

„With this ambitious endeavour in mind, Kosovo today, 15 years later, still remains a work in progress. Yet, the internal reforms aimed at transforming the country into a future member state of the European Union have paid some dividends. Kosovo is among the few Western Balkan countries where democratic continues to be reaffirmed through exemplary elections and smooth transition of power, even when the entire political spectrum was outvoted in the 2021 elections“, Policy Brief states.

However, despite notable advancements on the ground and international assessments that Kosovo is today freer and more democratic than ever before, there is quite a gap to bridge before fully realising the potential democracy. It is said that this can be contributed to the concentration of public policy-making within formal systems.

„Except for the usually relatively high election turnout, the majority of Kosovo’s population abstains from participating in either formal decision-making processes or civic actions in their own interests. A small percentage of citizens participate in public hearings at the local level, and a similar trend is observed in public consultations at the central level“, authors state.

They underlined that in formal policy-making processes, there is a need for specific mechanisms to ensure that space for participation is not reliant on the discretionary willingness of a single politician or civil servant but rather is sustained, predictable, and transparent.

Policy Brief recalls that Kosovo has developed a comprehensive set of legal requirements for public participation at all levels of governance, generally in line with the best international standards.

However, they stress that implementation of formal requirements is partial and results in effective opportunities to participate only for a very limited number of well-established civil society organisations and experts.

„Even less public consultation happens at the local level. Despite similar standards, there are no functional tools and capacities comparable to those of the central government. Legally required biannual meetings between mayors and citizens are largely a 'tick-the-box' exercise, both in content and outreach“, it is said.

The authors stressed that civil society as an effective tool for channeling citizens' needs and voices. Yet, it became increasingly evident that a gap existed between NGOs and the citizens they sought to serve and represent.

„The fact that formal mechanisms of participation primarily favoured high-capacity NGOs meant that even when decisions made by public institutions resulted from participatory processes, participation was predominantly confined to a small number of NGOs that sometimes lacked effective connections to the groups of citizens they meant to represent or serve. While participatory democracy was upheld in a formal sense, it failed to come fro, below“, authors underline.

Policy Brief stress that in a participatory democracy, the state has an obligation to provide timely information, and formal and effective opportunities for public participation and regular dialogue.

„The recent trend of alternative forms of civil society organisations and civic initiatives that are built around inclusive practises, has a higher potential to mobilise diverse groups of citizens around issues of their interest. With more citizens involved in the work civil society, their needs and concerns become more central to the agenda and activities of these civic initiatives, resulting in increased demand that such needs and concerns be addressed within the formal decision-making process“, it is stated in a Policy Brief.

For this to happen, authors believe the state also needs to follow the positive practise of creating public community spaces and design adequate funding practises that enable civic engagement.

The Policy Brief is published in the framework of the WB2EU project. The project aims at the establishment of a network of renowned think-tanks, do-tanks, universities, higher education institutes and policy centres from the Western Balkans, neighbouring countries and EU member states that will be most decisive for the enlargement process and Europeanisation of the region in the upcoming years. The WB2EU project is co-funded by the European Commission under its Erasmus+ Jean Monnet programme.