

DO CITIZENS
HAVE THE POWER?



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1. INTRODUCTORY SECTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

The National Coalition for Decentralization (NKD), in partnership with CRTA, Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, and Partners Serbia implements Citizens Have the Power programme. The programme is supported by the American Agency for International Development (USAID) and it is planned to last until 2022.

The programme objective is to promote the environment by enabling a higher citizen participation in the processes of decision-making and public policy creation, through a more open approach of local self-governments, and to create the conditions for a more responsible and inclusive public administration.

This survey is a part of the activities planned within the programme, and it is carried out with the idea to provide different perceptions and points of view for challenges of public administration reform process and increased citizen participation in the decision-making process.

1.2 METHODOLOGY

1.2.1 Survey methodology

The survey was carried out in accordance with the combined methodology in 20 local self-government units (LSGUs), towns and municipalities, geographically distributed in the following four regions:

- The region of West and Central Serbia, in seven local self-government units: Valjevo, Kruševac, Kragujevac, Novi Pazar, Požega, Prijepolje, Kraljevo;
- The region of South-East Serbia, in five local self-government units: Niš, Pirot, Zaječar, Svrljig, Leskovac;
- The region of Vojvodina, in six local self-government units: Indija, Novi Sad, Bela Crkva, Sremska Mitrovica, Zrenjanin, Sombor;
- The region of Belgrade, in two local self-government units: Novi Beograd and Stari Grad.

The first part of the survey is a desk survey carried out by NKD members on the basis of a defined questionnaire, based on the Good Governance Index methodology at the local level. This index was developed through the cooperation of the Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-government (MPALSGU) and the Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities (SCTM).

The Index includes five good governance principles (accountability; transparency, openness and participation; equality; predictability, cost-benefit and efficiency; anti-corruption). A set of indicators, questions and rating system was designed for each principle, realistically presenting the status in each of these local self-governments. NKD has chosen to follow up with two principles – transparency, openness, and participation, and anti-corruption, by using some of the defined parameters.

The second part of the survey included focus groups with the representatives of citizens as participants. The participants were selected by NKD, and each focus group consisted of 5–7 participants. The questions asked during the focus groups included four areas: challenges in the local community, accountability of authorities, citizen participation in decision-making and the prevention of corruption.

The third part of the survey was realized upon completion of the first two parts, and included interviews with the representatives of local self-government units. 14 LSGU representatives took part, and they answered questions about challenges in the local community, mechanisms of communication with citizens and overcoming of challenges in that communication.

1.2.2 In-depth analysis – approach and limitations

The results of the survey in the form of analysis of data obtained on the basis of the Good Governance Index at the local level were presented in a separate report – “How to Achieve a Better Understanding Between Citizens and Local Self-governments?”. Evaluation of municipalities on the basis of the indicators was supplemented with the focus group results and in-depth interviews.

That is why this Report is supposed to be the addition to the basic Report, with the idea to enable a deeper insight into opinions and attitudes of citizens, on one side, and representatives of the local self-governments on the other. Although the topics that the citizens dealt with and the topics that the LSGU representatives dealt with do not completely match, they still overlap. That is why this Report is structured by areas in which citizen opinions were assessed during focus groups.

The approach to the analysis therefore primarily included the analysis of the responses of citizens; those insights have been combined with the insights from the interviews with the local self-government representatives, and, where there was a base, the results of assessment per Good Governance Index indicators. Whenever possible, the perceptions of citizens and LSGU representatives have been compared to clearly point out to the similarities and differences in opinions, and therefore identify the potential points of action.

A more detailed analysis of the Good Governance Index (desk study) results is provided in Appendix 1 so that the municipalities could be analysed individually per each indicator within the studied areas, if necessary.

Please note that, while the citizens provided very detailed answers to questions, LSGU representatives did not go into much detail. However, both citizens and LSGU representatives provided answers to are tightly related, so the citizens found it difficult to treat the challenges in the community, accountability of authorities or participation in decision-making separately. Similarly, the LSGU representatives found it hard to avoid connecting the challenges in the community with the communication with citizens. That is why it has not always been easy to figure out the exact answer to exact topic, but there was an attempt to somehow group and summarize answers to different topics in order to observe similarities and differences in opinions and perceptions more easily.

Also, even though one of the ideas was to compare the results of this Good Governance Index study with the results of previous studies, the Good Governance Index is primarily set as the self-assessment tool, and there are no Index results per municipality. That is why it is not possible to establish whether there has been any progress from the time when the Index had been established until today. In the 2008 study ("Analysis of performance and capacity of the local self-government units in the implementation of the good governance principle), the Republic of Serbia and SCTM provided some of the results on a sample of 60 towns and municipalities, but the results are presented in summarized form, and not per individual town and municipality, so those results could not have been used for comparison.

2.

FINDINGS: DO CITIZENS HAVE THE POWER?

2.1 FINDINGS: DO CITIZENS HAVE THE POWER?

2.1.1 Challenges in a community: from practical to essential

The impression after the review of citizens' answers is a rather pessimistic picture of a significant number of issues going from one government to another, whereas during that time, the community is slowly sinking, burdened by the issues and the feeling that they will never be resolved.

If we try to analyze and summarize those answers, it seems that three levels of challenges/issues can be defined: individual issues in different communities, more complex issues (structural issues) shared by several communities, and finally, issues that actually represent the causes of failure to resolve all other issues.

1: Practical, in different communities. On level 1, the citizens mention hygiene in their communities, occasional heating issues, stray dogs, accessibility for persons with disabilities, lack of cultural events/facilities, poor public transport, unregulated parks and/or playgrounds, cutting down trees, digging up streets, etc. Each community has its own typical challenges/issues, but it is obvious that they could relatively easily be solved, even if big and important for everyday living.

2: More complex challenges, common for several communities. On level 2, issues/challenges shared by several communities, if not all of them, are recognized. These are more complex issues that take a deeper understanding of causes and setting a longer-term strategy for their resolution. The following belong to this group: economic situation, construction of reliable infrastructure (water supply system, sewerage system, power supply system, communal system), urban planning – lack of plans or failure to comply with the plans, pollution (particularly air and water pollution, as well as the landfills), insufficient development of rural areas.

3: Essential challenges, and/or causes of issues. On level 3, the citizens actually talked about the topics they find to be the causes of issues/challenges, or reasons for failure to resolve those issues. The following topics belong to that group of answers: indifference of the local self-governments to the real problems of citizens, frequently related to political party affiliation, and/or the feeling that the LSGU representatives

answer to the political party, and not the community they lead; incompetence of people holding high positions to resolve certain problems; non-transparency, failure to answer the requests of citizens and lack of information as related issues; corruption; lack of community development strategy related to failure to recognize (use) the potentials that certain local self-governments have at their disposal; centralisation.

We can definitely conclude that the issues intertwine, and that citizens, due to many questions that “hurt” them, sometimes find it difficult to make a distinction between the cause and the consequence.

The local self-government representatives have been asked the same question, and, interestingly enough, there were common points in their answers. As well as the citizens, the local self-government representatives recognize the following.

1: Practical, in different communities. This is level 1 of issues that, like with the citizens, differ from one community to another: unpaved streets, lack of cultural events/facilities, necessary renovation of schools, cultural centres, issues occurring in traffic regulation, parking zones, etc.

2: More complex challenges, common for several communities. More than citizens, LSGU representatives emphasize those issues of the second order, or more complex ones, that seem to be common for several communities. It would be interesting to mention that some of them noted depopulation and people leaving, that the citizens have not mentioned, but the following is also mentioned: economy, and/or employment, communal system, infrastructure, urban planning (difficulties with problem solving), pollution, and difficulties of resolving challenges in rural areas.

3: Essential challenges, and/or causes of issues. On level 3, almost all LSGU representatives emphasize difficulties in communication with citizens, or mention that they are trying, but that the citizens are not interested, that they do not use the existing communication channels, they do not know what and whom to ask, they do not know to find information available to them. The local self-government representatives talk about the citizens who are not interested in getting involved in problem solving, as they frequently point them out, but they are not ready to offer possible solutions; they also note that the citizens are frequently unaware that solving of some problems is very complex. Centralization seems to be the most prominent issue, even more than for the citizens, as it includes lack of money and/or budget for problem solving in a community.

2.1.2 Similarities and differences in perception of challenges in community

Table below shows matches and/or differences between the opinions of citizens and the opinions of LSGU representatives.

PERCEPTION OF CITIZENS	PERCEPTION OF LSGU REPRESENTATIVES
PRACTICAL CHALLENGES/ISSUES	
Communal hygiene, occasional heating issues, stray dogs, accessibility for persons with disabilities, lack of cultural events/facilities, public transport, parks and/or playgrounds, cutting down trees, digging up streets	Unpaved streets, lack of cultural events/facilities, renovation of schools, cultural centres, animal shelters, issues occurring in traffic regulation, parking zones
MORE COMPLEX CHALLENGES/ISSUES, USUALLY COMMON FOR SEVERAL COMMUNITIES	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic situation • Construction of reliable infrastructure • Urban planning – absence of plans of failure to comply with the plans • Pollution - particularly of air and water; landfills • Insufficient development of rural areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic situation • Infrastructure – old, requires large investments • Urban planning – issues with resolving • Pollution - water; landfills • Difficulties in development of rural areas • Depopulation, people leaving, birth death
CAUSES OF CHALLENGES/ISSUES	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indifference of LSGU to the real problems of citizens • Incompetence of people holding high positions to resolve certain issues • Non-transparency, failure to answer the requests of citizens and lack of information as related issues • Corruption • Lack of community development strategy (related to failure to use the potentials of local certain communities) • Political party affiliation, and/or the feeling that the LSGU representatives answer to the political party, and not the community they lead • Centralisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizens are not interested in problem solving • Citizens do not understand what problem solving entails (more complicated than they think), and they occasionally point out to the issues, but they do not offer solutions • Citizens do not use the existing communication channels, they do not understand the right channels to use • Citizens are not aware that it takes time to resolve issues systemically • Only one ruling political party, the officials are not aware that they represent the service for the citizens • Centralisation

It is obvious that the discrepancies in answers increase with the higher levels. Citizens and LSGU representatives agree about the practical issues, more or less.

In terms of more complex challenges, frequently common for several communities, the same issues are identified, but they are observed from different points of view. For example, while the citizens emphasize urban planning, and/or that there are no plans or

that they are not complied with, LSGU representatives talk about the issues they face when trying to resolve an urgent planning issue systemically. A prominent difference is that the LSGU representatives emphasized depopulation, which the citizens did not mention as much. It is encouraging for this issue that both citizens and LSGU representatives identify the same or very similar issues, although from their own points of view. This **opens a potential dialogue field, where a discussion about different points of view could be facilitated, in order to point to the perspective of “the other side”**.

In terms of problem causes, responses of citizens and responses of LSGU representatives are mirror images. While citizens believe that LSGUs are indifferent, community representatives believe the same for the citizens; while citizens believe that LSGUs are non-transparent, indifferent to communication and do not provide access to information, LSGU representatives state that citizens do not use the existing communication channels and that they do not try to find the information that are at their full disposal. While citizens believe that people in charge of certain issues are incompetent, LSGU representatives believe that the citizens do not understand the obstacles they are facing when trying to resolve issues. Citizens believe that there are no strategies for systemic problem solving, and LSGU representatives believe that citizens do not understand the time required to resolve some issues systemically.

A significant **difference is that the citizens recognize corruption as one of the causes of issues in the community, but, quite expectedly, LSGU representatives do not mention it at all.**

Two areas they agree upon are important: first, the citizens in a higher number of communities, as well as some LSGU representatives, marked the **ruling of one political party** as an issue, along with **failure of the officials to understand that they represent the service for the citizens**. The citizens believe that the decisions about the important issues are made elsewhere, and not in their communities, as the persons leading the communities belong to political parties, serving the interests of their parties, and not the interests of the local communities in which they have been elected. This topic is rarely mentioned among LSGU representatives, but it has been mentioned: *“Solving of many issues is frequently related to certain political interests; first of all of the largest political party that governs a town, or the party leading department in charge of a specific topic.”*

Another important topic, the same for several **communities**, is the issue of centralisation. Citizens frequently emphasize that the issues cannot be resolved locally, as everything depends on the republic authorities, whereas several LSGU representatives state that, with the budget they have available (as a large portion of the money goes to the state budget, and not the LSGU budget), it is simply impossible to resolve some issues, particularly those requiring significant investments, like infrastructure, pollution, etc.

Građani kažu:



NIŠ

"There is a high level of centralization, which is why the local government has almost no impact on resolving of certain issues."

SOMBOR

"The Assembly may change street names and allocate smaller sums of money, but until it has a higher accountability, there will be no higher interest either."

ZRENJANIN

"The Serbian Government is the only one that has a say, there is no local self-government. There is no regional level, no Vojvodina, everything comes from the top. If there is no permission from the top, nothing can happen. There is no state, no province, no self-government."

STARI GRAD

"Local self-governments should be strengthened, as each self-government knows the needs of its community best. The town and the state should not hold everything in their hands."

Whereas LSGU representatives say:



ZRENJANIN

"Our budget is about RSD five billion, and the fact is that 90% of the public finances goes to the central authorities, so the question is whether anything can be done with the remaining funds."

ZAJEČAR

"We need wastewater treatment plant, we also need to rehabilitate schools, cultural centres... and the self-government cannot resolve all that with this budget."

ZRENJANIN

"The local self-governments need to be strengthened through legislation... The HR potential has to be empowered... Our system is based on the authority of one man... Only in case of change will the citizens and local self-governments realize that the power lies within them."

Centralisation thus becomes one of the key issues, as in this moment, it is beyond the scope of being solved by the citizens and by LSGUs, and, at the same time, it is one of the fields in which both citizens and LSGUs have the same and clearly stated interest.

The responses of citizens and the responses of LSGU representatives point to different levels of challenges in the local communities: practical, more complex, and causes of issues.

Key differences in perceptions are in the reasons for **failure to resolve the issues**.

- **Citizens:** indifference of LSGUs to resolve issues, incompetence, corruption, non-transparency, lack of strategy.
- **LSGU representatives:** indifference of citizens, lack of understanding for the difficulties with resolving more complex issues, they do not use the existing communication channels, they do not understand that it takes time to solve the issues systemically.

Key similarity: centralisation, as one of the main causes of inability to solve the problems locally. It is the field in which the citizens and LSGUs have the same, clearly stated interest.

2.2.1 What do citizens think, and what do local self-government representatives think?

Only the citizens have been asked this question, however, as some answers of LSGU representatives contain opinions related to this topic, the answers of both groups are presented in this section.

Answers of citizens to this question are different, and as it has already been mentioned, they intertwine with the answers about other topics the survey deals with. The analysis found two key questions of citizens about accountability of the authorities.

1: Who is actually responsible for what? In most of communities, there is the question of unclear division of responsibilities. Although it is easy to observe the local authorities as a monolithic structure, responsible for all questions, the citizens are actually aware that there are different departments within the local self-government that are in charge of different areas, therefore having the primary responsibility in certain areas. The issues occur out of several reasons: first, it is not easy to differentiate which department within the local authorities is in charge of which topic; second, some of the issues are complex, and more than one department is in charge. Third, and maybe the most important, is that citizens are witnesses of the continuous collapse of the institutions that have started functioning in the previous period – maybe not in the best way, but they have still been functioning. They say that they used to have youth offices, departments that used to work with the elderly, different cultural institutions, etc. The citizens also talked about whom to address first: *“When you want to complain, you don't know whom to complain to.”* (Zrenjanin) *“We do not have the continuity of certain institutions, they keep on changing things. Now they are announcing amendments to the City Statute...”* (Niš)

2: Who should call to account? Another issue defined in the analysis of the answers of citizens is that it is not quite clear who is “in charge”, i.e. who is responsible for calling the government to account. Many answers emphasize the role of media and citizens; CSOs are mentioned in some communities, too. However, each of these options has special challenges.

- In terms of citizens, different obstacles are identified: the sense of powerlessness, i.e. a small number of people wanting to engage (there is no critical mass); many people find an attempt to call someone to account “interfering with the authorities”; disappointment of those who tried to get involved and call to

account, but with no results, so they do not want to deal with it. These obstacles intertwine to a large extent with the factor impacting the citizen participation level in decision-making, so for more information, please see Section 3.3.

- In terms of media, the citizens mention non-existence of independent media, and/or dependence of media on the funds allocated by the self-government, and that some media are owned by private owners who avoid “criticizing” the authorities. Both citizens and media representatives mention that the reporters feel the dose of fear that causes self-censorship. Media representatives stress that it is hard for them to obtain information (they used to use the Law on Access to Information, but that does not function now), and that even the information they manage to obtain is hard to prove and publish.
- It seems that Civil Society Organizations are just briefly mentioned, and not to the same extent in all local communities. Occasionally there is an impression that the citizens are actually not familiar with their activities, and that the CSO activists themselves talked about the activities, as they have also been included in focus groups. CSO representatives talk about having difficulties to call to account, emphasizing questions like who should be called to account, as well as the difficulty and the length of the process of calling to account. Considering that the engagement in CSOs also belongs to citizen participation, this topic will be additionally discussed in Section 3.3.

There is also an additional issue in the answers of the citizens that represents an important factor in understanding the difficulties in calling the local authorities to account is the **impression of the focus group participants that the “authorities” became very adept at avoiding responsibility**. It is reflected by providing unclear information (how to reach the responsible ones), unclear answers, refusing to communicate and/or prolonging the processes (scheduling and cancelling meetings).

A special and very important aspect of that evasion is the switching of arguments, or interpretation of any questions and attempts to establish accountability as the result of a different political affiliation of the persons asking the questions, or interpreting questions like attacks: “[Citizens] organized themselves, they blocked the landfills, they protested, but a political note was pinned to those protest and the momentum was interrupted.” (Prijepolje) “As soon as an omission is pointed out to, everything is understood as a personal attack. They do not understand that it is not an attack, but just pointing to an issue that should be resolved.” (Inđija) “When we as journalists ask questions about the benefit of something for the citizens or the price, they think that we are attacking them. They do not understand that we are the spokespersons of citizens.” (Prijepolje)

Another important aspect is the **creation of atmosphere of fear**, or the impression (that could be more or less realistic, but it definitely exists (that something bad will happen to those calling to account. *"I think people are afraid for their jobs and they try to keep them."* (Valjevo) *"One should be very brave to go out in the public and say some things, as you could lose your head over it."* (Sremska Mitrovica) *"I've personally experienced corruption a thousand times, mostly while I was working for local institutions... I cannot talk freely about the things I've seen and heard. The stories are horrifying, believe me."* (Niš) „Citizens are afraid to ask questions as they will immediately receive threats from someone from somewhere.“ (Leskovac)

Although this question was not a subject matter of the interview, some relevant points could be drawn from the answers of LSGU representatives. For example, numerous answers to other questions (communication with the citizens) mention the understanding of LSGU representatives that the citizens are not sure who is responsible for what and whom they should ask about a problem. *"The citizens ask me about errors in documents, correction of those errors and sending the documents, but they frequently ask other questions, as they frequently do not know who does what"*, Pirot. The representatives of different LSGUs mention ignorance in interviews on several occasions, "ignorance" or low level of education of citizens as the factors deepening that misunderstanding about responsibilities and whom to address: *"A citizen is sometimes an ignorant party, so a letter travels a long time"*, Zaječar.

A kind of acceptance and/or recognition of their own responsibility is very rarely reflected in the answers of LSGU representatives. For example, a representative of one LSGU mentioned the example when the citizens had been intentionally misinformed, causing problems to the citizens and to those who should help the citizens with certain procedures. Another example is the LSGU representative that talked about only one party ruling as an issue, including the lack of accountability to citizens, and/or lack of understanding that LSGU represents a service for the citizens.

2.2.2: Similarities and differences in perceptions of accountability of authorities

Both the citizens and the LSGU representatives recognize that **citizens frequently do not know who is responsible for what within the local authorities**. It is a thing of different perceptions: the citizens see it as an omission of the local self-government to clearly state who does what and who is in charge of what, whereas LSGU representatives believe that it is clear, but that the citizens are not educated enough to understand the structure of local authorities. The second part of the problem is that, although the citizens maybe do not know who is responsible for what, the local self-

governments do not recognize their own obligation to inform the citizens about that in a way they will understand, as it is a part of LSGU duty as the service of citizens. This question – **understanding the local self-government structure, level or accountability, definitely represents a field for dialogue, as well as the field open to education of citizens**, and civic initiatives and CSOs could play a part in that.

There is one distinctive difference: **the citizens clearly observe the collapse of institutions, whereas LSGU representatives do not identify it as a challenge or an issue.**¹ Although LSGU representatives do not recognize it, this could be a topic for a dialogue or civic engagement, in terms of monitoring the work of institutions within LSGU and the promotion of their operation.

2.3

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING: “THEY DO NOT DEAL WITH POLITICS, BUT POLITICS DEALS WITH THEM SUCCESSFULLY”

2.3.1 What do citizens think?

In terms of citizen participation in decision-making, the analysis of their answers indicates several key factors impacting (lack of) motivation and/or (in)activity of citizens.

1: Lack of knowledge about their own (fundamental) rights, including the ways in which they can participate and in which areas. The fact that the rights of citizens are defined by the laws or bylaws does not mean that the citizens are informed about them. The citizens do not necessarily have to know which laws or documents are relevant, how to obtain them, and many find it difficult to understand the legislative solutions provided in complicated legal terms. To that end, some of the participants have clearly identified what is needed. *“There should be a manual you can check and see what you can do and whom to address to.” “There should be a systemic way to raise people’s awareness. People should know their obligations and their rights. I believe that they are written somewhere, but I, as a citizen, have not been informed about that. I have an impression that nobody wants to do it, as it is easier to punish someone since there is something like that written in row 17 of footnote 15,000.”* (Novi Beograd)

2: Lack of belief that participation can achieve anything at all. Citizens often do not even try to participate, as there is an inherent belief that they do not have influence and that their engagement will not change a thing. It is not a recent, but a long-lasting situation that requires a solution that will last for years, if not decades. Citizens are simply not used to their words, their voices, being appreciated. *“I do not believe in the*

¹Citizens have also clearly identified the ways in which the authorities evade accountability. It is quite expected that this aspect is not mentioned at all by LSGU representatives who, on the other hand, talked about the efforts they made to communicate with the citizens. It would actually be very interesting to ask a direct question about accountability to LSGU representatives, as their answers would definitely provide an opportunity to observe/investigate the attitudes and understanding of accountability of authorities.

power of an individual, as I've experienced numerous situations in which an individual could not change a thing." (Kragujevac) "Situation is difficult, if you observe it from the citizen perspective. The citizens have little or no influence at all. If you have personal connections or a political influence, then you have an advantage. Otherwise, your voice is not respected and you are almost invisible." (Kragujevac) "Citizens have no power at all. Everything is at the level of an earthworm. The citizens have lost their enthusiasm, they are socially inactive, even inefficient for their environment, neighbourhood, community... they think they have no power." (Požega) This contributes to a kind of withdrawal, not trying to get involved: "People are getting distant, trying to make their own micro-worlds." "I even think that the younger generations are even more unconcerned and that they contributing to change even less." (Novi Beograd) "The problem is that they do not give us a chance to fight. You get up in the morning and the only thing you see is news. The political power is always stronger." (Stari Grad)

3‡ Dilemma about the ways in which to get engaged – through civic engagement or joining a political party.

Through their answers, the citizens actually expressed an important dilemma – how to get engaged, or what kind of engagement provides results. On one hand, there is a kind of "repulsion" towards direct engagement in politics, and an attitude that one loses one's integrity by engaging through political parties. "We are sick of politics because of daily media announcements. Marketing became dirty, and the politics is the worst thing ever, which is why moral people avoid all of that." (Kragujevac) On the other hand, there is an opinion that it is the only kind of engagement that can resolve things, as otherwise there is no access to places where the decisions are made. "When people see how the decision on priorities for spending of money is made, they become people who are right, and who do not have to think about it. So, you simply join a political party and ask for a road in your village to be asphalted." (Kraljevo) "I can officially go to the local self-government and say: I've noticed a certain problem, but if I'm not a member of a political party, then I will not be supported." (Svrljig) "The only way is to join a political party, cooperate with other members, tell them I'm one of you, I just want us to solve some problems." (Novi Pazar) Rarely, there are those who believe that civic engagement is important: "I do not support joining a political party, I believe that citizens can participate through their own initiatives." (Stari Grad)

4‡ Demanding and long-lasting engagement, due to which there may be no solution, or only a partial solution.

Some problems have been solved, and some attempts against the will of the citizens have been stopped, but all of that was achieved after a long-lasting and very persistent struggle, including a combination of different approaches: protests, writing letters and complaints, organizing meetings, legal resolution (lawsuits, courts, etc.). All that requires organization, persistence, knowledge of legislation and citizen rights, and does not guarantee the result. Many citizens simply do not have time or

resources to get involved in that way, so they find it easier not to participate at all. Those that do get involved are frequently discouraged, as they do not get the appropriate response from the self-government: "...We are working on a public procurement project in schools... When you go to a school and say: we would like to see the info about certain procurement, they say – well, you can't. Then they ask for your ID, although they are not allowed to do that, then they start stuttering, and then you go to the Commissioner and you pray to God that the Commissioners sees your mail in the following three years. Simply put, a citizen feels like being in some kind of a trial." (Novi Beograd) "In 2015, the local self-government made a decision to give the park area land from a residential area to an investor to construct a building there. The citizens were not informed about that, but they found out through informal channels and initiated a certain action. They got organized, as they understood that their microclimate and parking will be disturbed. They collected about 1800 signatures submitted to the local administration. All that had an effect, as it happened before the elections when the city administration did not want to fight with the citizens, so to speak. The citizens engaged legal experts, engineers, they addressed the institutions and reached the Constitutional Court. This problem has still not been legally resolved." (Leskovac)

5 Doubts about a civil society as the way of action. As it has already been mentioned, the civil society and organizations are perceived differently in different communities. They are recognized in some communities, while in others their activities are not really visible. Even in the communities in which they are recognized, citizens have their own view of their activity. The most prominent issues are the following:

- **Rare joint appearances.** The participants have the impression that CSOs are not trying to address the issues jointly. "Generally speaking, there are a lot of organizations in Sombor, along with prominent individuals. The increased resources for the non-governmental sector would not help, as the manner in which funds are allocated does not represent the key for project implementation. It's a problem, as everybody deals with their own topic and the need to find the common ground to impact an essential change has not been recognized yet." (Sombor) "I believe that the civil societies need to join if their rights are threatened, they have to join and implement and promote their ideas. Everything that remains at the local level is quickly diminished, it disappears, it is invisible for the media, and that's it." (Kraljevo)
- **Insufficient interest in the problems of citizens.** Also, the impression of some participants is that CSOs deal with their own projects that are not always related to the problems of citizens. "It seems that there used to be more quality organizations in the past, fighting for citizen interests." (Svrljig) "As far as the issues are concerned, I would like to add that ad hoc companies, NGOs that are awarded projects are created, and then the projects are just copy-pasted. The projects are frequently short-lived and they are not completed." (Sombor)

- **Impossibility of cooperation with the local authorities.** Some of the respondents recognize that the local authorities are actually not open to the inclusion of CSOs, so it is hard for the organizations overcome that obstacle. *“Basically, the number of our citizen associations and their activities is one thing, and it is another thing to which extent LSGU wants to include the civil society and citizen association in solving of any issue at all.”* (Sremska Mitrovica)
- **Communication with citizens.** It seems that there is no communication between organizations and citizens, as CSOs either do not present their activities, or they do not present them in a way that reaches citizens. One respondent talked about a CSO's activities: *“For example, I, as a citizen, do not have a clue about that story and the local communities. I think you should be more visible with that idea. This is the first time I've heard about it.”* (Novi Sad)

On the other hand, civil society activist talk about citizens who are not interested, difficulties to “break” the wall created by local authorities, GONGOs, non-transparency when funds are allocated, impossibility of cooperation, and sometimes doubts if they should actually cooperate with the authorities, as it is not a real cooperation, and the impression of cooperation provides legitimacy to the authorities.

It is a fact that CSOs, particularly at the local level, face numerous challenges. In the fight to survive, torn between donors, local authorities, and the issues they perceive it is possible that CSOs sometimes do not have enough time to make great efforts to establish trust of the citizens, so they could motivate them, and attract the citizens to their side. CSOs could then be more efficient in recognizing the actual issues of citizens that they could resolve.

The following is occasionally mentioned in citizen responses, and it is important to consider within efforts to engage citizens:

1.3: **Mixing (misunderstanding) terms 'politics' and 'activism' and/or 'civic initiative'.**

Some citizens believe that every initiative, every question, every attempt to solve an issue or call the authorities to account represent “involvement into politics.” To that end, politics is understood as something that is the not an obligation or a task of citizens, but someone else, and there is no awareness that their everyday problems are actually a part of that “politics”, and they do not want to get involved. *“I've always stayed away from the politics.”* (Stari Grad) *“When people are asked about politics, everybody means the political party politics and parliamentary politics, nothing else is observed as politics.”* (Novi Beograd) Words of one parent are striking, and they explain how it happens, and that the mistake is realized late: *“As a parent, I can say that it is our fault as parent. I raised*

my children as apolitical, and now, they do not deal with the politics, but the politics deals with them successfully.” (Sremska Mitrovica)

2.1 Division among citizens. Depending on age group and personal attitudes, there is something that may be called “the syndrome of putting the blame” - not to those responsible, but to other groups of citizens. For some, it is the elderly population, that many people believe consists just of the voters voting for authorities a priori; for others, those are young people, who are apathetic, uninterested in anything but the social network. Again, some believe that these are “bots” (whoever they may be), who have “sold” themselves, and now they vote or do as ordered. It can also be the middle-aged generation that is observed by others as the generation that has given up and has nothing to contribute with. *“I believe that the elderly should not have the right to vote..” (Zaječar) “I think that the young people are generally not interested and not informed about the things happening in their towns. They are simply not interested... They could follow one of the portals and find out about the things that are going on. Or they could see a bunch of problem just walking around.” (Sremska Mitrovica) “Someone will always say to the young people: ‘you’re young, what do you know?’” “They do not need citizens when they have an army of bots.” (Požega)* Citizens blame each other, instead of calling their elected representatives to account. That divide, along with placing very different people in a monolithic block where everyone behaves and thinks the same (all old people, all young people...), weakens the power of citizens who are the strongest when they stand united.

Finally, citizens frequently mention the **local community offices** as a way to participate, but it a way that rarely functions and a rarely recognized mechanism for participation.

.....
“It is a structural issue, as the Law on Local Self-Government does not recognize local community offices as entities that can do something or that have authority. As a result, the local community offices are barely functioning at all.” Sombor

.....
“Local community offices have lost their role, every kind of authority. Everybody talks about decentralisation, but the centralisation has been happening for years. The local community offices are supposed to represent authorities. There is no contact between the citizens and representatives of authorities. The local community offices were obliged to invite councillors to their board meetings, and when I was a councillor, I had to make them invite me.” Sombor

.....
“People think that the local community offices are not important, and that is not true; otherwise the political parties would not compete for taking them. People say: local community offices are not important, they do not even have a budget.” Novi Sad

.....
"City councillors have divided the local community offices among themselves, they are in charge of different areas, have their scope of activity, they listen to problems, go out in the field, and it is functioning, as I can see." Pirot

.....
"I am the head of a local community office, and if you asked me if anybody has ever asked for my optional about a topic, I would tell you no one." Zaječar

2.3.2 What do LSGU representatives think?

Although the question about citizen participation in decision-making was not the subject of the interviews with LSGU representatives, they brought it up while talking about challenges in the local communities, communication with citizens, and the ways to overcome the obstacles in that communication. The analysis of their answers points to the following factors impacting the degree of citizen participation.

1: **Citizens do not know that they can/should participate.** A very interesting answer was recorded in one LSGU – which the citizens actually do not understand that they are a part of the system, and that they have an option to participate. *"The problem is that the citizens do not understand that they are a part of the decision-making process. They rarely visit the web site, see what's going on and come to take a look at the project. Their awareness is not sufficiently raised... When we organize public presentations, it's the same story, very few citizens come to attend them... I believe the citizens are not informed enough about being the participants in the decision-making process."* Leskovac

2: **Citizens do not know how to participate, they don't use the existing communication channels, they do not understand the system.** Representatives of several LSGUs stated that the citizens do not know the system enough, and/or they do not know that there are communication/participation channels, and that they do not know how to use them. *"Citizens are not familiar with the budget system. Some people follow activities, but mostly as representatives of political parties. The fact is that our society is a semi-literate one... Also, if we do receive certain initiatives, they are frequently not written properly."* (Novi Sad) *"People do not know what budget is."* (Novi Pazar) *"Communication is difficult because of poverty and illiteracy."* (Kragujevac) *"We used to put boxes for people to leave their questions, but people do not know what to ask."* (Kruševac)

3: **Citizens are not interested in participating.** The representatives of numerous LSGUs mentioned lack of citizen interest, perceiving it as one of the basic reasons for low participation. *"Mechanisms exist, but they are rarely used. I am not sure if people follow the public announcements of the local authorities about different proposals... I believe that both sides are to blame, the citizens are to blame as they are not interested in participating"*

much.” (Zrenjanin) *“There are the local community offices that are active and those that are not. Those that are active, persistent, get what they want.”* (Zaječar) *“In the end, just a few people attend public hearings. Most of procedures are complete without citizens. I've heard that there have been just a few public hearings attended by numerous citizens.”* (Piroć) *“People follow media and social networks, but they still like to call on the phone personally and ask. Regarding public hearings, people just don't attend.”* (Novi Pazar) *“Local anti-corruption plan is an important document including citizen participation in the course of drafting. Citizens have regularly been invited, they have regularly applied, they have been regularly informed, but they also regularly failed to show up. People are committed only to something in which they have a direct interest, for example to have their street asphalted.”* (Požeća)

On the other hand, in several LSGUs, representatives accepted a part of responsibility for the lack of citizen participation. They mentioned that they did not have funds to engage people for active informing of citizens: *“Citizens have a tendency to participate, there is a legal obligation of informing, but we are facing the problem of human resources for such activities... There is no specific person in the systematization of jobs for performing those tasks, which is why those tasks are performed by a person who is willing to perform them. The level of citizen participation will remain the same until that changes.”* (Požeća)

They also mentioned misinformation provided to the citizens: *“People whose property has been damaged by the flood heard on a local TV station the Deputy Mayor saying that the citizens may call the Service Centre and have the Committee establish their damages. The Vice President told us that the information from the web site does not pertain to private property and that the citizens should not expect to be compensated, but that we could start taking, receiving applications. We don't know how to inform the citizens in such a confusing situation. It is not fair. If you send a message through the media that the Committee will go out in the field to assess damage, and then nothing happens, that's not fair... So the citizens have been misled.”* (Piroć)

LSGU representatives also mentioned **local community offices**, in a similar manner as citizens :

.....
“Almost every initiative starts from the local community office. Then the local community office asks some things from the city management, and then the city deals with it.” Novi Sad

.....
“We frequently send info to the local community office and expect them to inform the people. We also ask the local community office representatives to attend the meeting and show interest in a project.” Leskovac

.....
“We have been trying to discuss issues through the local communities, it was functioning, but only a few people attended.” Zrenjanin

.....
"Local offices are not active. We haven't received initiatives from them. When we have some activities in villages, we contact them. There are the local community offices that are active, and those that are not. Those that are active, persistent, get what they want." Zaječar

.....
"Citizens usually avoid the local community office, as that office usually does not function. They frequently do not know the representatives of their own local community offices." Požega

2.3.3 What does the Good Governance Index show?

Citizen participation includes three areas within the principle *transparency, openness and participation*:

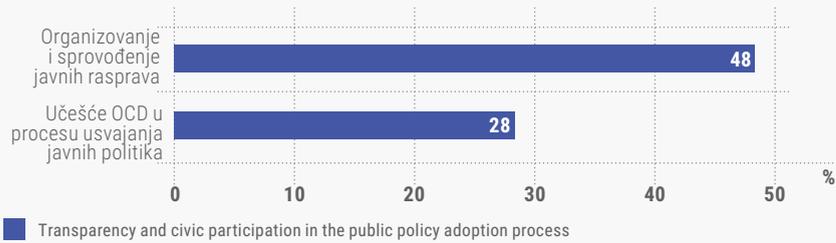
- transparency and civic participation in the public policy adoption process at the local level,
- transparency and civic participation in budgeting and monitoring of its spending,
- civic participation promotion through organizing and supporting opportunities for direct participation.

A deeper insight into indicators regarding the **public policy adoption** shows the following:

- Most of the municipalities publish draft proposals on internet presentations, organize public hearings and enable submission of proposals and comments. On the other hand, a smaller number of municipalities submit proposals well in advance, use several forums for public hearings, and a very small number actually respond to proposals and comments submitted.
- Although about a half of municipalities include CSOs in the process of development of strategic documents, only a few have regulations governing the inclusion of CSOs in the process of drafting either strategic or non-strategic documents.

In practice it means that although a part of municipalities formally follow the public hearing procedures, there is space for the promotion of public hearings and answers to citizen proposals. There is also a significant space for the promotion of CSO participation: CSO inclusion is mainly not regulated properly, meaning that the municipality itself decides if it wants to include them or not, and that there are neither criteria for the selection of CSOs to be included, nor the mechanisms for the manner of inclusion formed.

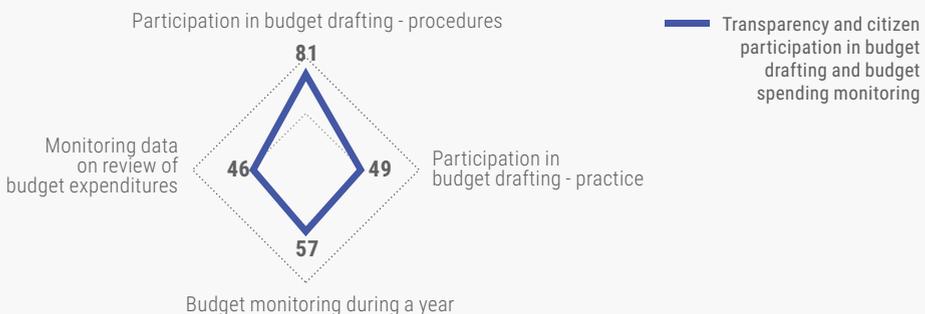
TRANSPARENCY AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION IN THE PUBLIC POLICY ADOPTION PROCESS
(AVERAGE RATING OF ALL LSGUS IN %)



A deeper analysis of the indicators of the inclusion in the budget matters shows the following.

- Procedures of participation in budgeting are regulated in a large number of municipalities (average percentage rating is as high as 81).
- Average rating of LSGUs is significantly lower regarding the practical inclusion of the public in budgeting – only 49%; although majority of LSGUs organize public hearings and complies with the basic rules (draft available, waiting for the hearing period to end before sending the budget for adoption), only a few of them make additional efforts to collect opinions or provide answers to the comments and proposals submitted.
- Average rating of all LSGUs, in terms of enabling monitoring of the budget throughout the year, is 57 and it is the result of LSGU approach: they are rather transparent in publishing information about budget, budget amendments and explanations but they are not up to date in publishing the civil budget, and just a few of them actually enable a detailed budget monitoring (lack of system for budget and expenditure monitoring).

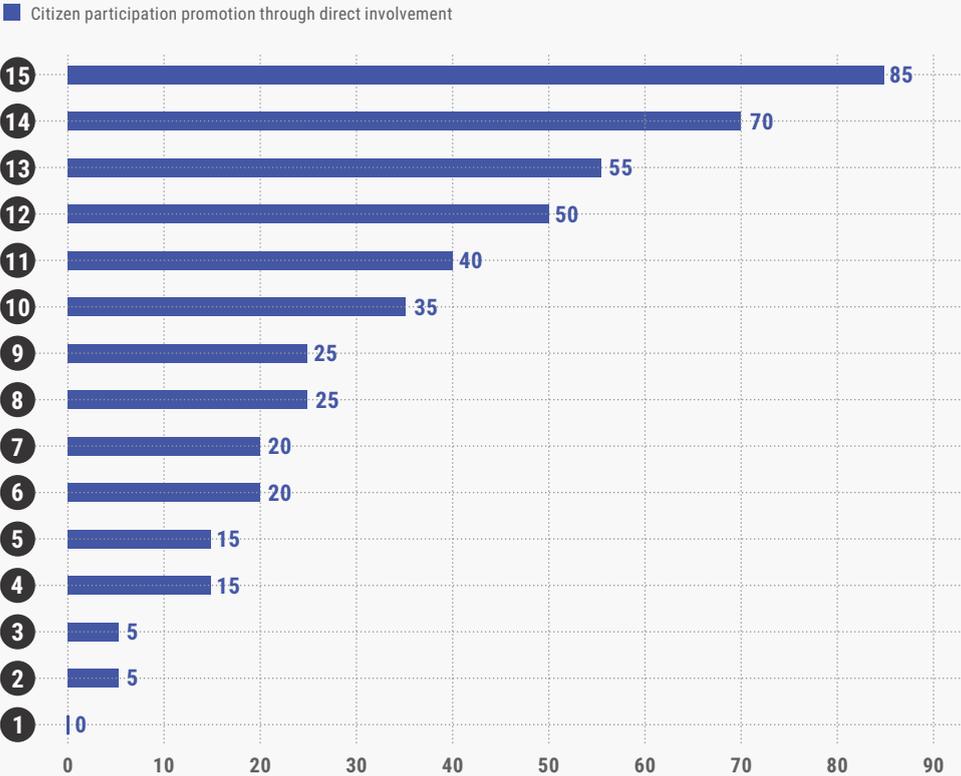
TRANSPARENCY AND CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN BUDGET DRAFTING AND BUDGET SPENDING MONITORING (AVERAGE RATING OF ALL LSGUS IN %)



- The lowest average grade of LSGUs is for monitoring of data on review of budget expenditures (46%), as although LSGUs are transparent in terms of the annual statement of account, the level of transparency in explaining the deviations in budget execution, independent assessment or discussion of the annual statement of accounts is much lower.

In the end, with regards to the **direct participation promotion** the chart clearly shows that the passive way of inclusion (presence on social networks, information at internet pages about the ways in which the citizens can participate) and that there is actually no active approach to the inclusion of citizens: example, only a quarter has an efficient mechanism set to respond to citizen proposals with an explanation, one fifth has a formalized job or unit dealing with citizen participation promotion, and only 15% have actively invited citizens to organize meetings and submit proposals in the last five years.

PROMOTION OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION THROUGH DIRECT INVOLVEMENT
(NUMBER OF LSGUS IN %)



LEGEND

- 15 LSGU has a profile on the social service that allows citizens to leave their comments and suggestions
- 14 The statute of the local self-government stipulates that the opinion of citizens is obtained when forming, changing borders, or abolishing local community offices or other forms of local autonomy
- 13 There is information on the website about the ways in which citizens can directly participate in the work of LSGUs
- 12 It has defined a range of issues in which it will be obligatory to consult citizens through direct participation mechanisms
- 11 In the last five years, it has been actively inviting citizens to submit proposals through civic initiatives
- 10 It has an effective mechanism in place to consider citizens' proposals
- 9 It has established an effective mechanism to respond to citizens' proposals with an explanation of the reasons for rejection.
- 8 It has a clause in the Statute regarding obtaining the opinion of citizens when changing the form of local autonomy
- 7 It has adopted a document expressing its commitment to strengthening citizen participation
- 6 He has a formalized job that encourages citizen participation
- 5 Keeps a record of the mechanisms used so far with outcomes mehanizama
- 4 In the last 5 years, it has been actively inviting citizens to organize citizens' meetings and submit proposals
- 3 Results of voting at the referendum taken into consideration
- 2 Organized at least one referendum in the previous 5 years
- 1 Publicly available records of the mechanisms used so far

2.3.4 Similarities and differences in the perception of participation in decision-making and objective picture

Comparing opinions of citizens and LSGU representatives, it is clearly that they share an attitude that citizen participation is at a low level, but there are differences in the perception of why it happens.

While both groups believe that the citizens are not familiar enough with their rights, even the right to participate in the decision-making process, that they are not sure how to participate and that they are not interested in participating, in terms of perceptions of reasons for the lack of interest, the citizens believe that the system is responsible, and LSGUs believe that the citizens are responsible.

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION – AS SEEN BY THE CITIZENS

Citizens do not know their rights, and there are no good communication channels, and/or ways to find information; if it is available, it is presented in a far too complicated manner.

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION – AS SEEN BY LSGU REPRESENTATIVES

Citizens do not know their rights, they do not know how to use the existing communication channels and find necessary information that is transparent, and there is an additional question of the level of education of citizens, their habits, etc.

THE CITIZENS ARE NOT INTERESTED IN PARTICIPATING AS:

- They do not believe that they can achieve something,
- They face dilemma – whether it is better to get engaged through political parties (efficient) or as citizens,
- Engagement is a long-lasting, exhausting process, takes many specific types of knowledge and patience, and does not guarantee results.
- They are not interested,
- They are not persistent enough,
- On rare occasions, LSGU do accept responsibility (there are not enough people to help citizens understand, citizens are sometimes misinformed).

Below is an example of the extent to which the perceptions differ, through a description of the same process in the same community, by citizens and LSGU representatives:

The portals do not function, I've tried to contact send my proposal five times, but it does not function, it only seems to function.

You have a choice, but their proposals are so ridiculous, like having a public toilet – which is something that we were supposed to have ages ago? Should we have a Wi-Fi tree in our town, when there is one already there, but it is not functioning... so, basically, they are proposing just repairs. Whatever we vote for – it's not going to happen.

Last year, over a thousand citizens signed a petition for the sewage system that has not been constructed yet. They just ask for the sake of asking, and the implementation never happens. The only way you have left is personal contact.

When preparing the budget for 2021, we enabled participation by presenting 5 projects that the citizens themselves proposed as priorities in their communities. They sent the proposals in different manners, one of them being through our web site and application REPORT A PROBLEM. They also wrote letters, called on the phone. There were many proposals, but we have selected five that have been frequently repeated. One of them was the Wi-Fi network on the main square (proposed by a younger generation), then there was a public toilette in the centre of the town (something our town really needs), playgrounds for children in town and villages, air pollution digitalisation (coming from the citizens living in the industrial zones) and a bike path in the industrial zone.

This example seems to show that there is a need for the dialogue between authorities and citizens in order to at least open the area for understanding mutual differences.

However, the objective indicators obtained through Good Governance Index indicators, indicate that a large part of responsibility lies with the local self-governments whose approach is passive at this moment – procedures and rules are mostly resolved, and the basic regulations are complied with, but systemic and systematic active support or assistance to citizens to find their way in the system and increase their participation in the decision-making process is missing.

Still, it is encouraging as both groups have relatively similar ideas for a higher engagement, including:

- Inclusion of media, both for raising awareness, and for education, informing;
- educating and informing citizens about the rights and ways for involvement;
- direct contacts, meeting in the field;
- gathering around civic initiatives, sending initiatives;
- revival of the local community office roles.

During the focus groups, the respondents mentioned more successful examples of citizen engagement, in which either a solution has been reached, or in which at least a higher number of people participated. Among others, there are the examples of Stara planina, Airport in Niš, previously mentioned prevention of construction on the park area in Leskovac, the mayor of Prijepolje who ended up in prison, prevention of an attempt to change the purpose of Francuska Street in Belgrade, etc.

A **common factor** of these initiatives is that these are the **topics the citizens care about very much**, enough to invest time and effort, then there is the **participation of those who know the system**, as, among the citizens, there are people who know procedures, laws, paths to take to resolve an issue– those who have information, knowledge, and usually a previous experience with civic activism.

FACTORS FOR THE LOW CITIZEN PARTICIPATION - PERCEPTIONS

CITIZENS:

- do not know their own rights, ways in which they can participate and in which areas,
- do not believe that participation can achieve a thing,
- face dilemma about the type of involvement that yields results – partisan or civic,
- face difficulties in achieving results, even when they actively participate through the civic initiatives,

REPRESENTATIVES OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENTS:

- do not know their own rights, or they even do not know that they have the right to participate,
- do not know how to participate, do not use the existing channels – they do not understand the system,
- are not interested in participating

CITIZENS:

- face doubts about the efficiency of civil society as the manner for participating – rare joint performances, dealing with projects and not citizen issues, inability to cooperate with local authorities, communication with citizens.

REPRESENTATIVES OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENTS:

THE GOOD GOVERNANCE INDEX:

- indicates that a large part of responsibility lies with the local self-governments that have a passive approach (resolved procedures and rules, complying with the basic regulations), but rare systemic and systematic active support and/or assistance for citizens to increase their participation in decision-making.

FACTORS OF A SUCCESSFUL CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT:

- issues that citizens care about very much, and
- participation of those who know the system.

WAYS FOR HIGHER CITIZEN PARTICIPATION – LSGU AND CSO ROLES:

- involvement of media, both for raising awareness, and for education, informing,
- educating and informing citizens about the rights and ways for involvement,
- direct contacts, field meetings,
- gathering around civic initiatives, sending initiatives,
- revival of the local community office roles.

- **In particular, the field of agreement, dialogue and a possible increased citizen participation through the local community offices**

2.4.1 | What do citizens think?

Considering the results of the focus groups about corruption, there is a general impression that everyone is aware of that issue, but no one sees the solution. There is a kind of reconciliation to the existence of corruption, and acceptance that it is something that cannot be avoided. Citizens believe that corruption has simply permeated all aspects of life, starting with the "small" corruption, where citizens give something to get a service that rightfully belongs to them (treatment, education, employment...), or evade smaller fines (the police), through medium (e.g. local public procurement), to big – on the central, state level.

It seems that the citizens have pointed out to several key factors supporting corruption.

1: There is no punishment. It is rare to see someone punished for corruption, and even when they are, they are either "minor players" or someone who is supposed to be actually punished for something else. *"Our law does not sanction people suspected of committing an offence. For example, the public procurement office head in our community was arrested, and released after a while, he was even promoted to assistant mayor in charge of public procurement. There are as many examples as you want. What would that person stop behaving like that, why wouldn't others wish to do the same?"* Zaječar

2: There is no support for those exposed to corruption or those that point to corruption. There is no sense that those exposed to corruption, or wishing to disclose of it and prevent it, would get support by either citizens or institutions. Without support, the person remains exposed, and that person and his/her family will bear the consequence that may be very serious. *"Nobody looks at persons like individuals needing protection; they just care for their own interests. Even if the opposition takes your side, they do it because they have some interest. This discourages people from fighting, particularly when they hear about such experience and they know how everything functions on a higher level. Even in case of the man from Krušik, I don't think that the citizens wanted to take his side and protect him."* Valjevo

3: System: there are no efficient control mechanisms. Citizens tell us that the fact that the system is set up without control mechanisms facilitates and encourages corruption. In fact, it is true here that some control mechanisms have been set up (e.g. state revision, Anti-Corruption Agency, etc.), but they are either not implemented, or the results of their work are not seen, so in fact they do not exist for the citizens. When it

comes to the local level, as the Good Governance Index indicators have shown, the local plans have not been adopted in all cases, and even if they were, they are not implemented. *"The system is made and works in such a way that you can't put things in their place if you don't get into some corrupt mechanism... We do not have clearly defined rules, everything is possible, and nothing is possible. For holders of public office, there is no form of control that exists in other countries, and it refers to how much an individual owns before the office, and how much after it. That is why it is possible for people to come to power having nothing at all, and after several years, they become filthy rich. Corruption supports the system, the system supports corruption and that's a two-way street."* (Kraljevo) Citizens also point out that one must start from the top in order to fight corruption more effectively. *"It cannot be dealt with efficiently at the local level, it has to start from "above". We have filed one criminal complaint related to public procurement in one public company. Although we had all the evidence, the prosecution could not do anything. After three years, there are no answers or consequences. It's a systemic thing."* (Sombor)

4 We all participate in corruption, we all bear responsibility. Citizens' openness to this issue should be appreciated - that is, the recognition that all sooner or later, all of us agree to participate in some form of corruption. *"All of us living in Serbia have already been introduced into corruption in some way, I guarantee that no one has gone through life without being touched by corruption. Each of us has at least once tried to find the way to avoid waiting in line to draw blood."* (Kraljevo) *"Most people find it o.k. to do things that way."* (Sombor) It is also encouraging at some level that the citizens understand that all of us have responsibility. *"As a society we foster corruption instead of fostering condemnation of corruption. Unfortunately, we are fostering it as it is the way to survive here."* (Kraljevo) *"We talk about the system all the time, but we keep forgetting that the system consists of people."* (Sremska Mitrovica)

As points where corruption occurs, citizens most often mention tenders, but also competitions for the allocation of funds, employment, etc.

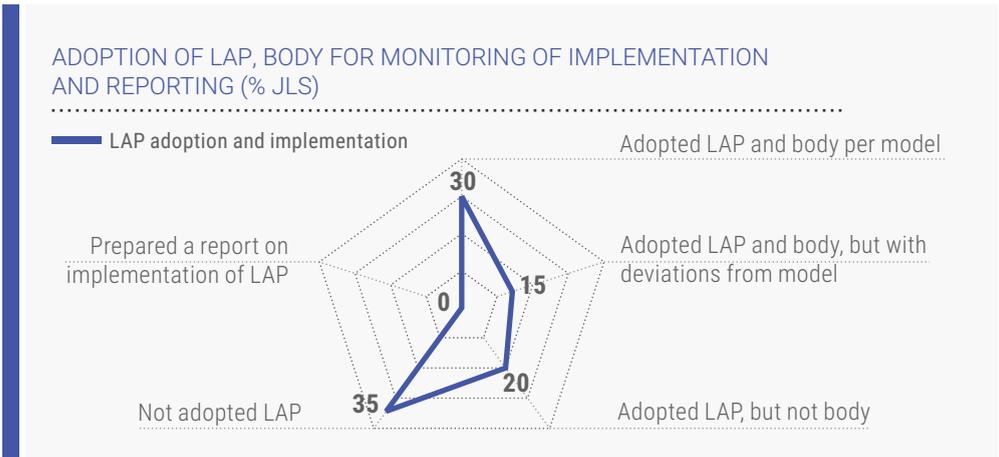
In addition, what needs to be addressed, especially in relation to civil society organizations, is that citizens in most communities, when asked if they know someone who deals with it, answer that they do not know. It was mentioned in Pirot that the Pirgos organization used to deal with it: *"They tried to initiate the drafting of the local anti-corruption plant, but the project ended and everything stopped."* So, CSOs are not seen as actors in fight against corruption. Of course, this does not mean that CSOs do not deal with it, there are CSOs and independent media committed to fight against corruption, but at the local level – if they do deal with it – then they do not convey it to the citizens clearly, and the citizens do not see the results.

Finally, almost the only positive comment on what can reduce corruption came from Novi Pazar: *“Regarding corruption, there is a difference between Pazar and other towns. Here we have three parties that function in that system. In cities where there is only one party, you have no control, and when there are more, they are at least slightly concerned, as they have competition.”* This comment can easily be linked to the issues of only one party ruling and centralization, identified in the challenges that the local communities are facing.

2.4.2 What does Good Governance Index show?

Considering the prevention of corruption, the principle of anti-corruption is primarily observed, where NKD “tested” one indicator: adoption and implementation of the Local Anti-corruption Plan (LAP). The average percentage rating (arithmetic mean) for this indicator is 41%.

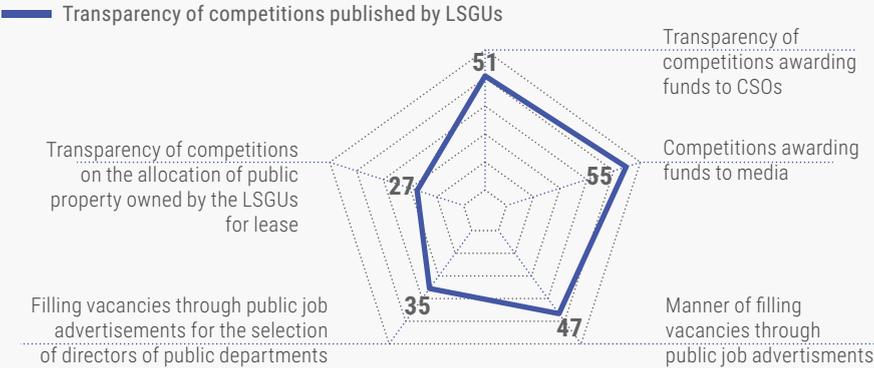
The chart shows the results of different questions about different topics, asked for each indicator: only 30% adopted LAP and the body in charge of monitoring in accordance with the model; an additional 15% adopted LAP and the body, but not in accordance with the developed and recommended model. It is worrying, however, that as many as 35% did not adopt LAP, and that none of LSGUs have published a report on the implementation of LAP.



Although the area of transparency of the competitions announced by LSGUs is not part of the assessment of the fight against corruption, but refers to the assessment of the principle of transparency, it is indicative to look at these summarized results, as it seems that competitions of LSGU are the potential “hotspots” of possible corruption. Five indicators were tested here through a desk survey:

- Transparency of the competitions awarding funds to CSOs;
- Competitions awarding funds to the media for the realization of public interest in the field of information;
- The manner of filling vacancies through public job advertisements;
- Filling vacancies through public job advertisements for the selection of directors of public departments
- Transparency of competitions on the allocation of public property owned by the LSGU for lease

TRANSPARENCY OF COMPETITIONS PUBLISHED BY LSGU
 (% AVERAGE RATING OF ALL LSGUS PER INDICATOR)



The chart is showing the mean rating (arithmetic mean) of the rating of all municipalities given in percent. The chart is showing that the highest average ratings of all LSGUs are the ones for publishing competitions for funds awarded to media (55%) and CSOs (51%), but that even those ratings are not extremely high, because in both cases there is no transparency in the explanation of the decisions made, as well as transparency of the results, i.e. the effects of the funds spent.

The percents in the assessment of filling vacancies are slightly lower (47%), but they are the lowest for the selection of public department directors (35%), and in particular for the allocation of public property owned by the LSGU for lease – only 27%. When it comes to leases, the problem is poor publication of calls, transparency of assets available for lease, allocation of leased assets, or records of leased assets

Citizen perception of what promotes corruption:

- No punishment for the perpetrators
- No support for those exposed to corruption or pointing to it
- No efficient control mechanisms
- We all participate in corruption, willingly or unwillingly

Good Governance Index:

- Only 30% adopted LAP and the body in charge of monitoring in accordance with the model, additional 15% adopted LAP and the body, but not according to the model
- As much as 35% of LSGUs have not adopted LAP
- None of LSGUs published the report on LAP implementation

Potential fields of corruption to be monitored: competitions published by LSGUs, especially for the positions of directors of public enterprises and for leasing of assets, but also tenders and competitions.

Corruption is pervasive, it has become a way of life.

2.4.3 Perception of citizens and objective picture

LSGU representatives have not been asked questions about the fight against corruption, so it is not possible to compare their opinions and the opinions of the citizens. As expected, they did not mention this issue at all.

On the other hand, an objective picture was obtained through the indicator of the adoption of the local anti-corruption plan shows that only a small number of LSGUs have taken steps to prevent corruption, and that citizens are right when they say that there are no control mechanisms at the local level. Given that the creation of the LAP is only the first step in the fight against corruption, it is obvious that there is a long way to go in solving this problem.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 FOR LSGUs

- Work on educating and increasing the understanding of officials and local self-government bodies that they are a service to citizens, and on creating and adopting a code of conduct to citizens
- Create clear, simple and easily accessible information on the structure, competencies and responsibilities of local self-government bodies, with clear instructions on whom to contact and in what way, depending on the type of problem / initiative
- Conduct campaigns to inform citizens about the structure, competencies and responsibilities of local self-government bodies
- Create clear, simple and accessible information about what citizen rights are and how they can participate in decision-making
- Establish a job position or a unit responsible for informing citizens about ways to participate in decision-making, actively promoting participation in decision-making, helping citizens get involved in the decision-making process
- Use the local community offices as a space where citizens can get involved and visit them, and the suggestions coming from them should be regarded as important
- Open space as often as possible for direct and regular communication between citizens and decision makers, not only online but also by going out on the field and "face to face"
- Open space for regular meetings with citizens and the media, where questions of interest to citizens would be answered; open a dialogue with citizens and CSOs on important issues for the community; such meetings could be broadcasted on local television
- Establish and control the application of mechanisms for checking the extent to which LSGUs really respond to the needs and problems of citizens
- Apply self-assessment through the Good Governance Index at least once every two years to monitor the progress of LSGUs in applying the principles of good governance at the local level. Publish the results and organize public debates or media appearances to discuss the progress made

- In particular:
 - improve the organization of public hearings by submitting proposals early enough, organize various forums for gathering citizens' opinions and holding hearings, respond with explanations to all proposals and comments submitted
 - adopt regulations about the involvement of CSOs in the process of adopting public policies (strategic and non-strategic), by defining the mechanisms for their inclusion and the criteria according to which CSOs are selected
 - collect opinions on the draft budget and provide answers to the submitted comments and suggestions
 - enable a mechanism for regular monitoring of the budget and expenditures on a monthly basis
 - work on improving the ways of direct participation, and in particular: define issues for which it is obligatory to consult with citizens, establish an efficient mechanism for considering citizens' proposals, formalize the job position for encouraging citizen participation, etc.
 - improve the transparency of all vacancies announced by local self-government units, and in particular the filling of vacancies, vacancies for directors of public departments, and especially competitions for the allocation of public property of LSGU that is leased
 - adopt LAPs with the participation of citizens and CSOs, form bodies in charge of its monitoring as provided by the Model
 - prepare and publish the report on LAP implementation

3.2 FOR CSOs

- Include in their programs the creation of easily understandable and accessible information on the structure, competencies and responsibilities of local self-government bodies
- Include in their programs the creation of easily understandable and accessible information on the rights of citizens, channels of communication and the ways to participate in decision-making
- Conduct campaigns to inform citizens about the structure, competencies and responsibilities of local self-government bodies, as well as information campaigns on citizen rights and ways of participating in decision-making

- React publicly before the adoption of important strategic and non-strategic documents, budget, etc. inviting citizens to get involved with clear information on what is being decided, what the options are and how citizens can get involved
- Improve communication with citizens and visibility of CSOs, especially:
 - by direct contact, going out on the field, conversations with citizens
 - devise / create mechanisms for assessing the real needs of citizens and the problems that bother them
 - by promoting the results achieved and positive cases in which civic initiatives have achieved a complete or partial success
 - in communication, separate civic initiatives from "politics", or explain how the problems of citizens are actually related to politics
 - avoid language dividing the citizens (into old, young, etc.), instead, encourage a united approach of citizens when it comes to common issues in the local community
- Monitor developments in the local community in order to identify problems that are important to citizens
- Offer assistance to citizens - give them information, guidance and other kinds support so that civic initiatives on specific issues have a better chance of success
- In cases of civic initiatives, advocacy or opening a dialogue with local authorities, try a joint approach of several organizations with prior arrangements
- Invite local authorities to public / media dialogues and discussions on important issues in the community, whether about specific problems / initiated civic initiatives, or about solving long-term issues / challenges (such as centralization, etc.)
- If their activities include the fight against corruption, present them to citizens in a way that is the citizens can easily understand
- Follow LAP adoption and implementation and call local authorities to account, but also to monitor tenders, tendering and similar processes, which are the most common points where corruption is possible
- Connect with national organizations and independent media that monitor and / or fight corruption, and point to examples of corruption in their local community, in order to make these stories more visible and thus perhaps encourage some government action

3.3 FOR DONORS (DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL)

- Offer longer-term financing options for local organizations involved in increasing citizen participation and preventing corruption
- Offer options for obtaining "urgent" funds in smaller amounts in order to finance actions arising from the immediate needs of citizens (ad hoc civic initiatives)
- Offer options for funding dialogue between CSOs, citizens and local authorities on important community issues
- When funding local authorities for projects involving citizen inclusion, include a requirement for an independent assessment of the success of citizen inclusion and reactions

3.4 FOR NKD AND PARTNERS

- Implement a new survey on a random sample, and conduct surveys with a completed methodology every two years to measure progress

4. APPENDICES

4.1

APPENDIX 1: MUNICIPALITIES THROUGH THE PRISM OF THE GOOD GOVERNANCE PRINCIPLES

In the survey, NKD used some of the already defined indicators for certain areas that were the focus of desk survey. This part of the survey included the following areas:

- transparency and citizen participation in the process of adopting public policies at the local level (both indicators);
- transparency and citizen participation in budgeting and monitoring the spending of the municipal / city budget (all four indicators);
- transparency of the competitions published by LSGUs (five of seven indicators);
- improving citizen participation through organizing and encouraging forms of direct participation in the work of LSGUs (one indicator);
- existence and implementation of anti-corruption mechanisms and public policies at LSGU level (one of two indicators).

NKD actually chose to find answers to the questions that are most important for showing the relationship in the triangle of local self-government - civil society organizations - citizens, following the already developed methodology, in order to point out good practices and challenges, and thus contribute to more successful local governments and greater citizen participation.

This section will present a detailed analysis of research results by areas and indicators.

4.1.1 Transparency and citizen participation in the public policy adoption process

Two basic indicators have been tested here:

- participation of CSOs in the process of adopting public policies at the local level (maximum points – 8);
- organizing and conducting public hearings (maximum points – 11).

The total maximum number of points that municipalities could receive in this area is 19.

Participation of CSOs in the public policy adoption process

The most interesting results concerning this indicator indicate that

- only two municipalities publish a plan of regulations that they intend to adopt during the calendar year;
- a small number of municipalities have adopted regulations governing the involvement of CSOs in the processes of drafting strategic (5 out of 20) and non-strategic (1 out of 20) documents;
- half of the municipalities in practice involve CSOs in the process of drafting strategic documents (10 out of 20), while less than half include CSOs for non-strategic documents (7 out of 20) through working groups and consultations.

Thus, the involvement of CSOs is mostly not properly regulated, which means that it is left to the municipality to include them or not. This also shows that there are no criteria for selecting CSOs to be included, or the established mechanisms for the manner of inclusion. In practice, it seems that about half of the surveyed municipalities still include CSOs in some way, although the question remains which and how.

Organizing and conducting public hearings

The results attracting attention show that:

- LSGUs generally publish draft proposals on their website (16 out of 20); close to three quarters do organize public hearings (13 out of 20) and allow for proposals and comments (12 out of 20);
- almost half of the surveyed LSGUs (9 out of 20) submit these proposals to stakeholders well in advance and use several forums to hold public hearings (8 out of 20);
- a small number (5 out of 20) do respond to the submitted proposals / comments, and the same number allows for 20 days of public discussion.

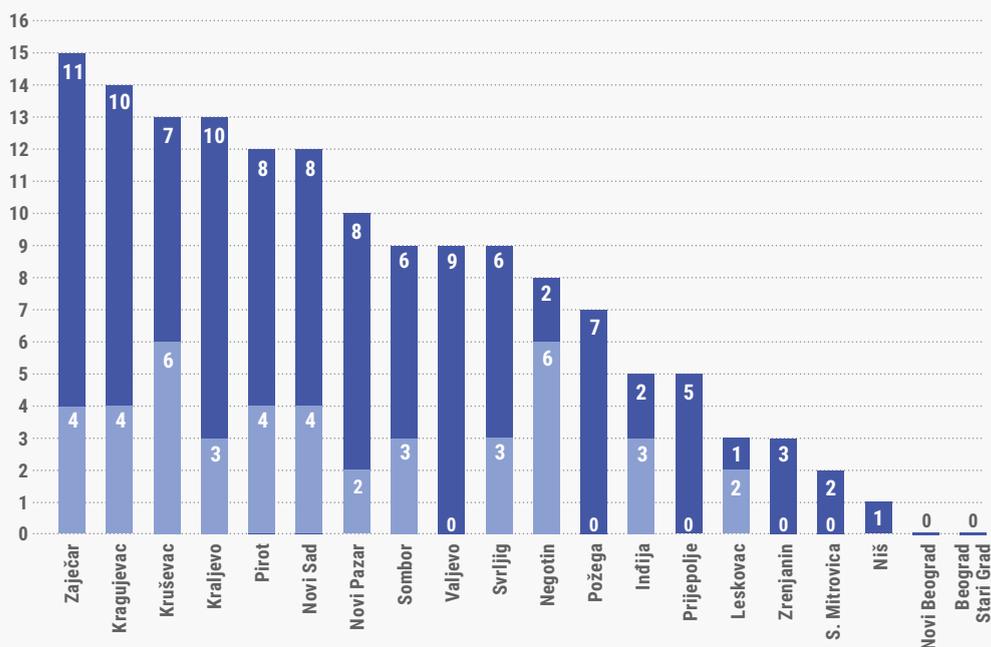
It seems that the approach of a larger number of municipalities here can be characterized as passive rather than active - that is, they publish draft regulations, allow comments to be submitted, but do not actually respond to submitted proposals and comments, and do not provide enough time for public discussion. In addition, some of them (8) do not have regulations governing the organization of public hearings.

Chart 1 shows the municipalities ranked by the total number of points in this area, where we see that the cities are at the back, and that the leading municipalities are medium-

sized, like Sombor, Negotin, Zaječar. When it comes to the inclusion of CSOs, the topic for reflection is certainly that no municipality has a maximum number of points, and that even eight municipalities have 0 points.

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■ Inclusion of CSOs ■ Public hearings



Appendix – Chart 1: Participation in public policy adoption process, points per municipality per indicator

4.1.2 Transparency and citizen participation in budgeting and monitoring the spending of the municipal / city budget

- Enabling public participation in budgeting - procedure (maximum points – 5)
- Enabling public participation in budgeting – practice (maximum points – 7)
- Enabling budget monitoring throughout the year (maximum points – 9)
- Enabling monitoring of data about the review of budget expenditures (maximum points – 4)

The total maximum number of points that municipalities could be awarded in this area is 25.

- **Enabling public participation in budgeting - procedure**

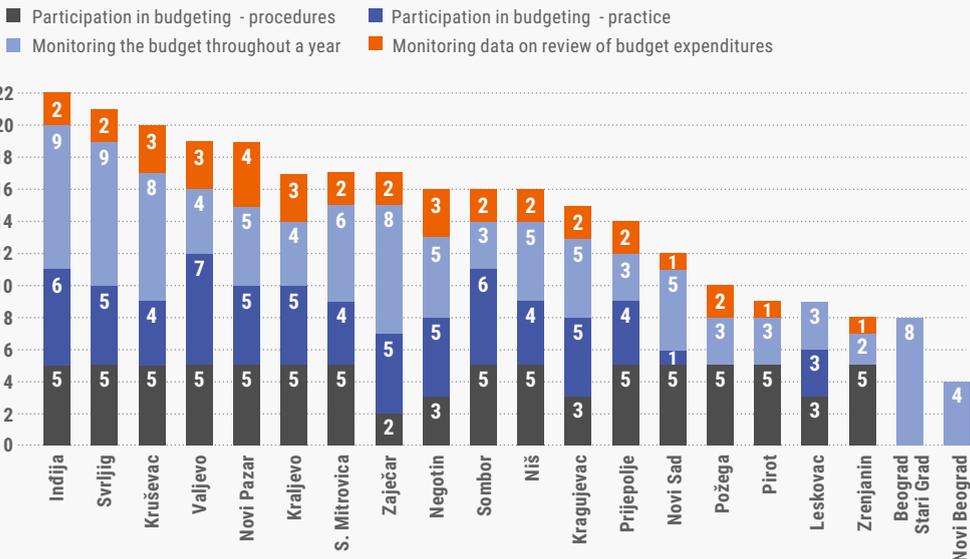
The results show that in almost three quarters of the surveyed municipalities, organizing a public budget hearing is provided by the statute of the LSGU, while in three cases it is provided by the rules of procedure, in one case by a special act, while in only two cases there are no acts. Therefore, a large number of LSGUs have adopted the regulations on organizing public budget hearings.

- **Enabling public participation in budgeting - practice**

The responses of the surveyed LSGUs show that:

- close to three quarters provides an available draft decision on the budget with an explanation before the public hearing (13), organizes a public debate on the budget (14) and waits for the end of the public hearing before submitting the budget for adoption to the Assembly (11),
- somewhat less than half (8) organize at least one event before the discussion in order to gather opinions,
- a very small number (five LSGUs) provide reasoned answers to the comments and suggestions received, and four allow 20 days for public discussion.

TRANSPARENCY AND PARTICIPATION IN BUDGETING AND BUDGET SPENDING MONITORING



Appendix – Chart 2: Transparency and participation in budgeting and monitoring of expenditures, points per municipality per indicator

In practice, although a large number organize a public hearing and respect the basic rules (draft available, waiting for the end of the hearing before submitting for adoption), the duration of the public hearing is usually less than 20 days, and the approach is passive - less than half organize another event, and only four submit reasoned answers to the received proposals.

Enabling budget monitoring throughout

- All LSGUs publish adopted budgets and budget amendments in the official gazette and on their website, and only one does not have a budget explanation available on the website until the new budget is adopted.
- Half of the surveyed LSGUs (10) publish the "civil budget" within two months after the adoption.
- Less than half have data on the use of the budget reserve available on the website (6), a system through which councillors can monitor the budget during the year (6), available data on budget expenditures updated on a monthly basis (5).

These results indicate that local self-government units are quite transparent when it comes to the budget, amendments and explanation of the budget. On the other hand, they are not so up-to-date in publishing the civil budget, and very few of them really enable detailed monitoring of the budget, i.e. spending taxpayers' money.

Enabling monitoring of data about the review of budget expenditures

- The majority (16) publish the proposal of the decision on the final statement of accounts on the website, but only a little more than half (12) publish the explanations for the deviations in budget execution.
- Only a quarter (5) publish the findings and recommendations of the independent audit, and only four publish a recording of the session of the Assembly at which the final statement of accounts is discussed.

Although LSGUs present the final statement of account transparently, there is a significantly lower level of transparency in the rationale for budget deviations, independent assessment or discussion of the final statement of accounts. Therefore, LSGUs are not transparent when it comes to "accountability" to citizens.

Chart 2 shows the ranking of municipalities in this area; as in the previous area, Belgrade municipalities are at the very back.

4.1.3 Transparency of competitions published by LSGUs

- Transparency of competitions awarding funds to civil society organizations
- Competitions awarding funds to the media for the realization of public interest in the field of information
- The manner of filling vacancies through public job advertisements
- Filling vacancies through public job advertisements for the selection of directors of public departments
- Transparency of competitions on the allocation of public property owned by the LSGU for lease

Transparency of competitions awarding funds to CSOs

- Most of the surveyed LGUs are transparent when announcing the competition on the website and e-government (19), decisions on awarding funds to CSOs (16) and the amount of funds awarded (17)
- More than half of the public calls contain all elements of the regulation (12), while 13 municipalities publish a list of projects submitted to the competition; less than half announce the composition of the commission that made the decision (9)
- A much smaller number publish a plan for announcing a competition (6). It is also important to mention that a small number of local self-governments publish explanations for the decisions made (6), and even fewer of them publish explanations for project rejection (4). Finally, none publishes a report on projects implemented and effects achieved through the use of local funds.

Although the competitions and received projects are published in a transparent manner, and mostly according to the rules (Regulation), transparency is significantly lower in giving reasons for the decisions made, and the lowest for the results of funded projects, i.e. whether the funds spent had an effect and what it was.

Transparency of competitions awarding funds to the media

- Most LSGUs publish competitions on the website (19), as well as in local media (18). The same number publishes the final decision on the awarding of funds (18) and keeps the notice of the competition visible throughout the duration of the competition, and a solid number publishes data on the amount of awarded funds (17).
- Less than half (9) invite media associations to nominate their representatives in the commissions, and eight announce the decision on the appointment of commission members. Only six publish a description of the projects to which funds have been awarded, while information for those who received less than requested to submit a new budget specification is published by seven local self-governments.

- Only one LSGU publishes a report on the implementation and effects of the projects funded, i.e. the information on beneficiaries who did not submit reports or returned funds.

As with CSOs, transparency with the media is high when it comes to publishing information about the competition, applications and the amount of funds awarded; somewhat less when competitions are announced outside the website, and about membership in the commission. It is interesting, however, that less than half publish a description of the projects to which the funds have been allocated, and that very few publish the results, i.e. the data on the effects of the funds spent.

Transparency of filling vacancies

In 14 municipalities, the respondents saw a competition published on a website or in the local media; in 11 local self-governments, they heard about a competition. However, the impression that the recruitment process was done transparently is present in only three LSGUs.

Transparency of competitions for the selection of directors of public departments

In nine LSGUs you can see the competition published on the website or local media, in 11 you can hear that the competition has been announced, but in only one there is an impression that the recruitment process is transparent.

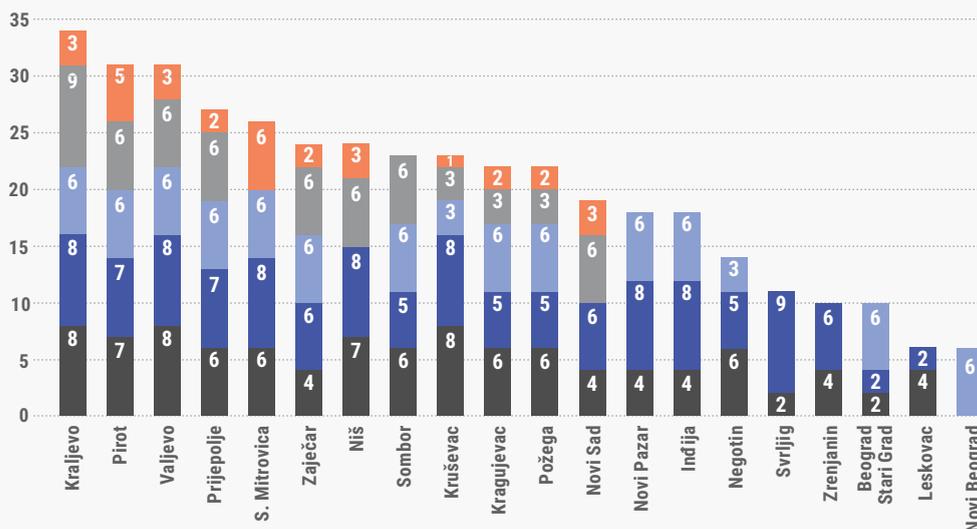
Transparency of competitions for the selection of directors of public departments

There is an impression that that transparency is much lower with this criterion: in 11 LSGUs invitations to lease property are published at the website, and in less than half, the invitation is published in the local media (9). Only four LGUs publish records of the property they own that contain data on tenants, price and duration of the lease. In three local self-governments, records of commercial property of local self-government bodies available for lease can be found at the website, the same number publishes reports on property allocation with explanation of the decision, while two local self-governments have published records of leased property.

Graph 3 shows the ranking of municipalities according to this criterion. As much as 7 municipalities have the result of 0 for the transparency of the employment of public department directors and property leasing.

TRANSPARENCY OF LSGU COMPETITIONS

Competitions for CSOs
 Competitions for media
 Jobs
 Positions of directors of Pds
 Leased property



Appendix – Chart 3: Transparency of LSGU competitions, points per municipality per indicator

4.1.4 Improving citizen participation through organizing and encouraging forms of direct participation in the work of LSGUs

One indicator was observed in this case, and the maximum points awarded to the municipalities was 22.

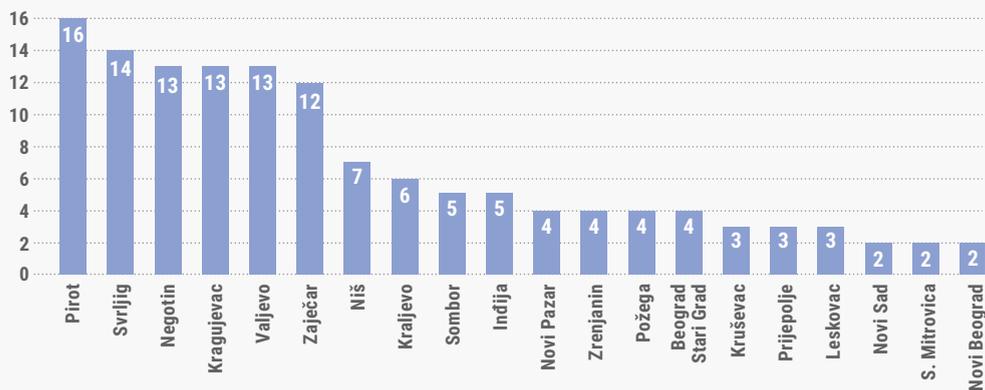
- Most LSGUs (17) are present on social networks, through which citizens can comment and suggest.
- About less than half (14) have a clause in the statute which stipulates that when changing the form of local autonomy, the opinion of citizens needs to be obtained, as well as the manner of obtaining that opinion. About half of LSGUs (11) publish detailed information on the ways in which citizens can participate in the work of LSGUs on their websites, and exactly half of them have the defined topic on which they are obliged to consult with citizens through direct participation mechanisms.
- About less than half (8) LSGUs have actively invited citizens to submit proposals through civic initiatives in the last five years, while seven LSGUs have established effective mechanisms to consider and respond to citizen proposals arriving in the form of civic initiatives, and five have mechanisms with an explanation of the

- reasons for the refusal. Some LSGUs (5) has a person whose job description is to provide assistance to citizens in the formal and legal organization of the use of mechanisms for direct participation of citizens in the affairs of the local government. JLS. Četiri JLS imaju usvojen dokument (kodeks ili povelju) kojim iskazuje svoju posvećenost jačanju učešća građana u radu JLS, a samo jedna je u poslednjih pet godina organizovala najmanje jedan opštinski/gradski referendum i uzela u obzir rezultate glasanja. Nijedna JLS nema evidenciju do sada korišćenih mehanizama neposrednog učešća građana objavljenu, odnosno javno dostupnu.
- In the last five years, just a few LSGUs have actively invited citizens to organize meetings and submit proposals, and have a record of the mechanisms of direct citizen participation used so far (3). Also, only four have a formalized job position or an organizational unit dealing with encouraging citizen participation in LSGU operation. Four LSGUs have adopted a document (code or charter) expressing their commitment to strengthening citizen participation in the work of LSGUs, and only one has organized at least one municipal / city referendum in the last five years and taken into account the voting results. None of them have a record of the used mechanisms of direct citizen participation published, i.e. publicly available.

Chart 4 presents municipality ranking in accordance with this principle.

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION PROMOTION

■ Citizen participation promotion



Appendix – Chart 4: Citizen participation promotion, points per municipality per indicator

4.1.5 Existence and implementation of anti-corruption mechanisms and public policies at LSGU level

One indicator has been observed in this case, too, and the maximum points awarded to the municipalities was 25.

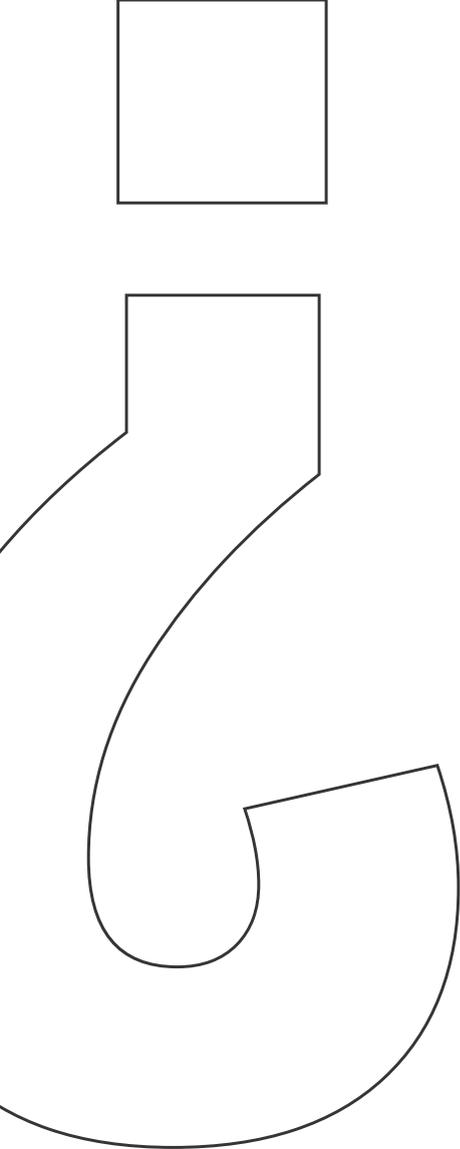
- None of LSGUs prepared the LAP implementation report.
- Only six LSGUs adopted LAP and formed the body in charge of its monitoring as stipulated by the Model.
- Only three LSGUs adopted LAP and formed the body in charge of monitoring its implementation, but there were deviations from the recommendations provided by the Model in the forming of that body.
- Four LSGUs adopted LAP, but they still have not formed the body in charge of monitoring its implementations.
- As many as seven LSGUs have not even adopted LAP.

Chart 5 presents municipality ranking in accordance with this indicator.

EXISTENCE AND IMPLEMENTATION OF ANTI-CORRUPTION MECHANISMS

■ Existence and implementation of anti-corruption mechanisms





NACIONALNA
KOALICIJA ZA
DECENTRALIZACIJU

