

NATIONAL CONFERENCE

EUROPEAN INTEGRATION AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT FOR LOCAL DEMOCRACY

POP NETWORK

MARCH 5, 2024



NEWSLETTER

THE JUXTAPOSING POLITICAL OFFERS NETWORK (RRJETI PËRBALLJA E OFERTAVE POLITIKE - POP)

The POP Network thanks all participants for your extraordinary contribution to the success of the Conference "European Integration and Civic Engagement for Local Democracy." The partnership with the POP Network and the "Social Contract 2023" project brought an example of success in strengthening local democracy and integrity at the local level where all stakeholders work together. We, as a network, greatly appreciate the active participation and engagement in monitoring the decision-making processes, as well as the promotion of the political debate for the interest of the citizens, as one of the main pillars in achieving the goals of the conference.

In partnership with the Olof Palme International Center and the National Endowment for Democracy, we will continue the spirit of collaboration on the path to a more accountable and inclusive government for all citizens.

We sincerely thank our honorable speakers and representatives of national, regional and European institutions for their contribution to the sessions and discussions of the conference, helping to achieve a deep and fruitful discussion for the advancement of local democracy in Albania. Thank you for your partnership and tireless dedication!

Follow the Conference

On 05.03.2024 at 10:00 Gender Alliance for Development Center in partnership with POP Network members, Juxtaposing Political Offers Network, with the support of the Swedish Government through Olof Palme International Center and National Endowment for Democracy organized the National Conference "European Integration and Civic Engagement for Local Democracy." This activity was organized within the Project "Social Contract 2023: Strengthening the Engagement of Citizens in Local Government"

The aim of the Conference: The advancement of local democracy and European integration in Albania, with a special focus on civic engagement, local transparency, and the implementation of the fifth strategic objective of the Intersectoral Strategy for Decentralization and Local Governance 2023-2030 (SNDQV 2020-2030): **"Improving local democracy and advancing the European integration agenda at the local level."**

This conference was attended by representatives from central and local government, diplomatic missions, media, and civil society organizations from Albania, the region, and Europe, as well as various agencies operating in Albania.

OBJECTIVES OF THE CONFERENCE

- Improving democratic processes and practices at the local level by promoting citizen participation, transparency, and accountability in decision-making.
- Enhancing communication and information exchange mechanisms between local authorities and citizens, fostering transparency, awareness, and active participation in local decision-making processes.
- Aligning local government structures and practices with European standards and principles, thereby contributing to the overall integration of the country into the European Union.
- Ensuring that decentralization and local governance processes are inclusive and consider the diverse needs of all community members, including marginalized groups. This includes promoting gender equality, social inclusion, and the protection of minority rights.

This very important event for the POP Network was opened by Ms. Mirela Arqimandriti, Executive Director of the "Gender Alliance for Development" Center and was greeted by: Ms. Romina Kuko – Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the chairwoman of the Tirana Municipal Council; H.E. Mr. Niklas Ström, Ambassador of Sweden to Albania; Ms. Marie Augouy, Programme Manager, Local Governance and Regional Development, Delegation of the European Union to Albania; and online by Mr. Johan Schmidt, Regional Programme Manager Western Balkans, The Olof Palme International Center.





MS. MIRELA ARQIMANDRITI
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
GENDER ALLIANCE FOR DEVELOPMENT CENTER

At the heart of the POP network is the Social Contract, a tool created before local elections through direct cooperation with people and candidates for mayor. This process includes the realization of a series of meetings and researches to determine the priorities of our citizens. Next, Public Forums convene, providing a fair and open platform for representatives of political parties to present their platforms and engage in constructive dialogue on social contracts and citizen concerns. It is here that the candidates are given the opportunity to pledge to address the priorities of the citizens during the following four years, by signing the Social Contract, if they emerge victorious in the elections.

We are particularly focused on increasing civic engagement, ensuring local transparency and monitoring the implementation of the Social Contract, including monitoring the actions of the City Council and other aspects related to local governance. The network remains active in lobbying and advocacy efforts aimed at promoting transparency and strengthening local democracy. Also, monitoring the implementation of the objectives of the Intersectoral Strategy for Decentralization and Local Government 2023-2030 (SNDQV 2020-2030), is one of the goals of the network of POP organizations.

To achieve these goals, it is essential to emphasize the key role of local democracy as a cornerstone for fostering comprehensive democratic progress. This includes ensuring the participation and representation of citizens in decision-making processes at the grassroots level. Integrity should be emphasized as a fundamental value for the EU, ensuring trust, accountability and transparency in governance. Continued efforts are needed to fight corruption and promote ethical behavior in both central and local administration. It is essential to cultivate a culture of integrity and accountability within public administration.

In conclusion, the work of the POP Network and the implementation of Social Contracts serve as exemplary models for the growth of local democracy and the promotion of civic engagement. By continuing our joint efforts, we can ensure a brighter, more transparent and accountable future for Albania, in line with our aspirations for European integration.

It is with great enthusiasm that I stand before you today to discuss the transformative initiative undertaken by the Juxtaposing Political Offers Network- POP, through the implementation of the "Social Contract 2023: Strengthening Citizen Engagement in Local Government" project. This effort is not just a project; it is a commitment to the citizens of Albania, a commitment to ensure that their voice is heard and their needs are addressed in the decision-making processes that shape their lives.

The essence of democracy lies in the participation of its citizens and this is exactly where the POP Network plays a key role. By monitoring decision-making processes and actively participating in advocacy, we are influencing political agendas to align with the best interests of citizens. Our aim is to improve public debate, provide information that empowers citizens and guide platforms to prioritize the needs and aspirations of the people they serve.

This project, generously supported by the Swedish Government, the Olof Palme International Center and the National Endowment for Democracy, extends to ten municipalities: Tirana, Durrës, Elbasan, Vlora, Fier, Kukës, Shkodër, Vau i Dejës, Korçë and Pukë. Each of these municipalities represents a unique structure of Albanian society and our efforts are tailored to ensure that every citizen in these regions feels represented and heard. The main objective of POP is to enrich the public discourse and provide insight into the electoral agendas of political parties and mayoral candidates, with a strong focus on addressing the needs and priorities of our citizens.



**MS. ROMINA KUKO –DEPUTY MINISTER OF THE
MINISTRY OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS AND THE
CHAIRWOMAN OF THE TIRANA MUNICIPAL
COUNCIL**

“We have been cooperating with the POP network for several years for the Social Contract. At first, I don't hide that a part of us raised questions: what are these debates that take place when we have an election campaign? However, local democracy essentially has what is called inclusion, and it is an exclusivity that belongs only to the citizens. I think that POP is a very important mechanism and it is very important that you ensure that the objectives are met.” - said Mrs. Kuko.

Among other things, Mrs. Kuko addressed the youth to encourage their involvement in the political process and in the development of democracy at the local level. She emphasized that young people should take an active part in their community by participating in elections for municipal councils. This experience will not only provide them with new knowledge and skills to manage municipal affairs but also help build a more inclusive and fair society. The initiative to establish integration commissions at the municipal level was presented as an important step towards more open and transparent governance

Mrs. Kuko expressed the conviction that involving young people in these commissions will bring a fresh perspective to local politics, making it more aligned with the needs and interests of the younger generation. She emphasized the importance of giving young people the opportunity to witness democracy in action and to follow the development of policies that impact their daily lives. *“This active participation,”* said Mrs. Kuko, *is the essence of democratic governance and can lead to a more inclusive and fair society for all citizens.”*



**H.E. MR. NIKLAS STRÖM
AMBASSADOR OF SWEDEN TO ALBANIA**

Mr. Ambassador began his speech by describing Sweden geographically and demographically, not without purpose. Being a country with a very long stretch despite having 10 million inhabitants, governance and the implementation of a functional democracy in the country, although difficult, have been successful, thanks to decentralization within Swedish governance. The concept of “The municipalities’ right to self-government” although it has its limits, is very broad in the resources that municipalities have, which are quite considerable. For example, schools, infrastructure, and housing are all the responsibility of municipalities, and 70% of all public resources are spent by municipalities. And while there is a need for a decentralized system in Sweden due to the size of the country, having a strong local democracy is also beneficial for smaller countries like Albania. Continuing, Mr. Ambassador said: *“That is why I am proud that Sweden, through our support to the Olof Palme Center, is contributing to fostering democratic practices here. Democracy is of course also a cornerstone of the EU integration process.”* Additionally, Mr. Ambassador emphasized trust as one of the most important things in governance, which is difficult to gain and very easy to lose. And, to gain the trust of citizens, besides many factors, two were highlighted as the most important: transparency and citizen engagement. These two factors are interconnected and more easily achievable in a decentralized system. *“I want to express my conviction that local engagement can play a vital role in improving democratic procedures as well as increasing the public’s faith for those procedures here in Albania. This, once again, is beneficial for a successful EU integration process in which much of the implementation will have to be done at local level. It’s vital to take part in and encourage local democratic procedures. I encourage all stakeholders and government in Albania, to actively prioritize this topic. Local democracy does not have to be flashy, but it needs to be accessible. Some chairs and coffee can be enough.”* – concluded his speech, the esteemed Ambassador of Sweden in Albania.



MS. MARIE AUGOUY - DELEGATION OF THE EUROPEAN UNION TO ALBANIA

"The role and engagement of civil society are one of the pillars of the functioning of democracy," stated the honorable Ms. Augouy, adding that this commitment should be at all levels of government and continuously at the local level since it is the closest to the citizens. According to the European Charter of Local Self-Government, which was ratified by Albania in 2020, local governments "are one of the main foundations of any democratic regime", and the participation of citizens in public affairs is one of the democratic principles. The role and engagement of citizens to actively participate in setting the political agenda and in policy-making processes are essential. Local governments must create enabling conditions to strengthen dialogue with the communities they serve. Emphasizing that in the context of negotiations for membership in the European Union, both parties, civil society and local governments, have a very important role to play in meeting the conditions for European membership.

Ms. Augouy informed also that the European Union in Albania supports the creation of an enabling environment conducive to a structured dialogue and a strong cooperation between civil society and local governments. Among other projects implemented by the EU, 48 projects financed by the Europe for Citizens Programme for Albanian beneficiaries, including civil society organizations, academia, and municipalities, are under implementation, out of which 11 are implemented by municipalities. That is without mentioning emblematic EU-funded projects such as Municipalities for Europe, EU for Municipalities and Reload 2 that provide support to the municipalities to engage more and better with citizens and civil society. It is also worth mentioning that a EUR 10 million project is currently being prepared with the Ministry of Local Governments and the Agency to give municipalities more opportunities to invest with citizens to improve infrastructure and services creating more opportunities for their communities. To conclude Ms. Augouy mentioned the importance of creating conditions to implement the EU Partnership principle that is at the heart of the EU Cohesion policy. *"To fulfill the EU partnership principles, public authorities (national, regional and local) must be able to strongly engage with the communities and other social groups, and the EU stands ready for supporting these efforts. This conference is a perfect opportunity to exchange on ways of boosting partnerships between municipal councils, local administration, associations of municipalities, and civil society organizations."*



MR. JOHAN SCHMIDT - OLOF PALME INTERNATIONAL CENTER

"In every democratic country, there is an institution that organizes political debates before elections. In some countries, it is the public service, media, universities, etc. To us at the Palme Center, POP has been an experiment, an effort to build such a platform for citizens to participate in these debates before the elections," thus began Mr. Schmidt in his speech.

In recent years, POP has demonstrated itself as such an institution within local and central government. The invitation is extended to all candidates and political parties. Despite some political parties declining participation, POP has organized independent and individual debates with each of them, directly engaging with citizens. Elections are meant to serve the interests of citizens, not political parties or candidates, and POP has proven that this is achievable, even in the face of political pressure, driven by a strong conviction. Additionally, POP has taken another crucial step in the democratic process – post-election monitoring to ensure the fulfillment of promises made by candidates and political parties during election campaigns. This is facilitated through social contracts based on citizen priorities and other forms of follow-up.

"We have seen that over the years, the network organizations that make up POP has been able to develop methodologies for both of these parts: Organizing the debates and monitoring the promises made, and we have been very proud to be part of this process. It's challenging and it needs to be constantly adapted to new political circumstances, and new issues that come up in a debate and I think POP has shown maturity in handling these issues and is a great contribution to the political maturity in Albania. So we are continuing to support POP!" - concluded his speech Mr. Johan Schmidt

Session 1: Strengthening Local Democracy through Ensuring an Inclusive Approach to Good Governance at the Local Level.

In this session, we discussed initiatives to create an environment where good governance and citizen participation are essential, such as transparency, citizen engagement in decision-making, consolidation of integrity at the local level, and advancement of the European integration agenda. The discussion focused on the challenges and opportunities of this journey, emphasizing the specific measures aimed at strengthening local democracy and creating a close relationship with citizens, as well as the importance of the Social Contract that the POP network carried out for civic engagement and accountability.

This session was moderated by Ms. Adelina Farrici – Executive Director of the Association for Local Autonomy and featured discussions from: Mr. Ferit Ringaj, Vice Mayor of Pukë Municipality; Ms. Keti Luarasi, Vice-President, Tirana Municipality; Mr. Klevis Kaso, Deputy Mayor of Vlora Municipality; Mr. Ermal Elezi – General Director of the Agency for the Support of Local Self-Government; Ms. Esmeralda Hoxha; Coordinator of the POP Network, GADC.



MR. FERIT RINGAJ – DEPUTY MAYOR, PUKA MUNICIPALITY

The main focus of the Puka municipality administration is to improve the quality of citizen services through concrete policies, starting with the municipal budget, which is the key link where citizens have the opportunity to participate in discussions for its elaboration, as well as discussions in the respective communities according to administrative units to highlight all citizen priorities. Naturally, with the POP network, a series of activities have been carried out, focusing on public hearings and citizen engagement. Puka, as a mountainous area with a high number of population living in rural areas, has specific characteristics that are very essential, mainly in terms of social and economic aspects. Citizen involvement, as it came to the forefront following the May 2023 elections, has been precisely focused on meetings, hearings, and transparency regarding budgeting in those aspects that are most needed by the citizens of Puka. The Social Contract signed between the mayor of Puka municipality and the POP Network is one of the documents that will be accompanied by accountability; however, it should be emphasized that there is much work to be done

However, it is important that the European integration part, as a challenge faced by Albanian society, has become part of the discussion panels at the local level in Puka. There is work to be done to increase the capacities of local administration in serving citizens, and we are trying to improve the service strategy. To conclude, Mr. Ringaj added: *"We are working hard for citizen inclusion in decision-making, especially youth, as we have a very good cooperation with the Youth Movement of the POP network, which is doing an excellent job in activating and empowering young people for local accountability. I want to say that work has been done, more work is needed, but also support from associations, donors, and beyond, for organizing such activities as today, to be updated according to the specifics or concrete examples for the country's integration into the European Union."*





**MR. KLEVIS KASO – DEPUTY MAYOR
VLORA MUNICIPALITY**

The Municipality of Vlora has taken significant steps towards improving its connection with citizens through the Participatory Budgeting process. By organizing public hearings in October, held in every district and administrative unit of the city, citizens were invited to contribute to identifying their priorities for the 2024 budget. According to Mr. Kaso, this demonstrates a genuine commitment to listening to the voice of citizens and reflecting their needs in budgetary policies. Collaboration with stakeholders and the publication of important decisions on the municipality's website mark a step towards transparency and providing citizens with complete information. Additionally, the opening of an information and integrated services office provides an additional platform for citizens to receive information and express their needs directly and effectively. *"These measures demonstrate the Municipality of Vlora's dedication to improving dialogue and cooperation with citizens to ensure the highest quality services and enhance local democracy,"* - concluded his speech Mr. Kaso.



**MS. KETI LUARASI – DEPUTY MAYOR,
TIRANA MUNICIPALITY**

In the Municipality of Tirana, we have placed great emphasis on the voice of civil society and have made maximum efforts to involve citizens in the decision-making processes of the institution. I will mention just 2-3 elements: Juxtaposing Political Offers Network (POP Network) is one of them; we have worked with the "Gender Alliance for Development Center" for several years and have also fulfilled the reporting part of the Social Contract, which is a very good indicator of how much progress we have made in achieving the objectives set in our action plans.

Another element, in addition to Participatory Budgeting, which has already been successfully developed, is what the Tirana municipality has undertaken for the development of the 5-year sustainable strategic program that we started in 2023 and now at this moment, we are in the final preparation to present the strategic plan to the Municipal Council for final approval.

This strategy has been drafted through public consultation with citizens and civil society with the support of experts from the Council of Europe from Strasbourg and Albania. Everything has been published on the official website of the Tirana municipality in a dedicated section regarding consultation for this strategy. This process went through four phases. In addition, we had a form (not just online) for voting by citizens on the five main objectives of this strategy. Over 150 citizens of Tirana joined us in a common meeting and voted with a simple online application to rank the objectives according to their importance and whether they agreed on these objectives presented by the Tirana municipality, which will work for the next 5 years.

"In the Municipality of Tirana, expanding participation and opening decision-making processes are very important, and the use of a methodology as mentioned above has been very successful for us," concluded Ms. Luarasi, remaining open for questions and further discussions.





MR. ERMAL ELEZI - GENERAL DIRECTOR OF THE AGENCY FOR THE SUPPORT OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT

"The Agency, as the implementing body of the Inter-Sectoral Strategy for Decentralization and Local Governance, foresees an increase in the role of municipal councils as representatives in decision-making bodies without neglecting the mayors." said Mr. Ermal Elezi.

The general director added that in recent months, the agency has worked intensively with Municipal Councils, emphasizing that to demand accountability, it is necessary to increase capacities related to decision-making processes, knowledge of laws, and oversight skills of decision implementation. Through the "Strong Municipalities" project, over 1000 members of municipal councils have been trained, offering modules to develop their role in transparency and accountability. Additionally, work is underway with the Municipalities for Europe to represent the interests of European integration processes at the level of municipal councils.

Meanwhile, another aspect is the improvement of the performance of local administration and mayors, especially newly elected ones, through training supported by the Council of Europe. *"It is important to assess how well municipalities perform, based on the number of employees in local public administration and the quality of services offered."*

Mr. Elezi added. To meet performance standards, a performance process has begun in all 61 municipalities of the country, including the analysis of functions to identify reasons for underperformance, including aspects such as accountability and transparency but also gender representation. At the level of municipal councils, the gender repre is satisfied (40%), but at the level of mayors, it is much lower than parliament. These are elements as part of the performance package of how local administration should be improved in the future. Mr. Elezi continued: *"Regarding the citizen inclusion process, one of the main roles of civil society should be this. However hard we try as an agency or municipalities, accountability is a process that can interest up to a certain point, and civil society in various forms should go to municipalities. Regarding the European integration process, it is important to continue progress, based on the objectives set, and try to align with European standards to improve society."*



MS. ESMERALDA HOXHA –POP NETWORK COORDINATOR, GENDER ALLIANCE FOR DEVELOPMENT CENTRE

The Juxtaposing Political Offers Network (Rrjeti Përballja e Ofertave Politike - POP) is an initiative of a network comprising 10 civil society organizations in Albania, operating in Tirana, Durrës, Vlorë, Fier, Kukës, Shkodër, Elbasan, Vaun e Dejës, Pukë, and Korçë. The aim of POP is to promote public debate and provide information on the electoral platforms of parties and mayoral candidates, focusing on the needs and priorities of citizens. Through various activities, the project aims to strengthen democracy in Albania by encouraging transparency and accountability during and after elections.

The POP network has a history of organizing similar initiatives before, during, and after local elections in Albania, including activities held in 2013, 2015, 2017, and 2019, as well as local by-elections in 2022 and the last elections in May 2023. One of the main mechanisms used by the POP network is the Social Contract, a document drawn up before local elections in collaboration with citizens through focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and research to determine the main priorities of citizens.

Subsequently, Public Forums are organized to promote democratic culture and provide an open and equal space for representatives of political parties to present their platforms and discuss with citizens about Social Contracts and their concerns. The POP methodology allows candidates to sign the Social Contract at the end of these meetings, thereby committing to addressing citizens' priorities in the next four years in case of winning the elections. The 2019-2023 Social Contracts were monitored by local organizations over four years, producing annual monitoring reports for each of the 10 municipalities where they operate, thus completing a four-year cycle with a fulfillment rate of 74.5% of citizens' priorities. In the May 2023 elections, following the consolidated methodology of POP, the new Social Contracts for 2023-2027 were drafted and presented in 18 public forums. The candidates signed these contracts, committing to addressing the identified priorities in the following four years.

Meanwhile, the POP Network continues its monitoring work not only for municipalities but also for decisions of the Municipal Council and other activities related to local government, lobbying, and advocating for transparency and local democracy.

Session 2: Promoting the European Integration Agenda at the Local Level – Perspectives from Albania and the Region.

Discussions in this session focused on Albania's progress towards European Union (EU) integration and the need for continued efforts by the central and local administration. In this context, the main goal is to create a specialized, non-bureaucratic, and transparent public administration to accelerate the advancement of public administration reform at the local level. In this session, panelists from the country and the region shared their practices for strengthening the capacities of local administration to face the challenges of European integrity.

This session was moderated by Ms. Esmeralda Hoxha – GADC and featured discussions from: Mr. Boran Ivanovski, Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South East Europe (NALAS); Ms. Katica Janeva, European Association for Local Democracy (ALDA); Ms. Megi Reçi, Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM); Ms. Elira Salihu, Democracy Plus, Republic of Kosovo and Mr. Blendi Dibra, Intellectuals of Young Hope - POP Network.



**MR. BORAN IVANOVSKI - PROGRAM OFFICER
NALAS**

NALAS as a network of associations of local authorities promotes decentralized cooperation which provides an opportunity for our members to support each other, learn from each other and contribute to the process of decentralization and EU integration. Municipalities have an important role in the implementation of EU acquis/legislation which creates the frame of service standards, but at the same time have a role to play in implementing them by modernizing public services. In this context, the role of national municipality associations is extremely important in the European integration process.

The progress report of the European Commission plays a crucial role in providing clear directions for the local governments to contribute to the accession process. NALAS through its network of associations of local authorities, for instance, supports the municipalities in increasing their capacities to assess the needs of vulnerable groups by applying the LNOB Social Mapping Methodology and by that to manage need-based social services.

Although there are a number of available EU and other development programmes and projects that might provide important support, local governments' absorption capacities remain limited.

This is mainly due to the shortage of human resources with the necessary skills for project development, but also a limited network of potential partners, when it comes to cross-border and other European projects.

Therefore, NALAS supported the initiative of the City of Sarajevo for the establishment of a City Network, which will work on strengthening the municipal project teams in accessing EU and other donor funds and increase their project partnership base, resulting in developed and submitted joint projects for the benefit of the citizens.





MS. KATICA JANEVA, EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR LOCAL DEMOCRACY (ALDA)

In ALDA, we implement various forms of citizen engagement locally on multiple themes and topics. Participation and citizen engagement are necessary to respond to complex and integrated societies. Participation is essential for several reasons: The first one is that the public sector needs more resources. The evidence shows that municipal, regional, or sub-regional levels need more resources for the tasks assigned, even in the legislative context of high decentralization. The functions of cities and local communities are always more significant than what the public sector can perform. Therefore, we need more resources that can be found in a profound and substantial partnership with citizens and civil society, which can contribute with trust, time, connections, resources, and engagement. The second reason is the need for public affairs and sectors to adapt to a complex and quick global transformation. Both at the societal level and in economic terms, the mandate assigned to local political bodies (usually 4 or 5 years) is too long to engage in dialogue again only through elections. So, the dialogue must occur constantly for changing situations and new deliberations and scenarios. Citizens are asking for more participation and ambitious goals; in most countries, they are asking to be heard and to have a role in decision-making processes that affect their lives. ALDA delivers evaluations of local governance's potential, opportunities, and challenges at the national or even regional level. It has developed several assessments in the Balkans, Eastern Europe, and the Mediterranean area. The assessment criteria are based on evidence and use methodologies tested on the field.

Among other things, Ms. Janeva added: *“ALDA advocates for the establishment of robust anti-corruption mechanisms at the local level. We believe that preventing corruption requires a multi-faceted approach, encompassing legislative reforms, institutional safeguards, and mobilization. By collaborating with relevant stakeholders, including government agencies, civil society organizations, and international partners, we strive to create an environment where corruption is not tolerated and perpetrators are held accountable.”*



MS. ELIRA SALIHU, DEMOCRACY PLUS, REPUBLIC OF KOSOVO

As is well known, the Republic of Kosovo currently holds the status of a potential candidate for membership in the European Union. Consequently, there are numerous challenges on this journey, requiring attention not only at the central level but also at the local level, given its significance, as highlighted in the Progress Report. The role of civil society in this process is also underscored in the latest progress report, where civil society is recognized as an important partner in Kosovo's preparation for EU membership. However, the government's relationship with civil society requires improvement, as indicated by some recommendations presented therein.

One of Democracy Plus's goals is to involve citizens in the processes of drafting and implementing public policies. Within this objective, issues such as transparency, public accountability, and public consultation are addressed to contribute to these processes. To achieve this goal and promote a healthy democracy in the country, Democracy Plus implements various practices, including support and encouragement for the use of digital public consultation platforms such as e-consultation. Through e-consultation, citizens can provide comments and suggestions on draft regulations and important documents published on the platform. Additionally, the "Ndreqe" platform provides an ideal opportunity for citizens to report any issues related to the Municipality, accompanied by photos, with these requests automatically forwarded to designated officials through agreements with the Municipalities. This platform enhances public participation and municipal accountability for addressing citizen requests.

Furthermore, last year, Democracy Plus contributed to the organization of participatory budgeting in five municipalities, which saw increased citizen participation compared to traditional public hearings or consultations organized by the Municipality. This process has demonstrated its effectiveness in promoting transparency and accountability in public spending.

All these practices contribute to enhancing public participation in decision-making processes within local government, ensuring a more representative and responsible governance



**MS. MEGI REÇI, INSTITUTE FOR DEMOCRACY
AND MEDIATION (IDM)**

In efforts to strengthen integrity, transparency, and accountability in local government, particular focus is placed on the design and implementation of Integrity Plans. These plans serve as strategic anti-corruption documents at the institutional level, incorporating measures and actions identified through integrity risk assessments. As part of these efforts, the Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM) has been assisting in drafting these plans for 23 municipalities of the country since 2019, in cooperation with the UN Development Programme (UNDP). In addition to document drafting, IDM has provided training to enhance administrative capacities in ethics, integrity, transparency, and accountability, and has developed guidance instruments for these processes.

To ensure the sustainability of these efforts, IDM has collaborated with the Albanian School of Public Administration (ASPA) to incorporate training modules into their ongoing programs for public employee. Furthermore, IDM has developed monitoring instruments, such as the Integrity Index, and has supported civil society organizations in monitoring integrity at the local level.

In this context, there is a special focus on fostering constructive cooperation with other civil society organizations and local institutions to ensure effective monitoring and supervision of the implementation of integrity plans and other local government reforms, thereby safeguarding the public interest. A joint approach of cooperation and monitoring enables social organizations to maintain their oversight role and contribute to strengthening the accountability and responsibility of public institutions.

In conclusion, Ms. Reçi stated: *"To safeguard our integrity and maintain our function, I believe we need a healthy balance of constructive cooperation with monitoring, without allowing one to compromise the other."*



**MR. BLENDI DIBRA – YOUTH INTELLECTUALS
HOPE – POP NETWORK**

As part of the POP network, we have developed a mediation model to encourage citizen participation and increase accountability and transparency in local government. This effort has been ongoing for several years and aims to formalize the electoral promises of political representatives, local elected officials, and mayors through the Social Contract. This contract is a tool that commits them to fulfill their promises to the citizens and to address the problems raised by the communities.

Our goal is for citizen participation and the commitment of local government to not only exist during elections but also to be integrated as an important part of the decision-making process. For this reason, we systematically monitor the work of municipalities and closely cooperate with local partners to ensure the effective implementation of promises and address issues that are priorities for the community.

At the same time, based on the recent recommendations of the European Commission's Progress Report for Albania, we have identified some special priorities that should be addressed at the local level. These include the consolidation of civil society at the local level, public participation in the local decision-making process, and improving the transparency of local finances.

Similarly, we have a special focus on increasing the capacities of local employees regarding human rights issues and the representation of women in local governments and their full participation.

"Collaboration with civil society is essential, as our aim is not to seize power, but to improve governance, ensuring that they will guarantee their next mandate," Mr. Dibra concluded his speech.

Session 3: The Impact of Municipal Councils on Achieving the Intersectoral Strategy for Decentralization and Local Governance 2023-2030.

Local government bodies, known as City Councils, bear a significant responsibility for the implementation of the strategy, ensuring that decisions and policies are aligned with the demands of local communities. Their cooperation with central and local authorities is vital in promoting an inclusive approach to governance and in strengthening local democracy. During this session, there was a discussion on their impact on decision-making processes and the implementation of reforms, supporting effective and transparent governance at the local level.

This session was moderated by Ms. Nevila Jahaj from the "Epoka e Re" Center and featured discussions from Mr. Fatlum Nurja of the Strong Municipalities Project; Ms. Jolanda Trebicka from the Municipality for Europe participated in the session via online connection, and Ms. Alketa Lamani from the Vlora Youth Center, representing the POP Network.



MR. FATLUM NURJA
STRONG MUNICIPALITIES

In an environment where local self-government is often overshadowed by the power of a mayor or administration, the question arises of how to ensure that citizens have an active role and feel included in the decision-making process. Mr. Nurja raised these concerns, demanding more responsibility and transparency from the municipal councils.

He emphasized the importance of municipal councils as the main bodies of local self-government, as stipulated in the Constitution of Albania. However, in practice, their power is often overshadowed by the mayor's authority. The most prominent problem arises from the lack of a referendum law, leaving citizens without a stable mechanism to express their opinions in decision-making.

Efforts to bring about positive changes are evident. Municipalities, striving to comply with the law on local self-government, have begun to regulate themselves through rules and procedures approved by the municipal councils themselves.

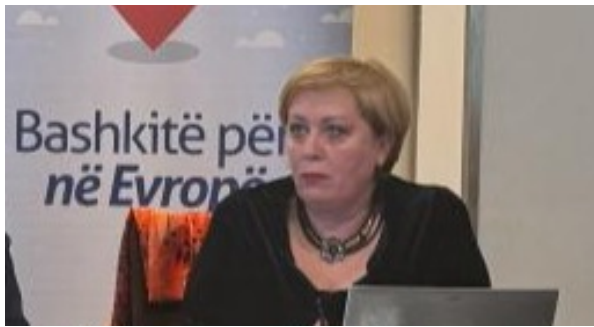
Many of them have adopted regulations for their organization and operation, including codes of ethics, rules for public consultation, handling of complaints and petitions, as well as community structures, regulations provided by the Strong Municipality project.

Among other things, Mr. Nurja stated: *"Although there are efforts to increase transparency, only a part of municipal councils broadcast their meetings live. Additionally, electronic registers for requests and complaints are still in the initial stages, leaving room for further improvements."*

At the core of these efforts is a change in the mentality of all involved actors. As citizens and representatives of local self-government, we must understand that local democracy is not just a process but a continuous commitment to ensuring everyone's involvement in decision-making.

In this journey towards a stronger and more inclusive democracy, the efforts of everyone working towards the same goal are necessary and encouraging.





MS. JOLANDA TREBICKA
MUNICIPALITY FOR EUROPE

In an online connection, the conference was joined by Mrs. Jolanda Trebicka, who provided an overview of the "Municipality for Europe" program. *"When the Integration Units were established and formulated, the idea was to have structures similar to the 'EU direct Office' established by European Union countries. Initially, three information offices were set up by the EU, which later evolved into European integration units established in all municipalities of the country. These units serve as a crucial interface between the EU and the local level,"* said Ms. Trebicka.

According to the European Commission's Progress Report 2023, there is a significant conclusion regarding the strengthening achieved by the Network of EU Integration Coordinators (European Integration Units in municipalities) in the inclusion of Local Self-Government Units in the EU membership process. Established in 2017, despite encountering challenges, they have demonstrated stability and results. This is evident in the municipalities' increased capacity to absorb European Union funds, with around 40 million EUR utilized during the period 2021-2022 alone. However, there is a need to enhance the engagement of elected bodies of local government and local administration in the EU integration process, particularly during EU membership negotiations.

Local government plays a crucial role in the negotiation process, as they are involved in 23 out of the 33 chapters, thus significantly impacting the implementation of the Acquis. Previously, municipalities were considered mere actors in this process. However, the EU emphasizes multi-level governance for integration processes and the implementation of European legislation, a concept that was not previously well understood. With the ongoing project work, there is increasing awareness, and recent cooperation with the chief negotiator's office aims to further enhance capacities within municipalities.



MS. ALKETA LAMANI, VLORA YOUTH CENTER
POP NETWORK

Ms. Lamani emphasized the need for a deep focus on the implementation of the Decentralization Strategy, identifying some challenges and goals for the future of local government. She stressed that to achieve success, increased commitment from local staff and municipal councils is essential. *"This is not merely a technical task but a commitment to fulfilling specific objectives in the field of local governance and democracy,"* said Ms. Lamani.

Mrs. Lamani pointed out that the objectives of the Decentralization Strategy include improving democratic processes and practices at the local level, encouraging citizen participation in decision-making processes, and ensuring transparency and accountability in these processes. This requires open and consistent communication with citizens and the enhancement of information exchange mechanisms between local authorities and the community.

Furthermore, it is imperative for local government to adhere to European standards and principles, thereby contributing to the overall integration of the country into the European Union. This undertaking requires ongoing awareness and commitment to improving local governance structures and practices.

Additionally, Ms. Lamani emphasizes that successful local government must be inclusive and consider the needs of all community members, including marginalized groups, while promoting gender equality, social inclusion, and the protection of minority rights.

This broad inclusion and diversity considerations provide the framework for building an active and sustainable local democracy in the future.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE CONFERENCE

- The use of mechanisms such as Social Contracts can increase the engagement of citizens in local decision-making processes.
- Improving local democracy through interactions with citizens and their involvement in public debate is vital to the growth of democracy at the local level.
- Monitoring the implementation of POP Social Contracts and local government strategies is important to ensure that citizens' needs are effectively addressed.
- The involvement of citizens in the local political process, through mechanisms such as the POP network, is an important step towards a policy more aligned with the needs and interests of the community.
- Encouraging youth participation in local elections and integration commissions is an important step towards a stronger and more representative democracy.
- Investing in transparency and engaging citizens in decision-making processes is essential for strengthening local democracy.
- The role and engagement of civil society is essential for the functioning of local democracy, and structured dialogue and cooperation between civil society and local government must be improved to ensure broad and conscious citizen participation.
- Local governments must create favorable conditions for the active participation of citizens in decision-making processes through investments in infrastructure and local services.
- Investing in methodologies for organizing political debates and monitoring promises made by candidates and political parties can strengthen transparency and accountability in electoral processes.
- Creating the necessary environment for free discussion and governance monitoring will help develop a more democratic and responsible society.
- Continuing efforts to strengthen citizen participation in decision-making, including youth and rural communities, is vital to representing and supporting the needs of all communities.
- The organization of public hearings and consultations with citizens should continue to define and reflect citizens' priorities in local policies and budgets.
- Investing in platforms and integrated services that provide opportunities for citizens to receive information and express their needs directly and effectively is very important.
- The use of open methodologies for the design of municipal policies and strategies, including public consultations and assessment of citizens' needs, is an important advance towards local democracy.
- Training and supporting municipal councils to increase their knowledge of laws and decision-making processes, as well as to deepen their commitment to transparency and accountability, is essential.
- Addressing the recommendations identified by the Progress Report of the European Commission for Albania is vital for fulfilling the EU membership criteria.
- The need for a referendum law is important to ensure a stable mechanism for citizens to express their opinions in the decision-making process.
- Increasing the transparency and involvement of citizens in decision-making processes, by providing live broadcasts of municipal council meetings and developing electronic registers for requests and complaints, is important to strengthen local democracy.
- Changing the mentality of all the actors involved is essential to create a strong culture of local democracy and to ensure everyone's participation in the decision-making process.
- Compliance with European standards and engagement in the EU integration process are critical for the progress of local democracy in Albania.



POP NETWORK

The Juxtaposing Political Offers Network (Rrjeti Përballja e Ofertave Politike - POP Network) aims to increase public debate and information to citizens as well as the orientation of platforms towards their needs and priorities. Through the activities, the project aims to strengthen Albanian democracy, promoting transparency and accountability. POP Network, is an initiative of the network of Albanian civil society organizations supported by "Olof Palme International Center" and "National Endowment for Democracy."

Members of the POP Network are the following organizations:

- Gender Alliance for Development Center, Tirana
- Civil Society Development Center, Durrës;
- Vlora Youth Center,
- New Epoch, Fier;
- Youth Movement for Democracy Center, Pukë;
- Center for Youth Progress, Kukës;
- Women in Development, Korçë
- Light Steps, Vau i Dejës
- Another Vision, Elbasan
- Young Intellectuals, Hope (IRSH), Shkodër

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