



Institute for Democracy and Mediation  
Instituti për Demokraci dhe Ndërmjetësim



Mbështetje për Parlamentin  
dhe Edukimin Qytetar në Shqipëri

# National Conference Report

Citizens' engagement in the parliamentary processes in Albania

October 2022

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# Introduction

The conference discussed the experience of the last two years when the Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM) and the Albanian Helsinki Committee (AHC) joined PACEP<sup>1</sup>'s efforts to build citizen demand for engaging with parliamentary decision-making. During this period, it was provided expertise on local issues to be followed up through a parliamentary procedure; introduced and implemented for the first time the deliberative polling exercise; trained civic stakeholders to better understand parliamentary activity and access points for the public; raised awareness of youth across the country. However, IDM and AHC experience entails also challenges and issues which could have been addressed differently. It is the full range of such experiences – the success and non – that make it worth an inclusive debate on lessons learned and strategies to move forward more effectively and more vigorously in consolidating open and participatory parliamentary decision-making.

Through this national conference, IDM aimed to mobilize efforts and key stakeholders to consolidate public participation in parliamentary decision-making. The goal was to explore how citizens' expectations are changing, and how MPs and parliamentary staff are responding as well as inform stakeholders about key principles and best practices of participation in parliamentary activity.

The national conference brought together more than 80 participants including MPs, parliamentary staff, policymakers, local stakeholders, media and international experts to reflect on the opportunities and challenges for citizen engagement in parliamentary decision-making in Albania. The report summarises the speeches of the conference panelists and the feedback of the regional consultative meeting, the so-called the 'mini-publics', organized in four regions in the country.

The conference paved the way for regular parliament-to-citizen forums in the future. The report highlights novel participatory elements that can be combined to offer both top-down and bottom-up approaches to participatory and deliberative democracy in the parliamentary decision-making process.

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<sup>1</sup> This conference that was held on 14 October 2022, is being implemented in the framework of the "Support to Parliament and Civic Education in Albania" (PACEP), a project of the Agency Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), implemented by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and OSCE Presence in Albania.

## Opening Remarks

### **Mr. Sotiraq Hroni**

*Executive Director, Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM)*

The engagement of citizens in parliamentary processes as the theme of this conference creates the first idea that we are dealing with some processes that are mainly related to the enhancement of communication between parliamentarians and citizens.

When we applied two years ago to become part of PACEP, perhaps we were not so aware of the processes we would go through, but also the enthusiasm of various actors and interest groups. The intervention of IDM and AHC consisted of various instruments and activities such as the provision of expertise and support for setting local issues on the parliamentary agenda, trainings with local actors and citizens to better understand parliamentary activity and functions, awareness campaigns with young people in secondary schools in the country and their visits to the premises of the Assembly, etc.

The results in these directions are not lacking thanks to very good cooperation with the Assembly of Albania, the parliamentary committees, and the administration of the assembly. A special thank also goes to the Advisory Board of the Project " Support to Parliament and Civic Education in Albania (PACEP)" whose co-chair is Ms. Felaj. Many of these experiences will be addressed by colleagues during the two panels of the conference.

A special achievement is the deliberative polling exercise carried out in collaboration with Stanford University focused on some of the most important topics of public debate. This exercise was a success and, in the future, I hope to continue to use this communication experience even with simpler approaches and to turn it into a working practice by the parliamentary committees themselves. In all these activities, IDM has tried to build by referring to the value of positive messages and encouraging to seek innovation from all parties.

Despite the levels of distrust towards institutions, the majority of citizens show considerable support for public consultation, an enabling regulatory environment to channel citizens' engagement, which would gradually lead to a more open and inclusive governing culture.

Our experience in PACEP can build such experiences that will align results in all directions, such as in strengthening public trust in institutions and policy-making processes, supporting a more active role of civil society and interest groups throughout the country, in the institutionalization of sustained communication practice and democratic culture in the interaction of the Assembly with society.

Of particular interest is the fact that this process fully supports the country's integration journey, which is primarily related to the strengthening of good governance, consultation of law-making, oversight, and democratic control. The role of the Assembly in this direction and the priorities highlighted by the Speaker of the Assembly Mrs. Nikola in the opening speech of the current session of the 10<sup>th</sup> legislature, find embodiment in the assistance of the PACEP Project.

I take the opportunity to thank the Assembly of Albania, the Speaker Ms. Nikolla, the Advisory Board, the administration of the assembly for the support and cooperative relations in this venture, where there are undoubtedly achievements, there are new positive experiences, but there are also challenges that could have been done better. To heighten the discussion in the two panels, we also invited colleagues from civil society from Latvia and Greece.

We are honored by the presence and contribution of Mrs. Edita Tahiri, a prominent personality of political and public life, as the main speaker of this conference, I hope that her speech will promote an open but also more fruitful climate of communication, considering the challenges in the generality of our societies for more open and responsible parliaments.

It is a special pleasure to welcome the Ambassador of Switzerland Ruth Huber and sincerely thank you for the all-around support that her country gives to these very important processes for strengthening parliamentarism, good governance, EU integration, and functional democracy in our country. In the end, I would like to thank our partner AHC and in particular NDI for their support and cooperation.

**Ms. Ermonela Valikaj (Felaj)**

*Deputy Speaker of the Parliament*

I feel pleased that I am invited to participate in this event, not only because I join the conference on behalf of the Speaker of the Assembly of Albania, but also in my personal capacity, I have extremely appreciated the organization of the event. This says a lot about the way work is done in the Assembly of Albania, but not only, thanks to the support we have had and from international organizations, in this case, the Swiss government, which has given the greatest support to the Assembly and OSCE and NDI, should be singled out.

The latter are the two main organizations that are implementing this fund to provide support to the Assembly of Albania. I have been in the Parliament of Albania for 12 years and I really see that things have improved in some directions and the approaches have changed for the better in others. In relation to the main topic of this event, the engagement of citizens with the Parliament, I would like to say that the support of citizens and the contribution of citizens to the Parliament has been increasing thanks to the instruments that have been made available. At the moment, I see both things closely related: the transparency of the Assembly, which today is ensured through the possibility of following every meeting that takes place in the Parliamentary Committees live in real-time, and this is an absolutely excellent way to understand what is going on happened with the parliamentary debate, but on the other hand, since 2016, the adoption of the Law on Public Consultation has given the Assembly another opportunity. It provides the opportunity to invite not only civil society organizations, interest groups, but also citizens of who have helped us to improve the content of the parliamentary debate and improve the content of the laws. What I particularly liked about this event was the issue of concern for a strong Parliament. I believe that a strong Parliament is a serious Parliament. It is a Parliament that gives time to debate, gives time to consultation, and above all, gives time to listen to interest groups. The numbers show that things have really grown.

I was actually looking at a statistic that was made available to me by the services of the Assembly and I noticed with some kind of satisfaction that during a parliamentary session at least 50 hearings take place in our Parliamentary Commissions, while during this year the Assembly of Albania has been visited by at least 6,000 itself, so the numbers speak of something positive. However, I do not say that we have reached the best opportunities because even previous surveys that have been done by IDM have shown that what we lack is the interest of the younger people and this is a deficiency that we must address through tailored instruments. which make the parliament attractive to the youngest. We need their contribution, we need their energy, but also their approach above all. Thus, I believe that we should not be satisfied with simply publishing on the website of the Assembly of all draft laws that are being discussed, we should not be satisfied with the notifications that we send from time to time to civil society organizations, we should not be satisfied with the electronic register that has today the Parliament of Albania and where all the civil society organizations that come to the Parliament to express their positions, their opinions and sometimes their initiatives are listed. We need to be closer to what people expect from us. At least my feeling at this point has been that we should leave more time available, we should show more attention and maybe we should conduct the hearings with smaller groups in order to give everyone the opportunity to be heard, and then the feedback can be reflected.

The role that civil society has played in the Parliament of Albania is invaluable, I believe that the fact that today we have a law that gives the opportunity to citizens through CSOs to submit legislative initiatives has been something positive. We can mention the Registry for those convicted of sexual crimes, we cannot deny that it was absolutely CSOs positive pressure and the fact that they submitted a draft to the Parliament that set the Parliament and then the government in motion. In fact that at one time we could quickly respond with a law that I think will have extremely positive effects in terms of protecting the emotional health and not only of children, women, and girls. I took this as an example because it was the first initiative that came in this way. It is precisely this opportunity that the Assembly is showing today, to be more open to the citizens, this has actually helped us to be involved in a relationship that constantly feeds us with what the citizens' expectations are. To have a strong Parliament, I will always insist on the point that we must have a serious Parliament, the weight and content of the debate are what I believe make the government more accountable to the parliament. As long as we try to preserve this part, I am convinced that despite the fact that we can be judged on our standpoints because of the party affiliations, in the end, I am convinced that the government would feel more responsible toward a Parliament which shows itself more and more dignified, at least the effort of the Speaker of the Assembly Mrs. Nikolla, the effort of the two vice-speakers, I am not talking about myself, but I am also taking the vice-president of the opposition, Mr. Gjekmarkaj was actually so that we can improve the weak points of the Assembly of Albania, which make it possible to increase the citizens' attention to the Assembly.

Even those instruments that are made available today expressed either in the Rules of Procedure of the Assembly or even in a practical way that is relevant to how the Assembly of Albania works today, can be fully used. I said that thanks to the support we received from the Swiss Government, today the Assembly of Albania has digitized most of all parliamentary documents, that is, most of the documents such as reports, minutes, and draft laws are available electronically and I am not talking only about parliamentary documents that belong to this year or last year, but also for many years before, on the other hand, all parliamentary sessions, all parliamentary meetings and they can be heard and the debate can be understood much better even without waiting for its disclosure in the relevant minutes. Of course, we are working towards the consolidation of the law in the sense that we can have the legal text appear with all the changes that have occurred over time. These are something extremely valuable because they help our work but also the work of those who see the Parliament of Albania from the outside. In the meantime, something that I have seen as very positive that has happened in the Parliament of Albania is the provision that we have made in the Regulations of Albania that we do not function only with the Permanent Parliamentary Committees, we do not function only with the Sub-Committees, we do not function only with the Commissions ad -hoc, but also have the so-called voluntary organizations of MPs who, for various issues, can be grouped in these voluntary groups and promote policies and attitudes about things that they believe are more necessary for citizens.

Such is the group of Friends of Children, but there are two new groups in the meantime because one is a traditional group and the Alliance of Women MPs that we have had since 2013, but there are at least two new groups. I am talking about the volunteer group that has been established in the Assembly: The Green Group and their agenda is mainly related to the protection of the environment not only but there is also another group that will soon be established in the Assembly related to sustainable development. I believe that orientation in this way gives more opportunities to the MPs, more opportunities for expression and connections and I approach the organizations according to the relevant profiles that they have to give their contribution to the Assembly. In the end, we are very clear that the sovereignty of the Parliament originates from the citizens and as long as we try to go alongside the expectations of the citizens, we will certainly have a strong Parliament and therefore we will also have a government that always feels more accountable to Parliament and citizens. All this requires very close cooperation between the majority and the opposition, we cannot see things so divided at this point, there are some moments when we must unite so that the government goes in the right direction and responds to those needs.

I hope that today really brings added value to all that the Parliament of Albania needs to change. I have followed carefully in all cases when we had to look at survey results to understand different attitudes because we need to actually reflect at the end of the day, making not just changes but adopting behaviors that are completely new and up-to-date.

**H.E. Ruth Huber**

*Swiss Ambassador*

I am especially delighted to be part of this event, which marks a milestone in the joint efforts towards strengthening the relations between Albanian citizens and their Parliament. When I received the invitation I thought this is a perfect opportunity for a Swiss citizen to talk about what is very dear to our hearts: participatory democracy.

It is based on the idea that citizens want to have a stake in political decisions. Political work is seen as a shared enterprise—not just among professional politicians, administrators, experts and advocates, but also with citizens who know best what their living conditions, needs and concerns are. They should be offered an opportunity to participate in shaping decisions.

- Participatory democracy is a way of deciding differently – deciding together.

I am glad to hear that the parliament of Albania has made good progress on matters of transparency and openness. When being informed about PACEP, I was also impressed to hear the big number of citizens willing to learn and also proactively engage with the Parliament by submitting concrete legal initiatives.

This approach is crucial, as it leads to:

- Better policy outcomes because they rely on considered public judgements rather than off-the-cuff public opinions.
- Greater legitimacy to make hard choices.

We are also aware that there is room for improvement with regard to Consultation processes, by the Parliament but also across Government institutions. We encourage the parliament to strengthen its efforts in this direction, especially by improving the feedback mechanisms.

We also encourage the parliament to strengthen its relation with citizens and interest groups, as a means to better exercise its oversight function.

We are glad we can support Parliament's efforts to become more transparent and efficient! We will continue to do so and we count on the support and engagement of all actors within and outside of Parliament.

***Keynote speech delivered by Ms. Edita Tahiri - Former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kosovo***

How can Western Balkans overcome 'Closed and Government dominated Parliaments'?

The topic is very interesting and relevant and I think that the Balkans are taking care to keep these topics relevant as they are; Why is the parliament closed? Why is it not very open to citizens? Why not make them participants? Why does the phenomenon of parliament being dominated by governments happen in the Balkans, in all countries I would say, but more so in the Balkans? We have an imbalance of power relations, in democratic institutions where they should be equal. In fact, all these phenomena, in my opinion, are paradoxes of today's democracy, because today we are dealing with a more fragile democracy than a functional one, even on the global level, democracy is declining, unfortunately, even a strong competition of autocracy as one of the phenomena of it is harmful to oppose all these achievements that have been made, especially those of us who have lived in communist systems, we had and have the ideal of democracy, but we are not able to make it as functional as it should be and as it should be.

It is interesting that especially in the Balkans (I will speak today from the perspective of the region) we tend to do things well on paper, but the reality is different. We are talking about why the Parliament when is created by the citizens, by the vote of the citizens, does the sovereignty of the Parliament come from citizens or not?

What about the citizen voice that is guaranteed with democracy, then why is there no such implementation and respect and not just formally the voice of the citizens? In my opinion, what is formal and what is functional? If parliaments will establish partnerships with citizens, with civil society in consultations for finding solutions, creating policies, and decisions instead of establishing only a consultative relationship. The consultative mechanism is good, but it is insufficient. Or the other: how is it possible when the Government leaves the parliament, when it comes to the Parliament playing the supervisory role it has under the Constitution, the government tends to dominate the parliament, especially in situations when the majority has many votes and uses this power and arrogance of the majority to dominate the parliament. Whom does it hurt in this case? The citizen, the people. Doesn't democracy start from the basic statement that democratic government originates from the people and is for the people? It is basic. Immediately we encounter distortions, and violations of principles that of course not only the results are not very qualitative, but neither the governance nor the quality of democracy also is qualitative on the other hand the solutions that the Government gives should serve to solve the problems of the citizens and when decisions are made together, I think the solutions would be more stable, more acceptable and longer lasting.

Another problem we have and this is a very good opportunity to address it, all of us who have experience, civil society, etc. What would be the ideas on how to solve the shortcomings or paradoxes of democracy? How will it be done that the Governments are no longer able to avoid accountability or when the parliament cannot make the government accountable then how can we achieve good results? I'm starting from my country so I don't go to others. For example, the Progress report for Kosovo came out, the most important, clearest, and the straight remark was about the Parliament of Kosovo, where it was said that the Parliament is weak in exercising control. I saw the EU use a very clear vocabulary and had given a critique. We should not be so far from what we have trusted as a political system. We have all trusted this system so let's make it more functional.

- Transparency, that is, accountability, are the basics that I believe would increase citizens' trust in democratic institutions and if citizens feel considered and respected and more active, the problem is the apathy or indifference that we have, I don't know how much expressed in Albania, Kosovo has sometimes raised its voice, but it is not enough. When I became parliament after the war, I had just come from Harvard and I came with a certain great enthusiasm, for big changes, especially for democracy. When I came to Parliament, I initiated the creation of public hearings and it helps me and I feel that time. We called the Minister of Telecommunications because he was in charge of that field then, you don't believe what resistance the Minister did, as if he thought we were dismissing him. I don't know what happened, they hardly brought it up, but since that time, today the public hearings in the Parliament of Kosovo are very active and acceptable, so the culture has changed. I also listened to the presentation of Mrs. Felaj for the opening of the Parliament in Albania, he mentioned numbers, numbers are important, but the quality, please, not only for Albania, I'm talking about the whole region. The opening of parliaments comes with the political culture to be open or with the democratic culture and does not become formal or on paper, but becomes real. Therefore, I believe that some of these paradoxes that we are discussing should be dealt with by empowering the parliament and its role, and empowerment comes from openness. Because by becoming a partner with the citizens, of course, the power is greater, and the impact is greater. Transforming the culture towards openness is very important.
- Educating citizens, encouraging citizens, and not allowing apathy, which is very harmful because citizens do not want to be active, this shows that they do not have a partnership.

This shows that democratic institutions do not see an interest in mutual cooperation. It requires interaction and joint decision-making.

- Something else that I have seen as something very harmful: autocracy. The first is the lack of accountability, which opens up and generates corruption. Corruption strengthens the government the most. Government officials not only get rich but also become dominant in Parliament. This thing has to change. I know it's not easy, but it's something that has to happen for the greater good. Our autocratic tendencies are so we fight, there is no use for anyone such a serious phenomenon that is happening.
- Next, what I want to emphasize as important, almost in the entire Balkans is the phenomenon of corruption, maybe we should think about a Social Contract between all the democratic actors in the state, which contract is to fight corruption together. These shortcomings are our work, so how do we find a solution, to unite all democratic institutions in the fight against corruption.
- Organizations such as IDM and others, which are mediators between democratic institutions and citizen participation. Mediators in the world are an innovation not only for the maintenance of democracy but also for peace. It is a category that is little known, but it is very important in societies that have many contradictions, paradoxes, shortcomings, etc.

I spoke as a parliamentarian, as a government official, but also as a politician who is very open to criticism but also to appreciation.

# Panel I: Making parliamentary activity inclusive

## The path to Open Parliament and avenues for future actions

Mr. Genci Gjoncaj, *Secretary General, Albanian Parliament*

Recent global and regional trends emphasize a more structured interaction and common agenda between Parliament, Civil Society, and Media, to promote transparency and citizen participation. Improving transparency and citizen participation are essential for democracy and good governance. Therefore, in addition to its legislative, supervisory, and representative functions, the Assembly has the responsibility to support the highest democratic standards of transparency and accountability and to be an example for other state institutions.

Transparency, civic education, and public involvement in decision-making processes are basic principles on which public institutions operate. These principles enable citizens to be involved, informed, and control the activity and work of institutions, thus providing them with a way to be part of processes that have a real impact on their lives.

The Assembly of the Republic of Albania, as the country's highest representative institution, is committed to being open to the public in order to include it in decision-making and to convey information on its activities.

Transparency is not only a fundamental principle on which public institutions must exercise their activity, but above all it is a necessity, which enables citizens to be informed, monitor, and control the activity and work of the Assembly, providing the public with a way to be involved in the decision-making process.

The open activity of the Assembly is realized through public participation in the law-making process; reflecting the activity of the Assembly and its bodies in the written and visual media; publications of parliamentary documentation; the website of the Assembly; internal audio-visual network.

The plenary sessions of the Assembly of Albania are open and are broadcast in real-time online on the official website of the Assembly of Albania, as well as the meetings of the parliamentary committees are open according to the provisions in Article 35 of the Regulation of the Assembly on the publicity of committee meetings.

Transparency is an essential issue to be fulfilled by the Assembly and as such, it is also foreseen in the Strategic Plan of the Assembly 2020-2025.

The Pandemic period started in 2020, beyond the difficulties it brought in the management of the crisis, also brought the need to adapt to the new conditions for the development of the parliamentary activity. In these conditions, a new reality was created that was reflected in the way work processes were carried out, but also in communication with the public. In the conditions when the activity of the parliamentary commissions started to take place online, a way was needed to familiarize the public with this activity but also to give it the opportunity to access the meetings of the commissions or bodies of the Assembly that are open to the public.

The Assembly managed to adapt very quickly to the new working conditions and the online broadcasting of all open meetings of the Assembly's bodies during the pandemic period, for this reason, it was also described as "one of the Parliaments that adapts the fastest to the new working conditions dictated by the Covid-19 pandemic", in the OSCE-ODHIR 2020 report.

On the other hand, the legislature of X also started with the online broadcast on the official website of all meetings of parliamentary activity, such as meetings of parliamentary committees, plenary sessions, or other important activities for the public, giving the opportunity to the general public to follow in real-time everything that happens in the parliament but also to have the opportunity to access all the meetings held at any time in video format. All this was made possible through the use of the new audio-video system of the Assembly that was installed thanks to the support and financing of the IPA funds and the budget of the Assembly, which is used and managed by the Information Technology Service in the Assembly.

This new mode of transmission marked an important step in communication with the general public and also in the access of anyone at any time to the parliamentary activity, providing complete and real-time information of the discussions, developments, and decision-making during the law-making process and not only.

This important development in the field of transparency was also accompanied by changes in the way of receiving the signal of the transmission of commission meetings by the media, offering ease and flexibility in this regard. Also, this process was accompanied by the creation of the official Facebook page of the Assembly and those of the Parliamentary Commissions, enabling faster, more efficient, and interactive communication with the general public and especially with user groups of social networks.

The developments of recent years, the measures undertaken by the Assembly as well as the investments in the field of technology, which focus on transparency and access of citizens to the general public, have led to significant results in this direction today, it is enough to mention the fact that today the official WEB page has very high visibility and an increased number of visitors in recent years, while our FB page today has almost 10,000 followers and this number has grown naturally without any intervention such as paid sponsorships to increase the number of followers. .

But despite these results, it is still a challenge to meet transparency standards, the public's perception that we still do not have a sufficiently transparent institution, the need to be closer to the public and interact more with all interest groups, communicate with young people and education or their involvement in parliamentary activity.

In order to meet these challenges, instruments and methods should be found that simplify the provision of information to citizens, through ways that are preferred by them, about the Assembly of Albania and the work of its deputies. These new instruments will create reasonable access to information, influencing the growth and improvement of public perception towards the Assembly. This function is also the preparation of the communication strategy for the Assembly of the Republic of Albania. Currently, the draft of the Communication Strategy 2022-2025 is for consultation in the Public Consultation Platform.

In order to be inclusive, the Assembly has taken an important step, enabling the broadcast of the plenary session also in sign language in RTSH Assembly.

According to partners' reports, over the past few years, the Assembly has significantly improved its transparency by preparing a platform for public consultation of acts, drafting a manual for citizens' participation in the decision-making process, and creating an online register of citizens' requests for information, developing a registry of civil society organizations (CSOs) as well as creating civic education programs with a focus on young people.

Also, the Parliament of Albania has recently joined the initiative to be an Open Parliament alongside the parliaments of other democratic countries.

The Assembly has available an online platform for public consultation of legal acts. The platform offers the possibility of online consultation of draft laws <http://konsultimi.parlament.al>.

Parliamentary Committees, after approving the work calendars and assigning the acts that will be subject to consultation with the interested parties, use the online platform to publish the acts for which the opinion and opinion of the public are sought. Acts are published on the online platform for a certain period according to the procedural deadlines for reviewing draft acts. At the moment of the publication of the draft act online, the coordinator for interest groups, in cooperation with the secretariat of the responsible committee, automatically notifies all interested parties registered in the online registry of CSOs and in the registry of lobbyists that are on the official website of the Assembly in the internet. The public comments on the draft act are published for public consultation in blocks (at the end or next to it) or article by article.

The Assembly publishes the Transparency Program approved by the "Commissioner for the Right to Information and Protection of Personal Data".

The Assembly makes public the information according to its functional activity as well as reviews and updates the Transparency Program in any case of change in the institutional activity, legal regulatory framework, or any other element related to proactive transparency. The categories of information are specified in the Transparency Program of the Assembly mandatory to be made public. Public information is: complete, accurate, updated, easy to consult, understandable, easily accessible, and compatible with the original documents in the possession of the Assembly of the Republic of Albania. Every person is given the right to know public information, without being forced to explain the motives. In cases where it is established that the information has not been made public, anyone can direct a request to the Coordinator for the right to information, of the Assembly.

I am also happy to inform you that the new webpage of the Assembly has just been made public, which is currently in the testing phase, and you will have the opportunity to receive a wider presentation on the innovations it brings to the activity that the Assembly will organize next week. In the meantime, I can tell you in advance that the new webpage has reflected all the comments, concerns, and problems that have come to us either from the media or civil society, but also from anyone else who uses and is informed by this page.

Another instrument is the "Manual of public participation" which deals with the activities of the Assembly in terms of public participation in decision-making, the cooperation with the public of the Assembly as an institution but also of the deputies, the structures created in the framework of European integration as well as public participation in other activities and the instruments of the Assembly to facilitate this participation.

Other instruments available to the public are the electronic Register of CSOs and the electronic Register of Lobbyists; the Transparency Program; the Register of requests and responses and the Regulation of mass media.

The process started by the Parliament to join the initiative to be an Open Parliament, by drafting and accepting some standards of transparency and above all by expressing the will and readiness to achieve these standards shows the appropriate approach of this Institution to be as close as possible citizens and the public at large.

Above all, what belongs to this process, what is worth emphasizing is that the drafting of the document of standards and activities for their achievement was carried out through a long co-drafting process where all parties, the Assembly, Civil Society, and the Media were engaged and have made their important contribution.

From what I mentioned above, I believe it is clear that the road to an open Parliament has already started thanks to the vision, dedication, and commitment on our part, but also thanks to the cooperation with our partners, whose help is very valuable in this process, together we will manage to have a model Institution, open and as close to the citizens as possible.

## Initiating deliberative democracy processes to strengthen parliamentary representation

Mr. Gjergji Vurmo, *Program Director, IDM*

When we conceived this Conference, we thought of it with three panels. The first panel turned out to be the best in fact as a kind of motivational panel for all the participants and for the discussion. The second panel is currently the one that presents positive and negative experiences not to point the finger, but to draw out our lessons from the project, but not only. The AHC representative and I will certainly present our experience as a partner in the implementation of some PACEP priorities. The next panel will be focused on those strategic priorities, maybe we don't need to make a long list of priorities but start with a list of things we can do.

To return to our experience as an implementer together with the Albanian Helsinki Committee, as an implementer of a sub-component of the PACEP project under the coordination of NDI in Tirana. Our task as a partner organization was actually to work with the demand side of citizens, civil society, and various interest groups for more involvement in parliamentary activity. In this context, a panorama or a broad framework of activities was needed. Together with the Committee, we have implemented activities ranging from awareness, informational activities, and research to activities or exercises that have all aimed at strengthening the demand for more involvement in parliamentary processes. Activities that aim to consolidate the approach of the open parliament, a Parliament that really consults the citizens. A Parliament that controls the executive and exercises all its functions. A Parliament that values citizens or civil society actors who are aware and have something to offer to the processes that take place within the Assembly. And in this context, I would like to share two activities of the project which have marked the entire involvement of IDM.

As was mentioned briefly in the opening remarks the deliberative democracy or the exercise of deliberative democracy that IDM has implemented within this project in support of the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University in America. What does this social experiment consist of in brief, in three main steps. A survey is organized at the national level with a representative sample on issues that are important and have divided the debate or public opinion. The data of this survey is of course processed further. In a second phase, two groups are selected. The Experimental Group consists of about 10% of the sample and this group undergoes an informative workshop on the same topics. A second group is also selected, the control group who are not subject to this information process. At the end of the workshop of the informative process, the same survey is done again to the two selected groups, i.e. the experimental and control groups. The basic assumption is that information and the way it is conveyed and the quality of the information is very important in shaping not only the opinions but also the attitudes of the citizens. This has been, I would say, one of the basic lessons that we have learned, apart from the fact that it was the biggest social experiment carried out in Albania. The importance of this massive exercise of democracy lies in the empirical evidence that I generate and especially to make the difference between a formal consultation process that is a consultation process which is guided, among other things, by the need to better inform the citizens.

To provide them with objective, unbiased and independent information on the matter. The two slides you see are let's say the two results of this experiment. What do I change and what do I not change? From a total of about 20 concrete options that citizens were asked about and for which we asked them if they were for or against. For more than half of them, the level of information and the information they were given made the difference. This is the slide that shows exactly what this type of information changes. We noticed that the experimental group that received objective information through information sessions with an independent expert, through short and concise materials that inform on the issue, have changed their attitude and a kind of change is observed compared to the group that did not undergo this information process.

Secondly, I wanted to bring up another activity that I think was equally important and shows the results of ongoing coordination work not only between the external actors of the Assembly, but also between them themselves, and these are public hearings with the Parliamentary Commissions.

One of the most motivating activities not only for us as civil society activists, but I believe also for the members of the Assembly, whom I also take the opportunity to thank for their participation and for all the attention they paid to the hearings. I am convinced that they served as a kind of motivation for the members of the Assembly themselves. There are three elements that have served the success of this activity or this approach. First, in the identification of issues to be addressed with a certain parliamentary procedure that can be a public hearing, a concrete legal initiative, or a hearing with the various institutions of the executive before the Assembly. In total, we have identified about 120 initiatives in four regional workshops, and to think that these workshops were carried out online I am very happy today to see a part of the participants in those regional workshops who have proposed concrete issues which we have followed up to in the end. I refer here to one of the hearings which was on the Challenges of Persons with Disabilities. Secondly, I think an important element has been the continuous communication of the staff of the IDM and the Helsinki Committee with the proponents of these initiatives and to inform them in order to give them more context regarding the content of the initiatives, but for them, they gave more information regarding the ways in which all initiatives can be addressed, some of them had to be followed up with other institutions that may have been executive or local government institutions. The fact that the proposers have had this kind of support from IDM and the Committee has motivated them to stay in touch.

Finally, as I said, not only the feedback that we have given but also the one that we have received from the proponents has been one of the issues that contributed to the success from the point of view of the Assembly and the deputies participating in these hearings.

### **Petitions & citizen's legal initiatives to influence the parliamentary agenda**

**Ms. Erida Skendaj, Albanian Helsinki Committee**

Thank you very much for the invitation to IDM for the cooperation we have had in the implementation of this initiative, also NDI for the support and continuous support it has given us, but also the Parliament has without question been an actor with whom throughout the implementation of our activities if not if we had your support, of the administration of the Assembly but also of the Friends of Children group of MPs, we would not have been able to do many of the activities with young people, especially those of the contacts we have had in public gymnasiums in the country we managed to see a very good potential of young people's engagement in Parliamentary life. They have brought very important ideas regarding environmental issues, issues related to the access of persons with disabilities to public life, the phenomenon of young people leaving Albania and how this can be better addressed by the Albanian Parliament. Sexual abuse of minors and many other issues which are already in the form of petitions. A public hearing was held with the Friends of Children group of MPs and we hope that these petitions will be heard further in the Parliamentary Committees. I really liked what Ms. Tahiri said that I am open to criticism as well as to evaluations.

In fact, I believe that any criticism of the Albanian Helsinki Committee and IDM in the context of the implementation of this activity is not at all intended to harm or undermine the work of the institutions and in particular the Assembly of the Republic of Albania for which in a general assessment, without question at least we as one of the organizations that are very much in contact with the legal oppositions that are made for certain draft laws. We can say that there is a difference in terms of transparency and access in relation to the Executive which is many times more closed and impervious to the way the public consultation process is done. But there is still a need for improvements in addition to the positive developments that Mr. Gjoncaj actually mentioned, when we talk about petitions and citizens' legislative initiatives, which are mechanisms that citizens have to influence the legislative process, but also to demand accountability to an elected body such as the Assembly, or to demand accountability with on the part of the Assembly, which is again an elected body that exercises parliamentary control over the Executive, these two instruments from the evaluation report that we have done together with Elona, who are the authors of this study report that will be launched very soon, identify a number of needs and recommendations.

First, it is necessary to review the Parliament's Regulations in order to provide a more complete standards and guarantees, even in comparison with the Regulations of other countries which have a more advanced and consolidated system of petitions, but also of legal initiatives by citizens. that enable any interest group regardless of whether it is registered or not in the Register for CSOs to have its petition effectively heard. From the assessment that we have made for the work of the Parliament for the years 2016-2020 for almost five years, we have seen the petitions that have been examined by the Assembly. We have identified many difficulties in the view of the parliamentary documentation because one of the difficulties that I estimate is that the administration of the Assembly does not have enough staff to respond precisely to the support and the support that should be given to the Parliamentary Committees in the review of petitions. For example, if we make a comparison with the German countries or with other countries that have good petition practices such as Scotland or the United Kingdom, these parliaments have staff dedicated only to petitions. Let's say it gives some support to the deputies, but also to the documents. Out of 42 petitions that have been referred or examined by the Parliament for a period of five years, it has resulted that only 14 have managed to trace parliamentary documentation, minutes of the discussion of these petitions in the meetings of the Parliamentary Committees or referral of the petitions by the President of the Assembly, respectively to the Parliamentary Committees.

It is undoubtedly very important that the part of giving feedback to the citizens from the Parliament is seen as a standard that strengthens accountability but also strengthens the responsibility of the Parliament. And in this context, when we see that, at least in this 5-year period, part of the petitions are related to issues of environmental pollution, the status of oil workers in relation to issues related to the demolition of buildings of public interest but that have violated the rights either property of the families who lived in these houses or the right to family life. In this context, the part that the citizens come to understand that this petition has been examined or not by the Parliamentary Commission, whether or not there was a delegation of the petition to the executive and that the Parliament is considered not to be the responsible body receiving and examine it, is of particular importance in this context. that and in conclusion every citizen, and every formal or informal group, every civil society organization demands an official reaction. And in this context, we have identified some problems and recommendations which you will soon have on your table. As we are currently doing a Petition for Petitions with many civil society organizations.

More or less these elements that I mentioned briefly, we want to cooperate with the Parliament in order that, in addition to improving the Regulation, why not as well as you will consider necessary based on the most positive elements of the countries that have the legal system of similar to our country that can be adapted to the Albanian context. But on the other hand, create electronic platforms because information technology has undergone significant development, e.g. Scotland, England but also Germany have dedicated platforms where citizens enter the website of the Parliament and submit a petition electronically and see what happens with the petition, manage to track it at all stages of its consideration. In the same way, you will have to pay more attention to the transparency of the petitions on the website of the Assembly, why not through this Platform, for which you may also need to support further and make it further possible that. The problems related to the legal initiative that comes from 20,000 voters are actually mainly due to the fact that we did not have a law until 2019 that details the way citizens concretize a legislative initiative that comes from 20,000 voters. It is very positive that the Parliament accepts an initiative for which civil society advocates, namely the law on the Citizen Legislative Initiative. This law has already been approved, the Veterans Commission has been consulted and its recommendations have been taken into consideration, but there is still a great need to look at other mechanisms, and how they can implement the legislative initiative that comes from the citizens. One of the difficulties we have highlighted is the electronic signature part, regardless of the fact that the law in force provides that these initiatives can be signed electronically, on the other hand, there are no effective mechanisms for citizens who are interested in signing exactly such an initiative to make this possible thing.

Due to the fact that according to the legislation in force there is a significant cost of electronic signature somewhere around 50,000 old lek and while many of the legislative initiatives that deal with social issues and address poverty phenomena as well as an initiative that is currently being worked on the vital minimum supporting them are people who are economically unable to pay such fees. I believe in the approach of cooperation to improve and move further in relation to these two instruments and I hope and believe that why not make this possible in the sense of a relationship of mutual cooperation and trust with each other. We as civil society organizations, but also the Assembly as a body that holds and exercises legislative power in our country.

### Interest groups' access to the parliamentary activity

**Mr. Enio Jaço**, *President of American Chamber of Commerce in Albania*

I would like to dwell on three main aspects: first of all, regarding the importance we give to this topic, the engagement of citizens in the discourse, parliamentary processes and law-making. How do we judge where the process is today? How is the situation today? Even how can it be? About 3 years ago in the American Chamber of Commerce there was something called the Investment Agenda, which has to do with the investment climate and the business climate, and we determined (this is something that we don't do very often, we do maybe a times in 10 years) we defined 8 main pillars that are fundamental in relation to the improvement of the business and investment climate in Albania. And of these 8 main pillars, 4 of them are primary and 4 are strong supporters. We place the public consultation exactly on those 4 main pillars that are related to the business climate. Not only for the fact that it has to do with the business climate in a straightforward way, but it also has to do with the functioning of democracy in Albania or with the functioning of democracy everywhere. So that it will always come and grow, this will be one of the main criteria of the European Union as well.

One of the main criteria that they will look at is the progress and reform that Albania will make in relation to the European Union membership process is fundamental. I think that in the coming years not only the work of IDM but also the work of civil society and the contribution and involvement of civil society in this process will be very important. If we look at the subject of the European Union if we look at the last EU report there are two main aspects that I found interesting, for the first time as far as I know it was a public process where the submission of the report is done in a public way which issues a clear signal to civil society and citizens in a way that they should always be more involved in such processes. The second is that this report has something specific about public consultation, it talks about public consultation which is not typical and has its own suggestions and recommendations which I do not want to dwell on. But it also has to do with the functioning of the law, it is not only a matter of democracy, it has to do with creating the right laws for what we represent, for the situation we are in, but it also has to do with the functioning of the law because if the citizens, if the interest groups do not know, do not belong to and do not look at these types of laws that belong to them and their needs and problems, then they will always be more and more distant from the operation of these laws and from life public.

I listened carefully to Mr. Gjoncaj, who quite rightly wants to have as many people and associations as possible to be involved, but this also has to do with trust. We will always have a very large involvement of civil society and citizens if they feel that they belong, if they feel and believe that their voice will be heard in this process.

Second, how do they function today, how do we think they function today? If I were to describe it in two words, it would mean that the law exists, but it does not work well. Albania has made progress in the last 5 years regarding the adaptation of a law on public consultation. I think that we should all give credit to the existing Government for the adaptation of this law. This is a law which foreign experts (I myself am not able to say) but I believe the experts that it is one of the laws which can probably be one of the best in the Western Balkans region.

This law needs improvements, but still we have a law which is good and this is a very good start. The main problem with the law that has so far not worked properly and would make it work in the first place is that the public consultation deadlines work. If we will have a new law which will go to the Parliament for a vote, then it must be given to the public with certain deadlines.

The public should be given a certain amount of time to think, reflect and give their suggestions, not only published but also to interest groups, civil society and professionals to engage and to give them the right opportunity and proper physical time in order to come up with suggestions for improving the current law.

The second is how the legal deadlines that the law has do not always work, so we have a problem with the implementation of the law. The other thing that is very important if the problem of choosing legal deadlines is the consultation process. And with the consultation process, I mean the possibility and ability to arouse the interest of the citizens. We arouse the interest of interest groups, civil society. Those who take the time to study the law especially when it pertains to them and believe enough to make their own recommendations as to how this law can be better. This is only the first part, the second part is that the law-enforcing or law-making and law-creating bodies including the Executive must consider these recommendations, in my opinion, these recommendations are not necessarily taken into consideration. Taking these recommendations into consideration is not a desirable process so to speak, but it is an obligation of the law. So the law requires not only to be studied, but also to be answered with the reasons why these recommendations for one reason or another can be decided not to be taken into account. It should be a process of communication where civil society and the public really see a process of communication but also take into account the recommendations.

What would the ideal structure be like? It would be a very high process of cooperation, with applied deadlines which will not be negotiable because they apply to one law and not to another. I want to emphasize that the American Chamber of Commerce has had a good constructive relationship with the parliamentary groups and with the administration of the Parliament regarding the consideration of our recommendations, the placement on the negotiating tables of the discussion of the parliamentary groups, but not so good with executive bodies. It is very important to have an appeal option, citizens and interest groups should have a mechanism which exists in the current law but is insufficient. They should have an opportunity to appeal the process violation. The processes of public consultation are very often violated. There should be a platform for citizens to make an appeal and someone to respond legally.

The last and very important thing is that the members of the Parliament should have an interaction with the citizens, this interaction is usually low in Albania. In other countries it is much higher.

Regarding the recommendations we have and I will finish it. The recommendations that we have regarding the public consultation, we think that there should be a clear mechanism for the operation and enforcement of the law. There must be certain time limits for consultations and there must be an institution, we think that it could be several institutions, but it could also be an institution like the Parliament that has the right to refuse to vote on a certain law whose public consultation deadlines have been violated. After all, the law on public consultation presupposes this. We think it is very important that not only the laws that go for consultation in the Parliament but also the big changes that are essential that are taken by the Executive or the Council of Ministers should be put for public consultation. Because often these kinds of changes are just as important.

## What role for civil society in the future of e-democracy?

**Mr. Imants Breidaks**, *Chief Executive Officer, ManaBalss.lv*

I represent a nongovernmental organization, a civil society organization called ManaBalss or “My Voice”. We are 11 years old and our flagship project is citizen initiative platform called Manabalss.lv or My Voice. So, the system is quite straightforward we gather citizen’s idea, we do quality control, we help them gather signatures and it goes to the parliament and with very good results. Over the years that we work we exist, we have expanded the thing that we do and now citizen legislation initiatives is no longer the only thing that we do. Here is the list of other things: I am just briefly mentioning them and will briefly tell few words about each.

But basically, we clearly understand that creating ideas and pushing them through legislation is not the only way how citizens want to interact with politics, with parties and with the parliament. That’s why we have been expanding. so, basically few words about our flagship project, we have 56 change laws out of 90 that have received a final verdict, a final vote in the parliament. As far as we know that’s the highest success rate in the world because so 56 out of 9, that’s around 60% success rate around a bit less than 30% of population are our users. We use only strong signatures. There is no email voting or SMS voting. These are real people. We use digital banks as the main; however, we also have digital signatures. But signing through your digital bank is far more popular actually still. But you can easily sign everything in our systems also through digital signatures. So, 56 change laws and the fiscal impact on the national budget is actually in the amounts of hundreds of millions of Euros.

There are changed laws about cancer treatment that’s immediately several millions. C-hepatitis, property tax as well. We influence that as well that immediately impacted hundreds of millions of Euros in the budget. But the thing is that when we receive citizens’ ideas for a new law, we do quality control. We don’t publish everything that we receive. Our filtering system is according to political scientists unique in the world. We publish around 30% of what we receive. At, the same time, we do stay neutral and you can easily find liberal ideas on our platform, conservative ideas on our platform. You can even find kind of, let’s say, thing that slightly not reduce the democracy, but let’s say we will never permit harming the democracy, but we do permit kind of expanding the borders, and we are definitely pro democratic initiatives that want to improve the democracy. But basically, for example changing anthem of flat wheel, sure go for it, that doesn’t harm democracy, changing capital, sure you can try, but we will never, of course publish ideas about a president for life, for example. That’s not through our systems. Thank you but no, thank you. So, we are restrictive but at the same time, our system heavily helps the initiative that do get published to become a law because the government clearly has commented that basically, yeah, it could be painful to implement the new idea that citizens have published but it’s realistic, thanks to our work.

So we have successfully built the ecosystem of trust between the media, between citizens, between the Parliaments, between the political parties. And the media knows that they can easily republish what we have published because well we have done the quality control. It’s not some absurd and silly ideas. For example, we will not publish idea which is against core principals of Latin Constitution which is unrealistic, which is not feasible, which cannot be done. For example, there was a proposal that Latin army should develop nuclear weapons. We asked the author, well, can you prove to us that is economically feasible? Can you prove it is realistic? The author couldn’t do it and sorry but the idea is not published. So yes we are rarely but sometimes criticized for being censors. However, democracy is not anarchy. Democracy has rules. There are limits. And so, yeah, that’s life. And at the same time we do publish ideas which are uncomfortable or that we disagree with. But, if they are within the rules which are public rules everybody can check the rules and they don’t change. They are fixed. Then yes, the idea of course will be published. So, basically we are also financially self-sustainable approximately 3-4% of population and micro donors. And the Parliament has directly told that that’s one of the reasons why the system works because we can’t be financially influenced because we depend on the public. So the most popular donation is 0.5 Euros. But the average donation is two point something. So this is not huge money. These are not oligarchs coming and donating Euros to us. This is really the public. This is the average citizen.

And again a small nuance is that we don't work just for the civil society, because civil society is just an active but minor part of the society. We far more care for those who are not active. Who are just watching television and doing nothing. We care for those people because they hold the majority of the political power in the country.

However, of course, civil society is very active as well and they come with their citizens initiatives and they are good at working with the parliaments and parliament when the idea goes into the parliament. And also important is out of 56 citizen initiatives that have become a law including one on the constitutional level. Half of them actually were proactively taken by the parliament. We didn't send a file, data, or anything to them in half of those cases.

The parliament knows very well the name of our website and they are going there basically every day and the interesting stuff that they find interesting they take themselves and we haven't submitted anything. So the trust is absolutely there. And the reason why they are doing it well they see something is popular and they want the support from the public for their parties. So, it's good to proactively engage with the public because that creates or improves your political capital. In more than 20 changed laws, we haven't submitted anything. We just are up keeping and maintaining the platform where all this happens.

One more thing that we are doing, one more project which also correlates very closely with the work of the parliament is open to the voting system. Now already it is well established around now and probably some 2% of the population are users but basically, the system is, every week there is something new in the parliament. There are some legislation projects being discussed and what we are doing is putting it to a public vote. We are simplifying the language. We are not putting 50 pages of legal text to a public vote. We are simplifying with the journalists and the media companies, media agencies and we are putting just one paragraph, just core idea of the law, and we are putting it to a public vote. And well this tool so far has had just one probable impact on actual legislation. However, the informative impact has been far wider. So, basically, people vote before the parliament votes on the legislation.

So there is consultancy happening in the process and that means that the public is far better actually informed about well what is right now happening in the parliament and of course we as the organization, we get criticized by the public. Why are you putting the public votes on such unimportant topics we are like but this is your parliament, this is topic for the parliament. This is legislation, this week from your parliament. We didn't invent it, your parliament did. Why are you publishing absolutely unimportant stuff? Yeah guys, this is your parliament. Sorry guys. Just because it is not important to you doesn't mean that it not important to some other citizens? So again, be respectful do one another.

Two weeks ago, we had elections in Latvia and what we did, was also adapting this tool, to the elections, so that you vote for the legislation, and the votes are compared with the deputy candidates and you can compare how you voted on legislation with the parliament. So, basically a kind of political tinder. We invited all 1800 or 1700 candidates from all political parties to participate and so you can participate up to a percentage, it turns out that based on work rather than promises I should be voting for these guys. So what political calculators usually do? They gather data based on promises, rather than legislation. And we are gathering on legislation. So your vote on legislation versus politicians votes on legislation. And that's far more precise because while in party program, you can promise a lot of thing. It doesn't mean that they will happen. But legislation where the position actually already voted on piece of legislation and it is approvable vote. You can compare the date far more precisely. 50.000 people participated in this pre-election tool in Latin elections. One more system that we have built is National Dialogues and what we did is we provided to the government a service for a dialogue for European Future. CSL-s were very active there.

And also open government partnership fifth national action plan was co-developed partly digitally. Thanks to our national dialogues software.

One more tool really briefly, improving digital democracy not just the national scale but also internally in organizations, including parliament actually. We discussed with the parliament how decision maker system could be a voting tool, could be used by the parliament during Covid when we were all lockdown and all the limitations being used for conferences where board meeting and voting and new board elections must happen, including political parties are using it because well distanced voting secure voting is crucial nowadays.

**Ms. Ina Zhupa, Member of Parliament**

I am an MP, part of the Transparency and Digitization Commission in the Parliament of Albania. A body that was specially created to make possible the transparency of the decision-making processes of the Assembly, but also the involvement of citizens in these processes. Because they are two things that seem to be the same, but in fact, they are two processes that have completely different obligations. I also use it as a metaphor, one process is that you watch Big Brother from the outside and be the person who follows him constantly, so you have a kind of transparency that you see him 24 hours a day and know what happens and another thing is to be an actor and be influenced by what happens in there and have your voice in what happens in there. That's how it is and the process of the Assembly is another thing for you to have the opportunity to see what the MPs are discussing in the Commission, to listen to the whole process, to hear all the Pros and Cons and it's another thing to be in the Commission to speak and be heard your voice, be it you in the plenary session or be it your petition. These are two processes that are both necessary but have different mechanisms to be realized.

As a deputy, I have actually noticed that the Regulation of the Assembly of Albania, just as they create the opportunity to bring the voice, also create obstacles to bring the process to the end. I will take you to some specific cases related to the MP himself.

As a member of parliament, I undertake a legal initiative and my basic function is precisely to make laws, there is no article of the Regulation of the Assembly of Albania that sets this thing in a deadline and sets this thing as a priority. So when I ask for changes in this draft law, I can go on for 4 years without entering the parliamentary agenda at all. The fact that I am a member of parliament and have that function is one of my duties. So the Regulation of the Assembly and I have launched a legislative initiative to change the Regulation of the Assembly and if some points, but I am sharing this point with you. When the rules of the Assembly create this deadlock for the deputy himself, imagine how big a deadlock is created for a legislative initiative that comes from the citizens. Even if it has the chance to be included in the agenda of the Parliament's calendar, it can go to what we call the Greek Calendar, it can go for years that is not discussed and may have lost the importance for which it was proposed. legal, even the moment.

Because the changes are so big, be it technological, be it international relations, or in this particular case a war, etc. that makes things change very quickly, and if we don't have the decision-making process so fast and with defined deadlines, then it's useless to talk for listening to the voice of the citizens. I started with the decision-making part, i.e. the legislation, because for me the final product is more important at the end of the day and to measure what it brings because I really want to say and the positive part, there are some positive steps regarding listening to the voice of the citizens. Parliamentary Institute and maybe Mr. Gjevori will speak for himself, this institute has brought a very good practice of young people to the life of the Parliament. To recognize Parliamentarism, as the "parliament" of students to bring their problems, to listen to these problems, and to reflect. The Albanian Helsinki Committee has brought several petitions to the Assembly in the framework of the PACEP project and they are very good. NDI has very good projects that have brought young people and citizens together inside the doors of the parliament, inside the session of the parliament, and in the Friends of Children group. IDM is also making very good strides, but as far as I can count it means we don't have a massification of this kind of practice and we don't have an ease of this kind of communication.

I liked what Mrs. Skendaj said we will have the opportunity to bring a petition for petitions. Because of the very steps that are followed for passing a petition and making it effective, hearing the petition in Commissions is very important to me. I will give you a concrete case. We have three petitions that we will examine next week that came from the Albanian Helsinki Committee in cooperation with several high schools in Fier, Shkodër, and, if I'm not mistaken, Tirana. What happens I see on

the agenda of the Parliament: to consider the petition. And in fact, I write to AHC myself and tell him, will the young people come? No, the petitions will be examined without the participation of those who made the petitions. Those who can explain better what they wanted to say. Who is the problem of what they want to change?

And for me, this is not good practice and I was surprised, I did not know that it was so, that we discussed them by reading the letter they brought but without inviting those who actually listened, asked, and interacted with them. That this is the idea to make the Parliament real that responds to the demands of the citizens. And in this aspect, I think there is a lot to do.

Even the Secretariat where I am a part. It is understood that I am a minority in the Secretariat, which consists of 3 MPs, 2 are representatives of the majority and I am a representative of the opposition. It is not my saying the right to vote that changes the situation. But so far the initiatives that we have taken have actually been initiatives that have a certain consensus and due to the fact that we all agree that we need to increase the level of transparency and inclusiveness. Where the problem arises is when the concrete issue comes. And when the concrete issue affects the decision-making of the government or affects the decision-making of the majority, then the mechanisms are introduced to postpone it as much as possible, not to approve it or to create some obstacles. I believe that later Mr. Sharka will also clarify a very important element that they brought a law to the Parliament which mysteriously and why it was very good was voted against.

So these are elements that need to be improved in my opinion to make the Parliament not just transparent in the sense that we can see what happens there, but to make it possible for what happens there to be a co-participant and to have the possibility that our voice is not only to be heard but to produce an important parliamentary product for changing our lives. I undertake in my parliamentary life to do everything possible and to address every demand that civil society has even in legal initiatives without the need for you to collect 20,000 signatures but it will be my MP's signature to address that bill that you would like to bring to the Assembly, as in the last case, I have again submitted an initiative of the 'Abdulla Keta' High School for some changes to the law on volunteerism, and I will do everything possible so that they themselves can come there, defend it in the Commission and I advocate until the end that this thing becomes a reality.

## What went wrong? – The case of amending the law on VAT and law on agriculture

**Mr. Eduart Sharka, representative of the Farmers Union**

Even as a result of this test that we did, that we took an initiative to change the law, we came to the conclusion that today the only way to change the laws is political decision-making and it is difficult through other links. We are a typical example where a large interest group needed the will of the legislator. In the face of several problems, agriculture accounts for 20% of GDP, a large group that occupies almost 40% of the population. Occurred 3 years ago in the face of several crises, such as phenomena that often occur in agriculture. We encountered some legal shortcomings. We produced by organizing and even organized as a Trade Union because we saw that the problems were very strong and the Trade Union and trade union action was more appropriate to confront the problem. We articulated them, we sent them to the government, the relevant ministries, but we could not find a solution, we also held protests which you have seen in Lushnja and Tirana. At the time of the pandemic, we fortunately participated in a seminar and I want to thank the Albanian Committee of Helsinki and the IDM who created the opportunity for us with their expertise and gave us the initiative to turn to the legislator, to impose the will of the legislator.

What did we find? The problem that we had in the law on agriculture were dealt with in an explicit manner, it was not left to the will of the Government of the Prime Minister or the will of the Minister of Agriculture, for example for subsidy schemes in agriculture. There, everything was written in the law and the Government had to change the law to change a scheme. They were forced to implement those subsidy schemes. In our case, the opposite happens, in our case it is up to the will of the next Minister of Agriculture to implement different schemes.

We had objections to the schemes and they are actually discriminatory. I'll give you an example: a winning farmer in the scheme is determined by the time of application. In the scheme for livestock, 6000 farmers applied and met the criteria, but they said it was enough for only 3000 and the 3001st farmer was told that you do not benefit because you applied 5 minutes late than the 3000th farmer. We find this discriminatory, we do not find it anywhere in the region and Europe, and we proposed legal amendments. We said: the scheme should be 5 years old, studied and covered with relevant funds so that all farmers who apply and meet the criteria will benefit within that year. For the Law on Agriculture of Macedonia, it was written that if there are more requests and this budget is not enough in the next budget, the fund would cover these farmers who are not covered in this year's scheme. We took this as it was in the Law on Agriculture of Macedonia, I remind you that the law on agriculture for Albania was approved in 2007 and the level of agriculture in 2007 to 2021 where we proposed the legal initiative has changed with big steps. While the law was never amended. This also shows the lack of interest in this sector.

We had two options: to collect 20,000 signatures and submit the bill to Parliament or to lobby. In the inability to realize the first way of obtaining signatures, we found the way of irrigation with IDM with the MP. We tried to find a member of parliament who could provide us with some kind of consensus and we turned to the agrarian party whose representative was a member of parliament and could provide us with consensus. What we found: 1-even the legislative technique, we got expertise from within the Government, but when we received the relationship from the Government with the Commission that examines the draft law, they were also taken with the commas, with the legislative technique. My conclusion at least is that the arrogance of the government that we are mandated by the citizens to make laws. In no way could they accept in their conviction that an interest group or a single MP or even an opposition MP would propose a draft law and they had also requested a comma in the legislative technique. 2- secondly, we found that our MP does not have political integrity. What do I mean by that? Being the way they are chosen through the party list, they cannot get out of line because in the Productive Works Commission, not a single argument was opposed by the arguments that we had presented in support of the amendments that we had presented. All accepted but the argument was that the Ministry of Agriculture in 2022 is drafting the Strategy for Agriculture 2021-2027 and at the moment it will make the Strategy we will incorporate these amendments which are very good and we will also change the law on Agriculture.

This was the failure we had and this was our experience. My personal conclusion was political integrity because we asked for it very sincerely, after we formulated it, made a protest and demanded that with the will of the legislator we impose on the Government to change these schemes and we had no argument against. Then in the parliament they voted against and the law did not pass, and in case there are representatives of the Parliament here, I wanted to raise another problem. That we made 2 amendments to the VAT and Agriculture law. The VAT law was forgotten, we were informed that it would be examined in the Commissions and it came out of the Parliament's agenda. Because there is only one amendment, it is highly argued, it is a fiscal range that happened at least fiscally, it violates the VAT Law. Violating the VAT law disrupts fair competition and violates the Constitution of Albania. It is very blatant, we have tried to contact the IMF and other international organizations, but they fail to understand because VAT is a tax on consumption and has nothing to do with business, while the way it works is something special and we have not been able to find feedback from them.

The Institute is a new structure in the Assembly that came as a result of an internal restructuring of the Directorates of the Assembly of Albania and has several tasks. In the context of civic participation, I will talk more about civic education, but one of the main things that we do in the Directorate of Research and Analysis is that we prepare research products for MPs in order to enable and facilitate informed decision-making. In the evidence and in this framework we have two main tasks: MPs can ask us specific requests, specific questions, we have this draft law, give us a comparative analysis and we do it without ever giving solution options or opinions. We are not in that field, the decision-makers are the MPs who are elected. The main task we are structuring during these months is to enable the debate to take place on the basis of some data co-accepted by the parties. So let it not be a debate whether it is 2 or 3, but if we give data which with time becomes reliable, that 3, let's say it should be debated from the political point of view of everyone who is a legitimate part of political representation. So we do this, but by analyzing the legislative program that comes at the beginning of each year and the legislative agenda, we also make proactive documents, when the MPs do not ask us, but we see that it is an important topic, we do something.

Just two or three days ago, Mrs. Zhupa, we submitted three large research documents that we did on the lustration process, on referendums as it is a legal initiative in the Assembly, and on the voting of non-resident citizens in political elections. We provide these works and then it is the MPs who process them and use them depending on the interest, the topic they cover, and the responsible Committee where they are because many things are divided through the Committees. This is the heart of the work we do. And this is what we are building over the weeks and months.

Meanwhile, the least tiring, but most difficult and beautiful part is the part of civic education that we are raising. Which is within the framework of increasing transparency and accessibility in the Assembly with the idea of trying to create citizens who have the knowledge, then awareness, and then activation in the Assembly. It is something very difficult to do that requires generations and the main work belongs to the education system. We do not pretend that we will replace the education system, but we are structuring some of them, we have piloted them and we will do them next year and more massively. A series of activities for different youth age groups but not only youth because we want to include all age groups in the Assembly. We have a lot of cooperation and I wanted to say that from the beginning. The work of the Institute is quite challenging because it is something that has been put into service this year, but I have a tremendous advantage as the head of the Institute because I have support through the PACEP project. There are few directors in Albania who have this support. The support is great and we have the next four years to implement a number of interesting initiatives in terms of civic education.

An initiative that we piloted and next year will be implemented in a massive way we call games these are the game my point of view where was and Mrs. Zhupa, where we piloted it with three high schools in Tirana, where we made a mock Parliament. The high school students received a draft law and decided what draft law they wanted to make, they were divided into different groups at school and they came one day to the Assembly and imitated the legislative process in the Commission to show that the main law-making work was actually in the Commission. And in every link of the process there was a member of parliament who explained how the procedure was done and then it was finalized in the Plenary session hall where the different high schools debated and in the end it was voted which draft law would win. The issue was not which bill would win regardless, but the bottom line was that everyone wants to win. The point was for the students to understand how the law is made. What are the links to what Mr. Sharka because in the Commission it is the main work where it is done and the more they understand this, the more aware they will be tomorrow when they have a business interest, when they have an ideological interest to know where to intervene. To know where to put their voice, this is what we piloted. We did it according to the model of the Swiss Parliament, which turned out to be quite successful.

Meanwhile, in cooperation with the Austrian Parliament, we are continuing the work to start another project in January called the Democracy Workshop. This is more focused on primary school and year nine students. In Austria, they have 15 years of experience with this and we have gone and seen that the call for NGOs has been opened, which I will implement and help us in the implementation phase. We will do it 2 to 3 times a week at the beginning of the project until we adapt, but the idea is that every day groups of 20 to 25 children come to the Parliament of Albania and do a workshop on a topic they choose with trained teachers specifically for different age groups and at the end of this workshop they make a media product. At first, we will make a small newspaper, we will do it ourselves there because we have the printing press that I will make there, but they can also make another product that can be a podcast but recorded with their voices of what they want from MPs. All these products are released online and once a month we will make them available to the MPs in their Committee room once a month at each Commission meeting we will tell them what primary school students think this month about this topic. This does two things: 1- it brings them to the Assembly and makes them learn about the Assembly, and 2- just as importantly, it presents the legislators and decision-makers with a point of view that is not easy for them to take. And both of these things, especially next year, we will try to do a lot with schools outside Tirana. Because there is the greatest impact, there is the greatest need and there is the greatest hunger.

We also have several other instruments that are online on the website of the Assembly, but with the new website of the Assembly, there will be a link at the entrance of the page specifically dedicated to civic education, that all these instruments that we have and I mentioned them to be there. Any school that would like to participate in My Perspective or the Democracy Workshop fills out the registration form, we find the date when it is open, and work immediately begins for them to be participants, so it is not necessary to know my number, nor to know someone in the Assembly. He enters, clicks, and fills in three very simple lines and we follow the procedure. There will be other elements here, for example, we have a parliament quiz in the palm of your hand, you enter there and there are 100 or so questions for the Assembly, so it is also like an educational instrument that can be used in the classroom, but also a way to connect the young man with the Assembly. The questions are of different levels, I answered a couple of them wrongly, but the essence is to attract the children to the Assembly to make it interactive.

We also have a virtual tour, which was always developed in cooperation with PACEP, especially during the period when the Assembly was closed. the doors of the Assembly were closed but another window was offered for people to look at. We have resumed physical tours online again, schools or citizens can register and offer tours. But the tours are changing a little this period, trying to make thematic tours. For example, for November we have dedicated it to Independence, so every Friday we will have thematic tours that will be held in collaboration with professors, and well-known lecturers who explain certain issues of Independence and these are for different age groups for high schools higher level and for 9-year-olds with slightly simpler levels. All this panorama that I gave him is that of course there are a number of technical elements of citizen participation, those who want to make petitions, those who want to bring bills, and those who want to listen. This part that my Institute covers is not in the framework of this technical element. But it is within the framework of creating the conditions of the current generations that when they are ready or when they need to do all these things that are important for citizen participation, they have been once in the Assembly, for example. Let them know that there are normal people there, that the MPs are normal people, and that the administration is normal.

They have taught you 2-3 internal things and then it leaves that effect and gives you the opportunity to know that it is not so hermetic. We are aware that this takes time because it was what was being discussed in the first panel, the culture of participation and the culture of the administration to be closer. One of the best things that will happen to us in the coming months is that the corridors of the Assembly will be buzzing with children of different ages who will make noise and maybe enter the wrong room, but the whole dynamic will change.

When we did it with Mrs. Zhupa, especially in the Committee where 90 high school students came to the building at the same time, the management was not easy but it was a kind of super positive energy and all the other deputies who did not know but passed by in the corridor were happy to find out what was happening.

And to close all these activities we do in cooperation with the MP. So there won't be any educational activity that we do where there won't be a deputy. Because it is a link for young men and women to look at the MP in a different perspective and to create a bond between them.

### Media reporting of parliamentary activity

**Ms. Kristina Voko**, Executive director of BIRN Albania

In fact, the position I have is a bit difficult because I am asked to see all this topic only from the role of the media, but in fact it is very difficult because often for the first time we are also part of civil society, but the media often encounters the same difficulties as all citizens and all other interest groups for access to information. And especially here when it comes to laws that directly affect the media situation. For example, one of the discussions that we had for the longest time, and to be honest, all journalists and journalists' associations and international human rights organizations felt completely small and insufficient and unheard was precisely the unanimous opposition to the draft laws against the anti-defamation package in which our voice, despite the fact that hearings were held in the Parliamentary Committee, was not heard, was not taken into account. And of course that law was first approved by the Parliament without any change, then it was returned by the President and now we have what we consider to be the opinion of the internationals who often step us much more than the very negative opinion of the Venice Commission. I will say one more thing, apart from the difficulty, there was not simply the difficulty of listening to the voice as an important interest group, but it was also facing a question that we faced within the Commission, I think all the representatives of the groups others, especially vulnerable groups, when faced with that question and told us: You don't agree with the law, we didn't agree with the purpose of the draft law.

But you are not giving us any concrete suggestion which Article is Anti-Constitutional or goes against EU directives. And as long as you do not have concrete proposals for specific Articles but are generally against this draft law, then you are not worthy of having your opinion taken. So it was considered that all that very long war and don't forget we also had the media behind because it was the media itself that was lobbying. Consultations or suggestions were not taken into account and were not introduced as a process precisely because it was claimed that we did not have concrete proposals as to whether Article 13 should remove this term and replace it with this term. And here I thought of all the difficulties that all other groups have. I took this only as an example and I don't want to speak in fact only for our group for the media in this case and journalists because since we are giving a lot of advice often about what parliamentarians should do, I thought we should do the same. thing.

Here, while we are talking about suggestions, let's reflect on some issues that were raised before. It is a very long list that came to my mind, but I will think of some that are priorities for me as next steps. 1- one of my main concerns is hyper digitization. We think that since things are online, since they are put on that page for public consultation, then the obligation of either those who propose a law, which are often the line ministries, or those who decide, discuss and vote on it is exhausted. No, and especially when we are dealing with groups that directly affect the interests of vulnerable groups. So something can be on the page, but it is your duty to encourage and get the opinion of those directly affected by that law. And in this case, I interpreted and translated the gentleman's concern in this way. So when it comes to legal initiatives for the hydropower plant, the deputies must make sure that they first invite, listen and take into account all the suggestions that come from the community that is directly affected.

A second element that is also related to digitalization, but I think it is very important, is the part of respecting the public consultation, but perhaps seen from a different perspective. The Assembly does not only have the obligation to carry out the procedures provided for in its Regulatory framework regarding the consultation of legal initiatives that are discussed and passed by the Parliament.

They must be responsible and ensure that every legal initiative that comes to you from the line ministries or from the office of the Prime Minister has respected all the steps of public consultation. I have never seen this element raised by the Assembly. Why should I accept an initiative and especially with the pressure I have to pass and to respect the procedures often and many laws are necessary, I agree with Ms. Zhupa said the procedures should be accelerated, but they should make sure that if we receive a law that affects agriculture or farmers, the Ministry that brought it there has completed all the procedures and is part of the Resolution. The consultation is not only what happened in the consultation, but also if the stakeholders were part of the drafting in all the steps, the same thing happened with the media law in this case as we are talking, the same thing happened in the registration of the company civilians, so they all went to the Parliament and no one turned them back. I see this as a fair suggestion.

The same with regard to the Resolutions for independent institutions. We know that the hearings are held at the end of each year of the annual reports regarding a long list of independent consultation institutions and transparency should be two points that should not be missing in any case either from the presentation of the annual reports or from the resolutions of parliament and the requirement of responsibility for the recommendations given for the following year. We have seen this element missing. There have been concerns especially in recent years regarding the new institutions of justice, there has never been a request for an account of what happened, why are these constant concerns, what have you done to address them, have the media been consulted about the new strategy of the relationship with the media from the new justice institutions and so on.

There is a deadlock even when I look at the presentations, especially of projects from other countries, I have seen, for example, the extraordinary presentation of an organization in Germany in terms of monitoring the parliament, the previous presentation was completely inspiring, I am convinced that it will be the presentation after the arrival. They have a common element, they hold the deputies responsible. In our country, just as we often talk about a total lack of internal democracy of parties, we also talk about a lack of internal democracy of parliamentary groups. What does that mean that the % that the gentleman introduced to us before who said how they voted would not be necessary at all in Albania, I assure you that it would be black and white or the SP voted all in one direction, the DP all in us one direction. What this means is that in the discussions and when the journalist goes to get opinions, none of the MPs see their individual role as elected and take responsibility for their personal rights for that vote. But this is how the party decided. No, members of parliament represent and should be much more accountable to citizens before the party. The initiative is not voted because it was brought by the party, your vote in the parliament should not be justified because of party instructions.

There are many problems and most of them are directly related to the way we are not attached to our constituencies due to closed lists. Perhaps we should look at how other aspects of the internal democracy of the parties would in fact directly reflect a greater transparency and accountability within the Assembly. Thank you.

Take that quiz and for the deputies, especially the young ones, if they do not pass 90%, they should not take that seat.

Parliament is undoubtedly the guardian of democracy, the guardian of the rights and interests of citizens. It is the amplifier that carries the often-diverse voices and concerns of ordinary people all the way to the top of the decision-making pyramid. Of equal if not greater importance is its role as the guarantor of democratic equilibrium within a given political system. In other words, its oversight over the executive branch is in essence the only institutional means through which citizens can exert control over government. Parliament is what makes democracy work!

This was obviously an over romanticized and embellished description, a phantasy if you like of what Parliament should be. The reality unfortunately can sometimes be very far from this idyllic picture. In fact, if we look closer we often encounter cases where parliaments do not really legislate but just ratify, where MPs prioritize the interests of the party (or big business) over the ones of their constituents, where adherence to the party line is more important than the free will of MPs. Parliaments whose political make up or constitution impedes them from really differentiating themselves from the executive and hence jeopardize the separation of powers thus weakening considerably their role as an oversight body. Parliaments that are inflexible to change, technophobic, averse to openness, inclusion and weary of cooperation with civil society. Parliaments that are strangers to transparency, accountability and integrity. For parliament therefore to have a truly impactful role as an oversight and legislative institution representative of its citizens, and for it to gain the necessary legitimacy and recognition both from the people and other institutions to carry forward its crucial work... it firstly needs to create the right conditions for gaining trust. After all. How can an institution be trusted to perform oversight when the institution itself is not trustworthy?

Transparency – accountability and openness are therefore fundamental towards gaining the legitimacy and trust of citizens which will then most likely lead to meaningful public engagement. So in other words, transparency, accountability and openness foster the public's trust in parliaments as institutions. And this trust is the very foundation upon which a culture of impactful public engagement can be built.

This is exactly where Parliamentary monitoring organisations such as VouliWatch might come in handy. I'm going to briefly present you now with Vouliwatch's work in Greece which is centered around restoring legitimacy of parliament, increasing its transparency and openness standards and facilitating citizen engagement and participation. We want to save parliament even if parliament doesn't really want to and here is how we do it:

Vouliwatch focuses its work around:

- bridging the gap between citizens and politicians by creating innovative and transparent channels of communication between the two via the organization's web platform.
- restoring the legitimacy of Parliament by monitoring and highlighting its work and pushing for improvements in the legislative process as well as in its transparency culture.
- increasing citizen participation by providing the latter with all necessary tools to adequately monitor parliamentary activity as well as communicate their ideas, proposals and concerns to their elected representatives.
- Registering all legislation and votes that go through parliament + presenting them in a way so that the average citizen can actually comprehend them.
- fostering transparency and accountability by campaigning for the advancement of open parliament agenda, transparency in the financial interest statements of MPs and political parties as well as in the decision-making processes.

## Closing Remarks

**Mr. Gjergji Vurmo**

*Program Director, IDM*

All the experiences, not only the presentation of Vouliwatch, but also the presentation of the colleague from ManaBals earlier, in the briefings we did with both organizations in advance, we were told because it was a concern that we do not know the Albanian context very well, what are the challenges and we were asked in fact, we warned them in a way that the reason why we invite them is that we want to get the experiences to look towards the future. What is our future is really their present. It was a very interesting and very inspiring set of presentations for us as civil society actors, but I believe for other actors with the participation of the Assembly. Also, the experiences brought by the other panelists and the recommendations that were given either by civil society actors, IDM and the Helsinki Committee, the experience is also brought by other interest groups such as Eduardi or earlier Enio Jaço, don't forget definitely BIRN as a perspective and of the media regarding the interactions we have with the Assembly. Of course, the other presentations from members of the Assembly as well as from the newest institution that I believe will be an ally of ours, of civil society, I'm talking about the Parliamentary Institute is still in its first steps. I know in detail the experience of other parliamentary institutes and in the region and I know what difference and what potential they have to make a difference. So it's going to be a journey I believe that we hope to walk together and I'm sure we'll be more or less on the same side of the table in our attempts to get involved and encourage others to get involved in the parliamentary activity.

Thank you Ana, of course, and a thank you from the IDM side, without a doubt, it has been a very intense two-year period and the IDM has always been engaged in various parliamentary processes, but this project gave us the opportunity for a kind of comeback, as Sotiraqi said. to work closer and with concrete issues with actors of the Assembly but also more widely. A thank you to all the participants today is the final conference of the project and I see faces that I have seen for the first time in those regional workshops that we did that were online and I am very happy that we managed to keep anchored all these representatives who are not only representatives of organizations but also individuals and I hope that this project will be a kind of comeback for them in anchoring with the activities of the Assembly. One last thing I want to say because I'm worried about it, I discussed it with Mrs. Tahiri and I am very happy that we managed to have him as the main speaker, since most of us here, as I see, are civil society actors, one of the interesting things we wanted to do for this final conference was not only to bring different experiences from different countries developed but also experiences from countries very close to the region and experiences which we did not know or are not sufficiently aware of from Kosovo itself. Albania often refers to Kosovo as the Mother State, but there are several issues, several areas, and among them I would definitely say civic engagement, where we have a lot to learn from Kosovo, and at least for this area, Kosovo is the Mother State from which we should we receive and must learn. I am very happy that we succeeded in this activity and within the framework of a project that we have recently started, SMART Balkans notices in fact very frequent contacts with Kosovo organizations that are much higher than us on many issues and we must turn our eyes to to get, if not concrete ideas, at least to get more inspiration from Kosovo.

**Ms. Ana Kovacevic**

*Senior Resident Director, NDI Albania*

Dear partners, dear colleagues, dear friends -- What a wonderful way to close the working week and bring to a close a joint two-year-long journey of the National Democratic Institute -- in partnership with the Institute for Democracy and Mediation and Albanian Helsinki Committee -- on one hand, and Parliament, on the other hand, to bring citizens closer to Parliament through the Support to Parliament and Civic Education Project generously supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. Thank you for your readiness to take that extra mile essential for advancing ways to make democracy deliver and shouting out that every single step to that end is worthwhile and necessary today more than yesterday and more than ever.

And all of it in an effort to motivate citizens to engage more actively in parliamentary decision-making, and encourage parliament to meet them where they are, and as they do so, to aim to be more open, accessible, inclusive, and responsive today, more than yesterday, tomorrow, more than today. Thank partners from IDM, Gjegji, Besa and others Thank Erida and the AHC team for your commitment, professionalism & perseverance; thanks to parliamentary leadership Madam Deputy Speaker for her genuine and inspiring opening remarks but also for her steady support of this project by being a great listener and excellent partner, honorable members of Parliament, Secretary General, colleagues from the parliamentary committee and information and documentation It feels good to be a proud and trusted partner of yours. Thanks to the Swiss Agency for Cooperation and Development for the trust and support.

Attending the public hearings organized by IDM with citizens, civil society and interest groups, and elected representatives and representatives of state institutions over the past two weeks on themes raised and conceived in diverse communities across Albania, including Roma communities that seek better access to education, people with disabilities, their parents or guardians who seek for access to quality social and health care, rural women entrepreneurs who struggle to access financial mechanisms to raise and grow their businesses as they don't have right to property title, or environmental advocates who demand timely and thorough consultations with communities regarding the quarrying activities that risk environmental and public health if conducted in an ad-hoc-ish & extra-legal ways. And their wants and needs are evident. What they want are governments and institutions that are more responsive, more transparent and accountable, more inclusive, and act in the public interest. It is also evident that they come armed with a variety of proposals to the issues they care about that when deliberated with elected representatives, as they did, solutions are at their fingertips.

The same experience was with meet-ups between the high school students and elected representatives. Seven petitions and one legal initiative and all of these presented before committee members. Thanks to the parliamentary group Friends of Children for being a committed partner in these efforts Democracy is about deliberation, and deliberation is a core element of democracy, particularly when it comes from the bottom up, from the citizens and civil society organizations supporting and mobilizing citizens to have their voice heard before the decision-makers. This conference has been abt the exchange of experience. Sharing experiences means sharing successes and failures so lessons may be learned. By observing the successful experiences of other democracies we may be inspired in turn to find ways to regenerate our own. Thank you Madam Tahiri, colleagues from Greece and Latvia for sharing your stories, it has certainly been refreshing and motivating. Also, hearing about intensive parliamentary monitoring activities in Greece and Latvia, are a kind reminder that democracy is not easy, that it is a forever a work in progress, and while it has to be locally grown and nurtured it benefits from international solidarity and support, even if manifested through these deliberations, as the one today.

This project has confirmed multiple times in multiple forms that Active Citizenry and Responsive Institutions which we as NDI promote globally and in Albania through work such as the one today I'd like to close with the same message with that we at NDI had greeted meetings with citizens and civic groups organized by IDM and AHC when we started with this project. Only through dialogue, wanting to listen to each other, and acknowledging the concerns that each side is raising as well as contributions from each side, we could make a lasting impact on the quality of Albanian democracy and, in turn, contribute to closing this gap between parliament and citizens. We at NDI, remain a humble and proud partner of yours committed to standing by you to support these processes.

## Regional Consultative Meetings (Mini-publics): Comprehensive parliamentary engagement

During four regional consultative meetings, in preparation for the national closing conference, it was discussed with about sixty representatives of civil society and active citizens the challenges and priorities for the engagement of citizens and interest groups in parliamentary processes. To precede the closing conference of the project, these regional meetings focused on the most efficient possibilities and mechanisms for promoting citizen participation in the parliamentary activity and what can be improved in terms of increasing the interaction between parliament and citizens.

In this direction, the focus of the discussions was on the issue of youth awareness, the role of the media, and the challenges in engaging civil society organizations, interest groups, and the general public. As one of the participants in the consultative meeting in Shkodër said, "The PACEP project, through IDM and AHC, has provided a lot of information for young people and CSOs throughout the country, but there is a lot of work to be done in rural areas and in towards vulnerable groups."

**Raising awareness and informing young people** from all over the country in 9-year and secondary schools about the role and functions of the Assembly. Curricula in schools should be enriched and improved to include the recognition of institutions. Also, structures such as the National Youth Council and Local Youth Councils can serve to mobilize and inform young people about the mechanisms of participation in parliamentary processes. Encouraging the participation of young people and the general public in the open days of the Assembly and the public hearings of MPs in the areas through various forms of communication, including social media. On the part of the Assembly, the participants requested the transmission of simpler information on the legal initiatives that are discussed in the Assembly and that are relevant to the public.

Diversification of communication channels with the public is important for informing the public about the agenda of issues for discussion in the Assembly and parliamentary committees as well as the work of MPs.

### Engagement of citizens and interest groups

To a large extent, the participants in the consultative meetings underlined the need for the development of more public hearings with interest groups and citizens by the deputies in their constituencies. Also, the Assembly should play a more proactive role in the development of public hearings, without the need for the mediation of various local or international organizations, by providing a budget for public hearings.

The participants suggested that a system be created near the offices of the deputies in the districts for the channeling of the concerns sent by the citizens. Following issues/issues to the end is challenging for citizens and CSOs. For this, the problems received by the assembly can be followed up and interest groups informed about the measures taken or their progress through regular communication from the assembly. Local CSOs can hold more local meetings with the community and convey concerns to committees in the assembly. On the other hand, CSOs can focus on monitoring the implementation of MPs' commitments made during election campaigns.

Also, CSOs should be more proactive in informing MPs about their work and about good practices at all levels of government. The difficulties of CSOs in addressing problems in the Assembly, such as the lack of specialists in the field and budgets to engage them, the need for the mobilization of volunteers to raise awareness and inform the general public also through the development of media campaigns.

Networking of CSOs around common issues increases the pressure on MPs and can lead to citizens' initiatives being sent to the Assembly.

There is a need to inform the public and interest groups outside the capital about the public hearings on the activity of the parliamentary commissions, as there is a lack of knowledge of the procedures and mechanisms available to the Assembly for the participation of citizens. On the other hand, the participants expressed that the public hearings have little interest because the same things are said, it is never shown where that particular budget was taken and what was accomplished with it.

It is necessary to develop public consultations and hearings with local communities and deputies in the case of strategic investments in certain areas, such as the cases of the construction of ports,

airports, PPPs, etc. In this direction, local referendums on issues that concern certain communities should be enabled.

In general, the participants in the consultative meetings should not encourage the division of citizens on party grounds and should promote models of cross-party cooperation from the assembly and politics. In this regard, the media has a negative role in following the work of the assembly that focuses on debates of no interest to citizens.





The Institute for Democracy and Mediation – IDM is a non-governmental organization, founded in November 1999, which focuses on participatory governance and democratic institutions, EU accession, the development of civil society, regional cooperation, and security issues. We aim to consolidate developments in these fields through independent research, capacity building, and efficient interactions across a broad spectrum of actors in society.

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