ROOT WB

LOCAL DEMOCRACY LABS

Country Reports and Regional Synthesis

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LOCAL DEMOCRACY LABS

Country Reports and Regional Synthesis

Regional Ownership of Our Tomorrow: Citizens and Civil Society Growing EU Values in the Western Balkans

ROOT WB · Work Package 4 (WP4), Deliverable 4.1 (D4.1)

WP4 Lead: Local Democracy Agency Sisak (Croatia)

Project coordinator: LDA Mostar (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

November 2026

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INTRODUCTION

Regional Ownership of Our Tomorrow: Citizens and Civil Society Growing EU Values in the Western Balkans (ROOT WB) is a transnational project funded by the European Union under the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme, implemented from January 2026 to December 2027. The project brings together civil society organisations and partners from seven countries - Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, France, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia - with the aim of strengthening civic engagement, democratic participation and cooperation between citizens, civil society and public authorities. Through a combination of capacity building, participatory activities, regional exchange, policy dialogue, civic campaigns and advocacy, ROOT WB seeks to create stronger opportunities for citizens to contribute to democratic processes and to decisions that affect their communities, while promoting European democratic values, fundamental rights and inclusive governance.

Within this broader framework, Work Package 4 – Local Democracy Labs was designed to promote participatory democracy and active civic engagement at the local level, strengthen inclusive local governance, encourage collaboration and co-creation between communities and decision-makers, and generate community-driven insights and recommendations that can inform further regional dialogue and policy-related activities. Seven Local Democracy Labs were implemented in the project countries, bringing together citizens, civil society organisations, local and public authorities and other relevant stakeholders around concrete challenges connected to democratic participation, local governance and fundamental rights.

The Labs were developed within a common methodological framework that provided a shared participatory logic while allowing each partner to adapt the focus, format and participatory approach to the specific national and local context, the issue addressed and the participants involved. The common approach started from an evidence-based challenge, connected it to the relevant policy, governance or institutional context, and used participatory processes to generate findings, possible solutions and recommendations rooted in participants' experiences and perspectives. The findings of the **Assessment Reports on Civic Participation Trends and Barriers**, developed under Work Package 2 – Baseline Mapping & Needs Assessment, served as an important source of evidence and context, together with other relevant national and local sources and partners' knowledge of their respective environments.

The Local Democracy Labs also contributed to the project's commitment to promoting awareness of and alignment with the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. Rather than treating fundamental rights as a separate or purely formal topic, the Labs connected relevant rights and principles to the concrete challenges being explored in each context and to the way participation, inclusion, access to decision-making and institutional responsiveness are experienced in practice.

This publication documents the results of the seven Local Democracy Labs and makes the insights and recommendations generated through the participatory processes available beyond the individual events themselves. It is intended for civil society organisations and civic actors, local and public authorities, decision-makers, project partners and other stakeholders interested in participatory democracy, local governance and citizen engagement. The results are also intended to support further use within ROOT WB, including regional dialogue, advocacy, policy discussion and other project activities that build on community-generated evidence and recommendations.

The publication consists of seven country reports, each briefly presenting the relevant national and local context, the issue addressed through the Local Democracy Lab, the main findings emerging from the participatory process, and the solutions and recommendations developed by participants. These are followed by a Regional Synthesis, which brings together the results across the seven countries, highlights common and overlapping findings and recommendations, identifies context-specific insights worth retaining, and formulates regional policy recommendations based on the combined results of the Labs.

COUNTRY REPORT – ALBANIA

Implementing partner: Albanian Center for Education Care and Training (ACT Center)

Local Democracy Lab: From the Right to Participate to Real Influence in Local Decision-Making

Date: 13 November 2026

Location: Tirana

Country population: 2,402,113 residents, 2023 Population and Housing Census (INSTAT)

Population of the Municipality of Tirana: 598,176 residents, 2023 Population and Housing Census (INSTAT)

Local context and the issue addressed

Tirana brings municipal decision-makers, youth organisations and civic initiatives into close proximity. The municipality has channels through which young residents can raise a concern, including public consultations, the municipal council and the Local Youth Council. The Lab examined how a young person can use those channels and how much influence they have once they do.

Tirana's position as the country's largest municipality provided an opportunity to examine different routes to the same institution within a single local setting. A civic initiative can engage through its own networks, while a young resident approaching the municipality individually may need to discover the route without that support. ACT Center selected exercises on local institutions and youth participation that let the two situations be considered together.

Albania's Law on Youth provides for youth councils, while the laws on local self-government and public notification and consultation provide routes into municipal decisions. Although legal and institutional mechanisms for youth engagement exist, ensuring that these opportunities translate into genuine participation, inclusive dialogue and tangible influence on local decision-making remains an important area for improvement.

The three laws concern different points of entry into municipal affairs. Law No. 75/2019 establishes youth representation as a distinct responsibility, giving young residents an identifiable body through which to raise issues. Law No. 139/2015 concerns the wider relationship between residents and municipal government, including the channels through which the public can hold local institutions to account. Law No. 146/2014 is particularly relevant when a proposal has reached the public notification and consultation stage. In Tirana, the advisory status of the Local Youth Council means that it can convey a proposal to the municipality, while the competent municipal body remains responsible for the decision.

The Local Youth Council operates within a framework that provides for youth councils at local and national level. The Lab focused on the local council because the questions considered were about decisions for which the municipality is responsible. The distinction matters to young residents who may encounter several bodies concerned with youth policy but want to raise an issue about a specific local service or initiative.

The Lab focused on several interconnected barriers to meaningful youth participation, including limited access to clear and timely information about municipal decisions and public consultations, insufficient trust in the effectiveness of participatory mechanisms, and practical obstacles related to accessibility, transportation, time and digital inclusion. A young resident still needs to hear about a decision in time, understand how to contribute and find out what the municipality did with the proposal. These practical questions matter particularly for people outside organised youth networks.

ACT Center framed participation as an exercise of rights that starts with the ability to obtain information and express a view. The Albanian constitutional protections for expression, access to information and equality supplied the national context for that discussion. The organisers also drew on the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights as a European reference, particularly its provisions on expression and information, non-discrimination, and equality between women and men. They used the Charter's principles of good administration to frame questions about fairness and responsiveness, taking account of the scope of Article 41 in relation to EU institutions and bodies.

The local problem can therefore arise at several stages of the same decision. Someone may have an advisory route through the youth council, the right to read the municipal proposal and the opportunity to comment during a consultation, yet be unsure which route fits the concern they want to raise. The effectiveness of these arrangements depends in part on how the institutions explain where a contribution goes and what role it can play. This was especially relevant in a capital where municipal bodies and organised civil society are both present but their proximity does not guarantee a point of contact for every resident.

The youth council is relevant before a formal draft exists. An advisory body can give young residents a place to discuss a concern and determine whether it warrants a proposal to the municipality. The public consultation framework becomes relevant when the authorities put a matter out for comment. The timing of each route affects the kind of contribution it can receive.

The Local Democracy Lab

The workshop considered what a young citizen might need in order to make use of a right outside the Lab setting. Recognising an occasion to contribute is one part of that preparation. Another is being able to judge what to ask of the relevant institution. The organisers used the Albanian participation framework to make those choices concrete before asking the group to work on improvements.

The Lab brought together primarily young people and civic actors interested in youth participation and local governance. Over a six-and-a-half-hour programme, they examined how residents can influence municipal decisions, where young people encounter difficulties and what a more accessible relationship with the municipality would look like.

The programme began with an introduction to ROOT WB and an icebreaker. Participants could share their starting perspectives before being asked to apply the institutional terminology introduced in the first thematic session. This mattered for a mixed group of young citizens and people already active on civic issues, since the latter could be more familiar with the bodies and

procedures under discussion. The materials on youth councils and local governance gave the group a shared point of reference for the later exercises.

The materials were organised for a non-formal education setting. Interactive presentations introduced practical questions, and the cases required participants to use the framework themselves. That choice suited a session in which strengthening participants' ability to engage was an objective alongside producing recommendations for institutions.

Recognising different degrees of influence. The opening session introduced the local participation framework and Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation. Using practical scenarios, participants distinguished between being informed, being asked for an opinion and taking part in shaping a decision. The exercise gave the group a way to discuss the role young people actually played in each case.

The scenario work invited participants to look at how the process itself was designed. The participants were asked to identify what the person could initiate or help develop in each case. The combination of a common framework and cases drawn from familiar settings proved suitable for participatory work with youth groups and could be adapted for similar activities.

Hart's framework also helped distinguish what a participant knows from what they control. Someone receiving information may understand a municipal initiative well, while a person invited to offer an opinion may have little information about the decision that follows. A group helping design the initiative has responsibilities and choices different from either of those roles. Participants could use the scenarios to discuss these distinctions in relation to an actual participation mechanism.

The first thematic session looked at how local governance and the youth participation framework connect. It was followed by a networking break before the discussion of barriers. The order gave participants time to compare the mechanisms introduced in the session with other people's experiences before turning to the challenges they wanted to work on.

Comparing experiences. A second discussion examined the gap between formal rights and everyday experience. A World Café then brought together three questions. How can young residents gain access to public consultations? Who is missing from the usual youth networks? How can young people and local authorities stay in contact?

The afternoon case discussion enabled participants to examine an institutional difficulty and a practical barrier separately. A procedure can be hard to understand even for someone who has time and means to use it. An opportunity can also be well explained but difficult to attend. The World Café then gave the groups distinct questions under which to develop responses.

Developing proposals. Groups connected each difficulty to a practical response and the people or institutions able to take it forward. They presented their recommendations to one another and reflected on opportunities for further civic engagement. The programme closed with participant evaluation.

The World Café took up an hour and a half of the afternoon. Its three topics let participants explore the barriers separately before considering which could be addressed through the same

institutional relationship. The groups then had a separate half-hour for presenting their work and discussing which proposals ought to be pursued. The exercise connected each problem with a potential solution, the actors able to act on it and an indication of how progress could be observed.

The Lab also highlighted several conditions that made this format suitable for similar participatory activities. Questions need to be sufficiently precise to keep the groups on the issue, facilitators need time to hear different answers, and the organiser needs a reliable record of the proposals. A discussion about young people's access to a municipal process can otherwise end with observations that are too broad to direct to a particular office or participation mechanism.

The sequence left room for participants to reconsider their starting assumptions before proposing a change. Someone familiar with an advisory council might initially see it as the obvious contact, while another person could describe why they would be unlikely to approach it. Sharing those perspectives before the groups formulated proposals gave the participants a way to examine the same mechanism from both positions.

In the final thematic discussion, participants had to consider which of the people named in their proposals would actually be able to change the practice in question. An organisation in contact with young people can describe a problem and help circulate information. The authority responsible for a consultation can decide how it receives contributions. The structure of the exercise encouraged groups to be explicit about the relationship between those roles.

Key findings

Finding out about a decision. The starting point for many young people was knowing that the municipality was asking for their views. The group identified limited awareness of consultations and difficulty locating relevant information. A resident may have an interest in the subject and still miss the opportunity if the notice arrives late or circulates mainly through organisations they do not belong to.

For an organiser, a low rate of response to a notice is difficult to interpret on its own. The subject may have attracted little interest, or the intended audience may have learned about it too late to act. The difficulties raised at the Lab illustrate why those explanations have different implications for the way the next consultation should be organised.

Knowing about a consultation and knowing how to use it were distinct difficulties. Participants discussed the need to explain what was under consideration, what kind of contribution was possible and how a proposal could be submitted. Announcing a meeting alone leaves those questions open for a young person approaching the municipality for the first time.

The issue also concerned who already had a contact able to interpret a notice or draw attention to a consultation. The people with the fewest connections to youth organisations or institutions could have the least access to this practical information.

Communication difficulties also shaped residents' expectations of the institution. One young participant recalled never seriously considering contacting the municipality because they assumed no one would pay attention. Another said that hearing other young people describe

similar feelings was itself revealing. These accounts show how an individual can come to regard a barrier as a personal experience, even when others are making the same judgment about whether approaching the municipality is worthwhile.

Who has access to the discussion. The World Café examined what prevents less-represented young people from joining municipal discussions. Participants identified travel, time, physical accessibility and the ability to use digital channels. These barriers could affect people differently, even when everyone received the same invitation.

Physical and digital access can present different difficulties for the same group. A method that removes the need to travel can still demand reliable access to a device or familiarity with an online channel. Conversely, a meeting close to residents can be practical for people with limited connectivity but difficult for anyone whose other commitments prevent attendance at the chosen time. Participants considered access in terms of the actual arrangements available to young people.

Youth organisations and council members bring experience and established contacts. The discussion drew attention to young people whose concerns may never reach those representatives. Lack of a place in an organisation does not indicate a lack of interest in the decisions affecting a neighbourhood.

Participants identified gaps in representation in relation to young people's contact with institutions. A participant who can turn to a youth organisation may have access to help in putting an issue into terms the municipality recognises. Young people outside formal groups may encounter the same policy concern without that assistance. The design of participation therefore affects whether different kinds of experience become legible to officials.

One civil society representative explained the difference in the discussion. "Not every young person belongs to an organisation or knows someone working at the municipality. Those young people also have ideas and concerns, and we need to find ways to include them."

The group linked inclusion to the way a consultation is organised as well as the way invitations are distributed. An invitation can reach a young person who still has no practical means to attend or contribute.

The group examined inclusion at the level of the whole process. Travel and scheduling can determine who is in the room before a discussion starts, while the way written or online contributions are collected can affect whose concerns are represented in the final record. Young residents who encounter more than one of these obstacles may have fewer chances to make repeated contact with officials. From the perspectives the Lab gathered, the composition of a consultation group is therefore relevant to what the municipality learns from it.

What happens after young people speak. The scenarios prompted participants to ask when young people enter a decision and which choices are still open at that point. Young residents may be present at an event or asked for a reaction after priorities have already been set. Participants placed greater value on opportunities to identify priorities themselves and work with the municipality on the response.

The programme's distinction between different degrees of influence also applies to representation. An invitation can increase the number of younger people present without changing whose priorities shape the discussion. Giving young participants time to formulate a problem in their own terms can bring forward information a municipality would otherwise miss when asking for responses to a preselected option.

A young participant put the distinction succinctly. “We want to be part of the process, not just invited to attend.” The group considered how local youth councils might carry proposals into municipal discussions and maintain links with people outside their membership.

Feedback mattered to trust. Young people wanted to know how local authorities considered their contributions and whether anything followed. As one participant said, “I hope we can have more conversations like this, but also see something happen afterwards. Otherwise, we just keep talking about the same problems.” This concern connected the quality of an individual consultation to people’s willingness to take part again.

Participants' attention to the quality of replies also raised an accountability question. A young person can contribute an idea without knowing whether it reached the municipal staff who were preparing the decision, was already covered by the proposal or fell outside the consultation's remit. When the process makes the treatment of contributions visible, participants can distinguish between a proposal that was considered and one whose status is unknown. The distinction matters for assessing the institution's responsiveness even where contributors disagree with the outcome.

The Local Youth Council came into the discussion as an advisory body with a relationship to municipal institutions. That relationship can make it easier to bring a concern to the attention of the appropriate office. The weakness identified by the Lab concerns the other end of the relationship, namely how concerns first reach the council. A group that hears mainly from its immediate contacts can relay what it receives effectively and still have an incomplete view of the priorities of young people in Tirana.

The discussion also distinguished institutional responsiveness from the informal exchanges participants valued during the session. Hearing that others had similar experiences can encourage a young person to bring an issue forward. A reply from the relevant authority serves another purpose. It provides evidence of how the public body dealt with the proposal and helps the person decide whether further contact is appropriate.



Photo 1 Youth discussion in Tirana

Proposed solutions

Make consultation opportunities easier to find and use. Participants proposed publishing notices early and distributing them through municipal websites, social media, schools, universities and community networks. They wanted the information to tell a young resident what the consultation concerned, how to take part and how to submit an idea. Municipal communication teams, youth organisations and the Local Youth Council could each reach a different audience.

The choice of channel mattered because relying on established networks reproduces the gaps those networks already have. Educational institutions and community organisations could reach young people who do not follow municipal announcements. Information shared through them would still need to be clear enough for a first-time participant to act on independently.

In publicity terms, the municipal website gives the consultation an official point of reference, while the other channels suggested at the Lab take information into the places where young people already study, organise or exchange information. An educational or community partner could use the official notice to answer procedural questions consistently. The rationale for distributing the notice widely is therefore strongest when the municipality prepares a usable source that those partners can circulate with confidence.

Take engagement into the community. A second proposal was to offer accessible consultation formats and opportunities closer to young people. The municipality and youth organisations could work with schools, universities, informal groups and community organisations to reach

residents who face mobility, social or digital barriers. Participants linked that outreach to equal opportunities to contribute once people are reached.

A local discussion can also reveal practical barriers that are invisible in the number of announcements published. Young people who are difficult to reach through formal invitations can explain how an event's location, hours or format would affect their ability to contribute. The proposal gives educational and community organisations a practical part in this work because their regular contact with residents can inform the arrangements as well as bring the opportunity to people's attention.

Community-based engagement can be aimed at the problem of unequal opportunity. A consultation held in a familiar setting may help residents who feel less comfortable approaching an institutional venue. The procedure still needs to carry contributions from that setting into the municipal process. This connection gives practical meaning to cooperation between the organisations doing outreach and the office responsible for the decision.

Keep dialogue going between consultations. Periodic meetings between young residents and the municipality, accompanied by workshops or discussions on specific issues, would give people a place to return to with a concern. The Local Youth Council, youth organisations, educational institutions and municipal staff could use these exchanges to identify priorities together. Regular contact would also give young people a way to ask what had happened to a previous proposal.

The proposal for thematic discussion makes it possible to organise a meeting around an issue that young residents recognise. The subject can give municipal and civic actors a reason to identify which service or another body needs to be involved. A standing dialogue with the Local Youth Council can help themes emerging from those discussions remain visible even where they concern more than one municipal initiative.

Give young people a role in the work itself. Participants proposed involving young residents in identifying community needs, developing proposals and monitoring local initiatives. This would extend their contribution beyond commenting on an existing municipal proposal. Youth-led groups and community stakeholders could work with the municipality and the Local Youth Council at each stage.

Monitoring gives the joint-work proposal a defined purpose after an initiative has begun. Young people who helped identify a need can compare what is delivered with their original priorities and bring matters that remain unresolved back to the people responsible. For a municipal team, this provides feedback from contributors who understand the reasons behind the original proposal and can say which part of a response was most relevant to them.

The two proposals address different parts of the same experience. A regular meeting creates a place to bring an issue forward. Joint work gives the people who raised it a role in deciding how to respond and in following the initiative as it progresses.

The proposals also point to separate functions for people who deliver participation activities. A municipal communication team can change how an official announcement is prepared. Community partners can test whether the information makes sense to the people they meet. The

Local Youth Council can use its relationship with each side to bring practical concerns back to the municipal discussion. This division gives the proposals a route through institutions already involved in youth engagement.

Recommendations from the Local Democracy Lab

1. Publish clear and timely consultation notices. The Municipality of Tirana, particularly its communication and consultation departments, should give young residents adequate notice and use several channels to reach them. Each announcement should explain the subject in accessible language, set out how to participate and make clear how proposals can be submitted. The Local Youth Council and youth organisations can help circulate the information.

This recommendation concerns the information residents receive before deciding whether to take part. It responds to participants' difficulty finding an opportunity and working out what is expected of them once they find it.

The recommendation applies the public notification and consultation framework to the reader of the notice. The municipality controls the official announcement, so procedural information remains its responsibility even where a youth organisation or the council does most of the circulation to a particular group. The involvement of those partners can help reach an audience without shifting the responsibility for the accuracy of the instructions away from the office managing the consultation.

2. Reach young people outside established networks. The municipality, the Local Youth Council and civil society organisations should work through educational institutions, community organisations and informal youth networks. They should adapt consultation arrangements for young people facing geographical, financial, physical or digital barriers.

The recommendation distinguishes barriers to outreach from the circumstances that can prevent somebody from using a consultation. Organisers can learn about the first through the experience of schools and informal networks that are in contact with young residents. Decisions about physical or digital access depend on the arrangements for the consultation itself. The actors named by participants span both parts of that work.

The intended reach includes young residents who are not already connected to the organisations usually invited to speak. The proposal combines direct outreach with accessible ways of contributing.

The actors named in the second recommendation have different forms of contact with young residents. Schools and universities have access to people in education, while community organisations and informal groups may know residents who are absent from a student or organised youth constituency. The municipality is in a position to change how it receives contributions. The combination is important because a new route for recruitment can uncover barriers that only the institution hosting the consultation has the power to address.

3. Establish regular exchanges between young people and the municipality. The Municipality of Tirana and the Local Youth Council should organise periodic meetings, thematic consultations and participatory forums with youth organisations, civil society groups and educational

institutions. Young residents should be able to raise concerns, discuss local priorities and help identify practical responses.

The involvement of educational institutions could provide a link to young residents who are still becoming familiar with civic mechanisms. The role of those institutions would sit alongside the municipality's and the youth council's responsibility for the exchange. Their involvement matters because a recurring forum needs a continuing relationship with its audience as well as a place in the institutional calendar.

The recommendation gives continuity to dialogue that can otherwise end with a single event. It also gives both young people and municipal representatives an opportunity to return to issues raised in earlier discussions.

The recommendation also gives thematic workshops a role alongside routine contact. A standing relationship makes it possible to raise several concerns over time, whereas a workshop can give one issue the attention required to identify a workable municipal response. The presence of civic organisations or educational institutions can help sustain a discussion where a policy question involves people with different levels of experience in working with the municipality.

4. Involve young people throughout local decisions and initiatives. The municipality, the Local Youth Council, youth-led organisations and community stakeholders should give young residents opportunities to identify needs, develop policy proposals, contribute to local initiatives and monitor their implementation.

A policy proposal and a local initiative offer different opportunities to share responsibility. A policy proposal can involve young people in defining what an institution should change. Work on a local initiative can give them a place in delivery and an opportunity to observe its effects. The recommendation puts both routes in scope for the municipal and community actors named by participants.

For participants, the point at which young people join the work matters. An opportunity to help define a community priority offers a different degree of influence from an invitation to comment after the proposal is complete. Continued involvement also allows young people to see what their contribution helped to change.

Looking ahead

A further direction emerging from the Lab is to strengthen institutional accountability for the participation opportunities offered. In practical terms, that would give the municipality grounds for asking whether its youth channels reach groups whose views were missing and whether contributors can recognise a result from their involvement. The longer-term effects depend on changes to those everyday practices.

The recommendations envisage a closer working relationship between young residents and municipal institutions. Clearer information would make it easier to enter a discussion. Wider outreach and more accessible formats would give young people outside existing organisations a route into it. Continued involvement in local initiatives would allow participants to follow decisions they helped shape.

The Local Youth Council has a role in connecting these stages. Its links with the municipality can carry youth proposals into institutional discussions, while contact with informal groups and less-represented young residents can broaden the range of proposals it hears.

The longer-term aim is to strengthen trust and civic ownership. Young residents would have more reason to see a community priority as their own if they had a part in defining it and could follow what happened during implementation. A municipality would also have a better basis for judging whom its engagement arrangements are reaching. These can be seen as possible effects of sustained contact, accessible practices and institutional responsiveness.

ACT Center identified the ROOT WB Regional Community Dialogue Forums under Work Package 5 as the next use for the Tirana findings. The forums offer a place to discuss the proposals alongside experiences of youth participation and inclusive local governance from other project countries.

COUNTRY REPORT – BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Implementing partner: Local Democracy Agency Mostar (LDA Mostar)

Local Democracy Lab: Testing Civic Participation Mechanisms

Date: 22 October 2026

Location: Mostar

Country population: 3,412,000 residents, mid-2024 estimate

Population of the City of Mostar: 103,304 residents, mid-2025 estimate

Local context and the issue addressed

Mostar is located in southern Bosnia and Herzegovina, along the Neretva River, and it is the administrative centre of Herzegovina-Neretva Canton. It is the largest urban centre in the canton and an important regional centre for public administration, services, education, culture and economic activity. Decisions taken by the City Council and the City Administration, together with services delivered by city-owned companies, affect neighbourhoods, public transport and communal services. The Lab discussions highlighted that residents wishing to raise concerns about the quality or availability of these services may be uncertain where to turn or which institution is responsible for addressing the issues they encounter.

The city's contemporary social and institutional context has been significantly shaped by the 1990s war and its lasting consequences, as well as by persistent political and ethnic divisions. These circumstances have influenced the organisation of local governance and the relationship between different communities and public institutions.

The High Representative imposed the City Statute in 2004, which was intended to remain in force on an interim basis until formally adopted by the City Council in the required form. As the Council has not adopted it in that form, the 2004 Statute, as subsequently amended, remains in force. Mostar also went without local elections between 2008 and 2020. This interruption followed a 2010 ruling by the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina concerning the city's electoral arrangements. Following amendments to the Election Law in 2020, local elections were held on 20 December 2020, restoring citizens' opportunity to elect their City Council representatives after twelve years. While the return of elections restored an important element of democratic representation, it also left a separate question: how do residents communicate with their elected representatives and influence decisions between elections? Several of the Lab's proposals address this day-to-day relationship.

Mostar is situated in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, whose legal framework regulates the establishment and functioning of local communities (mjesne zajednice). The Mostar Statute, separately, provides for six City areas and branch offices of the City Administration, and defines the City Council’s oversight role in relation to the City Administration. These arrangements represent distinct elements of local governance: local communities provide a form of neighbourhood-level self-government, while branch offices bring administrative services closer to residents. The distinction becomes particularly relevant when an issue raised at neighbourhood level requires action by a City department or another competent institution.

Although Bosnia and Herzegovina has a formal legal and institutional framework for citizen participation, the practical implementation of existing mechanisms remains uneven and does not always ensure meaningful citizen influence on public decision-making.

The legal and institutional framework provides different bases for citizen participation. The Federation's Law on Principles of Local Self-Government recognises local communities (mjesne zajednice) as a mandatory form of local self-government and regulates their establishment, bodies and functions. The Mostar Statute provides for direct forms of citizen participation, including citizens' initiatives, citizens' assemblies and referendums. Its provisions for six City areas and branch offices of the City Administration establish administrative service points, which have a different function from the neighbourhood-level self-government provided through local communities under Federation law.

The Federation's Law on Freedom of Access to Information provides another example of how a formal right depends on administration. It requires authorities to assist applicants and to publish an information guide and an indexed register. It also provides for an information officer and sets a general fifteen-day response period, subject to statutory extensions. For the purposes of the Lab, this framework raised the practical question of how a resident learns to direct a request correctly and recognise which procedure and time limit apply.

Article 30 of the City Statute provides for public Council sessions and timely announcement of them. The public discussion of the draft 2025 City Budget provides an example of a formal consultation. Such examples provided a basis for examining how early residents can see the choices under consideration and what records are available once the relevant body has made a decision.

Articles 39 to 46 of the Federation's local government law address transparency and forms of direct participation, including how citizens can submit initiatives or complaints. Articles 24 to 29 concern the local community structures themselves. Residents' experiences in the Lab showed why access to one part of the framework can depend on understanding the other. A person bringing a concern through a neighbourhood body also needs to know which City procedure the body can use.

The Lab examined how these formal channels work in practice in Mostar, focusing on the accessibility and effectiveness of existing civic participation mechanisms. The Lab focused on the pathways available to citizens and civil society organisations when they identify a community problem, seek to bring it to the attention of public institutions, propose a solution or respond to an invitation to participate in a public decision-making process. Particular attention was given to the clarity of procedures, accessibility of information, identification of competent institutions and stakeholders, opportunities for timely involvement, and the availability of feedback on proposals and questions submitted by citizens.

Different institutions already communicate through different channels. The Council publishes information about its work on its own website. The City has its own website and Facebook presence, while the Culture Service uses Instagram for cultural announcements. However, the availability and use of different channels vary, illustrating why the visibility of one type of announcement cannot be taken as a measure of access to information about the City as a whole.

These practical questions are linked to freedom of expression and association and to the principle of non-discrimination. It points to the constitutional protection of fundamental rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the application of the European Convention on Human Rights. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities provides a further reference for accessibility of information and participation in public life. These concerns were relevant when participants considered who could use the City's existing channels without relying on someone else to interpret the information.



Photo 2 Citizen-led discussions in Mostar

The Local Democracy Lab

LDA Mostar convened a three-hour Lab bringing together representatives of civil society organisations, citizens and community members, City institutions and the cantonal level. Working in mixed groups allowed people familiar with municipal procedures to compare their understanding with the experience of residents trying to use them.

The opening presentations shared evidence from ROOT WB's earlier assessment of participation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and gave participants an overview of existing mechanisms. Mixed groups then drew on what residents knew about the needs involved, what civil society groups had learned from pursuing local issues and what officials could explain about internal responsibilities. The group composition made it possible to test a proposed route from more than one point of view before presenting it in plenary.

Three scenarios for citizen participation. Groups examined a proposal for a children's playground, an initiative for a circular city bus line, and citizens' reactions to proposals put forward by city-owned public companies. They identified the community needs involved, developed or examined the respective proposals, mapped the institutions and other actors involved, and considered what could prevent the proposals from advancing. They then identified

practical ways to address those obstacles. A plenary discussion brought the groups' findings together.

The scenarios asked the groups to consider how a proposal or citizens' response would move through the relevant institutional process.

They first had to describe the need in a way that would give the institution a concrete issue to consider, then identify the body with a role in the proposal. Bringing the first route into plenary meant that another group could challenge when an actor was approached or whether a suggested step would be realistic. This arrangement exposed procedural problems that would have been harder to identify in a general discussion of the right to participate.

The playground proposal and the circular bus route also gave the groups issues at different scales. A playground can begin with the needs of a particular neighbourhood. A circular bus line has implications for a wider service and for the bodies that can decide how it operates. Comparing the cases helped the group see why the sequence of contacts and approvals should depend on the issue residents bring forward. The third scenario, concerning citizens' reactions to proposals from city-owned public companies, added a further dimension by examining how residents can respond to initiatives originating from public service providers rather than only proposing changes themselves.

Whose experience informed the discussion. A representative of the Department for General Administration and City Areas contributed the institutional perspective on the relationship between the City Administration, city areas and local communities (mjesne zajednice). Participants combined this perspective with the experiences of residents and civil society organisations when examining how neighbourhood concerns reach City institutions and how proposals involving public services can move through the relevant procedures.

Representatives of public companies and individual neighbourhood communities did not take part directly in the discussion. As a result, some operational and procedural questions concerning service delivery and neighbourhood-level decision-making could not be clarified during the Lab itself. This was particularly relevant to the circular bus line example, where a public service provider could have clarified which operational decisions fall within its remit, and to the playground proposal, where a neighbourhood representative could have explained how local priorities are established and communicated to the City.

The scenarios nevertheless enabled participants to follow a proposal through several stages, identify the actors that would need to be involved in practice and develop proposals for consideration by the relevant institutions and service providers.

Key findings

Residents need an identifiable person or office. Participants looking at neighbourhood representation found that the City website listed local communities by name. It did not give the addresses of their premises or the names and contact details of the people responsible. For a resident seeking help with a local problem, even the first step could be unclear.

The City provides an administrative directory, while the Council publishes separate information about its elected bodies and activities. The group considered how a resident could find details of a committee's work and establish whether a committee member or councillor could be approached about an issue. Knowing that a Council session is public addresses one part of that question. Residents may still need information on the working body that examines a matter and the route for contacting it.

The group also asked how neighbourhood representatives transmit residents' concerns to the City Administration. Knowing which person to approach in the neighbourhood would only answer part of that question. Residents also needed to know which City service takes responsibility for the matter and how the local representative learns what happened.

The distinction between a city area and a local community mattered here. Federation legislation recognises local communities (mjesne zajednice) as a form of local self-government and regulates their establishment, bodies and functions. The Mostar Statute sets out arrangements for the six City areas and branch offices of the City Administration, but does not specify the bodies and working procedures of local communities. Participants connected this distinction and the lack of clarity in the local arrangements to their difficulty identifying an accountable contact.

A public contact list does not explain a procedure. Participants described the difficulty of finding documents and understanding how to submit a request, complaint or initiative. Departmental contact details could be available while the relevant procedure, deadline or next step remained hard to find. Legal or administrative knowledge gave some residents an advantage in exercising rights available to everyone.

Much of the legal information is written for people who already know the name of an administrative procedure. The starting point for a resident is more often an everyday concern such as the cost of a service, a missing facility or a problem on the route to school. Finding the relevant menu, department or legal provision requires translating that concern into administrative categories. Participants considered this a practical burden because a mistake at the outset can delay a response even when the City publishes the necessary contact details somewhere on its site.

Information about the Council's work can take different forms, including agendas, recordings, minutes and decisions. A resident may need one of those documents to find out whether an issue is due to be considered and another to see what was decided. Participants' interest in better information about Council work concerned the ability to follow those stages, including the role of its working bodies.

Participants also described making proposals or asking questions without hearing how their input had been handled. They could not tell whether the submission had been registered, which service had received it or whether a decision had been made. They wanted a response even when the institution could not accept a proposal.

The treatment of an input can be difficult to establish if institutions explain only the final outcome. A resident who submitted a suggestion may need to know whether it was redirected,

considered alongside another proposal or answered through a different procedure. Participants' interest in how comments are recorded reflects the importance of the earlier steps in making the explanation of the result intelligible.

The eCitizen platform illustrated the problem. Participants reported difficulty directing complaints to the relevant service through its category menu and associated this difficulty with a lack of clearly identifiable recipients. LDA Mostar subsequently reviewed the publicly visible platform on 30 October 2026 and found limited public information about councillors' responses and no visible consultation activity in the public consultation section at that time. Other communication channels used by the City were outside the scope of this review.

Timing and accessibility affect whose views count. Participants wanted to be involved when the City identifies needs and considers options. They cited the budget, urban planning, kindergarten subsidies and increases in communal service prices as decisions where advance information and time to prepare would make a difference. Publishing a budget also has limited value to residents if they cannot understand its priorities and allocations.

Budget participation was a particular example of the relationship between timing and the quality of information. Residents need to see enough of the proposed allocations to understand which services or investments would receive resources. They also need time to compare the proposal with the local priorities they had intended to raise. The discussion about kindergarten subsidies and communal charges brought a household perspective to this question because the effect of a decision can be immediate even where the underlying budget document is difficult to interpret.

People described different obstacles to receiving information and attending a consultation. These included inaccessible digital formats for people with visual impairments, limited internet use among some older residents and practical barriers for parents with small children. Participants wanted both accessible venues and alternatives to online communication.

Accessibility also concerns a resident's ability to use the information independently. A document that can only be understood by someone familiar with local government may require an intermediary even if it is physically available. The group therefore discussed presentation and plain language alongside access to venues and alternative means of obtaining information. The accessibility of one format cannot be assumed from the existence of another.

Questions about delayed responses led to a discussion of staff responsibilities, internal supervision and institutional accountability. These observations reflected participants' experiences. The Lab did not audit staff performance or individual cases. Across the examples, people wanted to know who had a duty to respond, what deadline applied and where they could turn when they received no answer.

Participants' concerns about institutional responsibility extended to the way an office supervises work after somebody has accepted a submission. Several questions concerned the visibility of internal review when deadlines pass or duties are unclear. These comments helped identify what residents want to be able to understand about the process and were distinct from an assessment of individual officials' performance.

Proposed solutions

Give residents a practical starting point. Participants proposed a plain-language guide to requests, complaints and initiatives. It would identify the competent body, submission route, steps and applicable deadlines. It should also explain the difference between a citizens' initiative and one submitted by a city councillor. This distinction had proved difficult when groups traced their example proposals.

Participants gave attention to the difference between the information a resident needs before approaching a body and what they need after making the approach. At the outset, the guidance can help them identify the correct procedure. When an answer is delayed, the same information can help them establish what steps are open to them and whether the expected time for a reply has passed. The practical guide was proposed to support both situations.

They paired the guide with a permanent information point where residents could ask for initial advice. Regular open days would allow people to speak directly to officials in City departments. Publishing councillors' consultation or office hours on the Council website would provide a comparable route to elected representatives.

The proposals also draw on facilities and communication practices that City bodies already have. The Council can use its website to maintain current information on when elected representatives are available. Departments could use open days to field questions about their own area of responsibility. An information desk could help when the point of contact is still unknown. This would give forms of direct access different purposes within the same set of proposals.

Make neighbourhood representation visible. The City could publish the address and contacts for each local community and identify the person responsible. Participants also proposed clarifying how neighbourhood representatives report local problems to City services. That would give both the representative and the resident a way to follow an issue after it leaves the neighbourhood.

Connect each submission to a response. City departments, services and public companies could designate people to receive eCitizen submissions, check that complaints reach the correct service and use the consultation function. Clear procedures for recording and responding to submissions would allow residents to find out how their input affected a decision. Participants also saw a role for local media in following up on public issues after the initial report.

The proposed solution would put the consultation function to work alongside the reporting and response channels. That would give a person who visits to raise a service issue a place to find out whether there is a wider public discussion affecting that service.

Make decisions easier to examine before adoption. The City and its public companies could announce hearings and consultations in advance through official channels and local media. A readable presentation of the budget would help residents understand proposed revenue, expenditure and priorities while they could still influence allocations.

For a public company or the City, an advance announcement has to contain enough material to let participants prepare. A notification that supplies a date can help people plan attendance, but the subject and available material determine whether they can contribute to the discussion. Participants proposed using local media as well as official channels so that notice of a hearing could reach people who would not otherwise be looking for it.

Use complementary formats. The groups proposed clearer online documents alongside options such as a city information bulletin and local radio. The choice of format would depend on the residents it needed to reach. They also emphasised physical accessibility so that people who obtained the information could take part in the meeting itself.

Participants also identified a possible role for local media after an issue first receives attention. A report about an institutional answer or subsequent progress would allow people who did not submit the original proposal to follow it. This would be particularly valuable for a service problem experienced by more than one neighbourhood, where residents might otherwise learn only about the first complaint and have little public information about the response.

Recommendations from the Local Democracy Lab

1. Clarify the role and status of local communities. The City Council and City Administration, working with the Department for General Administration and City Areas and neighbourhood representatives, should clarify the bodies' responsibilities, coordination and working arrangements. Residents should be able to identify and contact their representative and understand how the representative takes an issue to the City.

The groups treated neighbourhood contacts and the status of the neighbourhood bodies as related parts of the first recommendation. A contact is useful when the resident can understand what the representative can do with a concern. Conversely, an arrangement defined in local rules will be of limited practical value if the public cannot locate the people expected to operate it. The bodies named in the recommendation would need to consider both features.

2. Make administrative procedures understandable. City departments and the Council should publish practical guidance on participation rights, responsible institutions, procedures and deadlines. The City should organise documents and information on its official channels so that residents can find and understand them without specialist knowledge.

Making guidance available through the official channels would let departments use the same explanation when they direct people to one another. For a consultation or information request, the relevant page should enable a resident to identify the next procedural step and refer to it in any later exchange. Making documents easier to locate is therefore part of the recommendation alongside explaining how the procedure works.

3. Provide direct access to officials and councillors. The City Administration, departments and elected representatives should offer regular opportunities for direct contact. Departmental open days, a permanent information point and regularly updated information on councillors' office hours would address different needs. Together they would make it easier to seek advice, put a concern to the appropriate person and find out how to pursue it.

Participants highlighted the importance of maintaining clear and up-to-date information about opportunities for direct communication between councillors and citizens. The recommendation therefore emphasises the need to ensure that any such opportunities are clearly communicated and that residents can establish whether they are currently available.

4. Make existing digital participation tools work reliably. The City Administration, Council, councillors, public companies and platform administrators should ensure that the eCitizen functions operate as intended. Each relevant service needs a designated contact who can receive a submission and respond. The consultation function should be used actively, and residents should receive feedback on their submissions and next steps.

Updating the way complaints are routed would require action by the services that receive them as well as the people responsible for the platform. A technical administrator can maintain the form and its categories. The receiving organisation has to decide who monitors the submissions and what information it sends back to the person who raised the matter. That division helps explain why repair of the digital interface and appointment of institutional contacts appear in the same recommendation.

5. Involve residents early in local decisions. The City Administration, Council and city-owned companies should invite contributions while needs and priorities are being identified. They should announce consultations, hearings and presentations in enough time for residents to examine what is proposed and prepare a response.

6. Make the budget and decisions affecting daily life accessible. The City's finance department, Council and public companies should present the budget in a form residents can understand. Decisions involving urban planning, public services, subsidies and communal prices should also be accompanied by timely information and opportunities to contribute. Participants treated accessible information and a chance to influence the decision as parts of the same process.

The budget recommendation speaks to finance officers because the presentation of revenues and expenditure affects how easily someone can identify the question they want to raise. Council and public companies also have relevant information where decisions concern tariffs, communal services or urban development. Access through official channels would allow a resident to relate a service proposal to the underlying financial decision while both are still open to discussion.

7. Provide inclusive ways to receive information and participate. The City Administration, Council and public institutions should use accessible formats and complementary communication channels. Local media and organisations representing people with disabilities and other affected residents can help reach those who face barriers. Online information should be accompanied by practical offline options for residents who cannot readily use a website or digital platform.

Organisations representing people with disabilities were among the actors identified to inform accessible communication. They can bring knowledge about barriers a public body may overlook when choosing a format. Local media have a separate role, including reaching residents who rely

on offline channels for local news. The recommendation envisages these contributions alongside the City's responsibility for maintaining accessible official information.

The recommendation also concerns the setting in which people participate. Older residents, people with disabilities and parents with small children may be able to obtain a notice but still encounter difficulties attending or contributing.

8. Make institutional follow-up accountable. The City Administration and its services should define who receives citizens' questions, complaints and proposals, who deals with them, and how residents are informed of the outcome. The adequacy and application of existing internal control and supervision arrangements could also be reviewed, with the City Council acting within its respective competences.

An institution can apply the eighth recommendation even where it is unable to accept a citizen's proposal. A response would allow the resident to see that the submission entered the process and where responsibility for the matter sits. For the administration, recording receipt and handling also gives internal supervision a way to establish what happened if a question about a delay or referral later arises.

Participants put forward these eight recommendations without a formal ranking. The neighbourhood, digital and budget examples illustrate where they would apply, while the responsibility to communicate outcomes runs across them.

The Lab left the measures open to examination by the relevant bodies. Some would involve changes to everyday work, such as publishing guidance or assigning a contact inside a service. The status of neighbourhood communities also calls for attention to the relationship between the local rules and Federation law. Participants' proposals cover both kinds of improvement because the barriers arise from more than one part of the system.

Looking ahead

LDA Mostar intends to consolidate the proposals and return draft recommendations to participants for review. This gives those who took part an opportunity to correct the account, add information and check that the proposals reflect their discussions. Relevant City departments and services would then receive the draft for comment.

The next consultation envisaged by LDA Mostar is with the relevant City departments and services. Their feedback would help clarify which aspects of a proposal relate to daily administrative practice and which would require action by the Council or another body.

LDA Mostar plans to submit the final recommendations to the City of Mostar and the City Council for consideration and coordinate the follow-up within ROOT WB.

The intended change is practical. A resident raising a neighbourhood concern should be able to identify the responsible body, reach it, contribute before a decision is taken and learn the outcome. The Mostar findings will also inform the ROOT WB Regional Community Dialogue Forums, where partners can consider how the experience relates to other local settings.

The changes described would give community groups a basis for staying involved beyond the first approach to an institution. A civil society organisation assisting residents could use the same procedures as the public service receiving a request and help the community interpret the reply. In that sense the proposals concern a continuing relationship among residents, their representatives and the services that act on local needs.

COUNTRY REPORT – CROATIA

Implementing partner: Local Democracy Agency Sisak (LDA Sisak)

Local Democracy Lab: From Idea to Change – How Can Civic Initiatives and Public Policies Come to Life in Practice?

Date: 23 November 2026

Location: Sisak

Country population: 3,874,993 residents, mid-2025 estimate

Population of the City of Sisak: 38,892 residents, 2024 estimate

Local context and the issue addressed

Sisak is the administrative centre of Sisak-Moslavina County. The city and the county are characterised by long-term population decline and population ageing. According to the 2021 Census, the City of Sisak had 40,121 inhabitants. Children aged 0–14 accounted for 12.3% of the population, young people aged 15–29 for 14.6%, while persons aged 65 and over accounted for 25.3%. According to a more recent estimate, the City of Sisak had approximately 38,900 inhabitants in 2024. According to the Register of Persons with Disabilities, 8,758 persons with disabilities were registered in the City of Sisak in 2025, corresponding to approximately 22.5% of the city's estimated population. People from the surrounding area use the city's education, health and social welfare services. Population decline and ageing make the continuity of some of those services particularly important.

The local context continues to be strongly shaped by the consequences of the devastating 2020 earthquake. Reconstruction of a large proportion of public buildings is nearing completion by the end of 2026, while many privately owned residential buildings and houses have still not been reconstructed. The earthquake further accelerated the out-migration of part of the population, including entire families who have not returned, while the lack of suitable premises continues to make the work of some civil society organisations more difficult.

There is an active local civil society sector that provides humanitarian, social and cultural services among others. Its organisations vary in the staff and resources they can devote to policy advocacy, especially when an issue requires several cycles of discussion or monitoring. The partnership between smaller service providers, public institutions and local authorities is significant in that setting because they have different kinds of capacity and institutional access.

Sisak has a strong industrial tradition, but its economy has undergone a long-term transformation following the decline or restructuring of former large industrial systems. Today, a larger number of small businesses and trades operate in the city, but opportunities for diverse employment remain more limited than in larger urban centres. At the same time, registered unemployment has been declining; at the end of October 2026, 786 unemployed persons were registered with the Sisak branch of the Croatian Employment Service.

The social structure of the city has also been changing in recent years due to the increasingly visible presence of foreign workers and other third-country nationals. In the area covered by the Sisak-Moslavina Police Administration, 3,795 residence and work permits were issued during

2025. Although this figure does not show how many foreign nationals live specifically in the City of Sisak, it indicates the growing importance of migration and integration in the wider local context.

Croatian law and the City Statute provide for several ways to raise an initiative or contribute to a decision. The issue addressed by the Lab was the gap between a formal outcome of civic participation or public policy and its actual implementation, monitoring and translation into sustainable change in the community. Civic initiatives, participatory processes and public policies may lead to a decision, programme, measure or other institutional outcome, but their adoption alone does not ensure that they will be clearly operationalised, adequately financed, coordinated and implemented, or that their effects will be systematically monitored.

The national framework addresses separate stages of the policy process. The Act on the Right of Access to Information provides for consultations on certain acts and planning documents, together with publication of a report on the consultation. That report can record the treatment of individual submissions at the decision stage. The strategic planning framework addresses issues that arise later, such as responsibility for implementation, resourcing and monitoring. Those separate arrangements helped the organisers identify where a proposal might reach a decision and still lose the connection to the people who first raised it.

In practice, the problem manifests through unclear or divided responsibilities, insufficient resources and capacities, inadequate coordination between institutions and levels of government, weak monitoring of implementation, and a lack of timely information and feedback for interested citizens and organisations. The Lab showed that such patterns can occur in very different areas – from the integration of foreigners and the protection of women victims of violence, through education, to the prevention of institutionalisation of older persons and adults with disabilities through the Zaželi programme.

Such a gap affects citizens and groups for whom policies and services are intended, civil society organisations involved in their design, implementation or advocacy, as well as public institutions and decision-makers responsible for implementation and monitoring. It was relevant to address this through a Local Democracy Lab because the problem cannot be understood from only one institutional or civic perspective: a shared space is needed in which different stakeholders can compare experiences, identify where and why processes stall, and jointly develop possible solutions and recommendations.

The earlier ROOT WB assessment for Croatia provided additional context for examining how civic initiatives and participatory processes translate into implementation. Building on this context, the Lab used examples familiar to participants to explore where a process may stall after a decision or formal outcome has already been achieved.

Participants examined that question through four cases familiar from their own civic or professional experience. The cases concerned integration of vulnerable groups, protection from domestic violence, education and domestic support.

LDA Sisak also placed the issue in a fundamental rights context. A service for someone facing a language or disability barrier raises questions of equality in practice, as does an arrangement

that requires victims to change where they live in order to obtain protection. Relevant provisions of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights include equality and non-discrimination, as well as provisions related to dignity, the rights of children and respect for linguistic and cultural diversity. These principles help explain why the arrangements for delivering a measure are part of the issue the Lab considered.

The Local Democracy Lab

LDA Sisak brought together citizens, representatives of civil society organisations, local and regional government, public institutions, and the education and academic sectors for a four-hour Lab. They examined where an initiative advances, where implementation stalls and what would allow work to continue.

The group included people who could describe a service from the perspective of delivery and people who had experience asking public bodies to change it. This spread of experience allowed a case to be examined in relation to the person seeking help, the organisation providing it and the authority able to allocate responsibilities or resources. It was particularly relevant to difficulties that one institution could address only in cooperation with another.

The facilitator traced the path from an identified need through a proposal, a decision, implementation and monitoring. Two Sisak examples introduced the discussion. One concerned the observance of Diversity Day, the other the City's Volunteer Development Programme for 2023–2027. Both illustrated the questions of responsibility and resources that remain after an initiative is accepted, as well as implementation of concrete policies proposed by citizen initiatives.

Diversity Day allowed the discussion to begin with a familiar instance of a civic proposal reaching the City Council. The Volunteer Development Programme offered a way to consider implementation from the perspective of a standing programme. The two examples helped participants separate the type of outcome secured through public action from the practical work needed to carry that outcome into local policy or institutional practice.

Four groups then selected a case they were familiar with. Each traced what happened in practice, identified obstacles and proposed changes. The plenary compared their experiences and drew out recommendations that applied across more than one policy area.

In plenary, the groups considered what kind of change each obstacle called for. A financing problem could demand a decision by a funder, while a gap in cooperation could be addressed by organisations that already had the necessary powers. Other problems concerned procedure, staffing or more explicit institutional responsibilities. Tracing the connection from the case to the obstacle and then to the responsible actor prevented every difficulty from being interpreted as a call to amend legislation.

City and County representatives contributed to the discussion, while elected representatives, national authorities and foreign residents did not take part directly. Organisations working with foreign residents conveyed some of their experiences. These limitations are relevant when interpreting proposals that depend on decisions at national level or concern how foreign

residents experience local services, as some institutional and user perspectives could not be explored directly during the Lab.

Elected representatives could have spoken directly about how a service issue competes for a place in a budget. National institutions could have explained decisions that sit above the city or county level. The absence of these perspectives sets a boundary on what the cases can establish about the reasons behind particular institutional choices.



Photo 3 Four groups discuss key issues in Sisak

Key findings

A cross-cutting finding concerned which actors are involved when a measure is turned into an operating arrangement. Practitioners can explain which steps take time and where a service relies on expertise that may be difficult to recruit. Civil society groups can bring knowledge of people who struggle to use the service. Participants pointed to both forms of knowledge when considering what authorities can learn during design and implementation.

Integration in Sisak. One group identified a gap between national and European integration objectives and the arrangements available locally. People needed information about public services and opportunities to learn Croatian and take part in community life. Different organisations could help, but the city lacked a local action plan and a formal body that could connect their work.

The EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027 and Croatia's Migration and Asylum Management Plan until 2030 both gave the group a wider policy setting for the integration case. There is also national guidance for local authorities working with third-country nationals. The gap identified in Sisak concerned the local arrangements for carrying that work out. Measures can be supported nationally and still depend on who brings public services, civil society and foreign residents together to plan them in the city.

Without agreed responsibilities, an activity could depend on one organisation or an individual initiative. The group saw a risk that needs would go unrecognised and that foreign residents would experience social isolation. A coordination mechanism would need to involve the people affected as well as the organisations already working with them.

The group related that organisational gap to the experience of the host community as well as newcomers. Without practical opportunities for contact and involvement, residents who live in the same city can remain connected to separate networks. Such separation can contribute to reduced social cohesion. The concern helps explain why participants treated participation in local life as part of integration alongside information on services and opportunities for language learning.

Access to information. The same practical question recurred in other groups. A person may be entitled to a service but still lack an understandable explanation of where to apply, what the procedure involves or who can help. Language and administrative barriers made that gap especially apparent in the integration case.

Information also has consequences for the organisations that provide referrals or support. If the explanation of a right changes without reaching those organisations, people can receive different accounts of the steps they need to take. Participants treated communication as part of implementing the service because the people advising potential users need current information as much as the people applying for support themselves.

What it takes to keep a safe house open. The group discussing protection from domestic violence described the costs behind an uninterrupted service for women and their children. Alongside specialist support, a residential facility needs technical and support staff, functioning heating and installations, repairs and routine maintenance. Funding that omits these costs makes long-term planning difficult.

The national standards for social services were one point of reference for participants familiar with running a shelter. They distinguished the required professional support from the ongoing work of maintaining a large residential facility. A heating installation or roof can require attention regardless of how a grant defines its funded activities. Funding restrictions can therefore create operational problems even for an organisation that has personnel with the required professional qualifications.

Participants then considered the consequences for families. Seeking safety can mean that the woman and her children leave home while the perpetrator remains there. Moving can interrupt schooling, work and contact with people who provide support. The group asked how protection measures could place greater responsibility on the perpetrator and reduce the disruption borne by victims.

The response involves the police, courts, social services, local authorities and organisations operating safe houses. Participants described coordination and information exchange as part of the protection a victim actually receives. They also identified public awareness as relevant to whether a woman knows that support exists and how to seek it.

The group also considered the relationship between the protection measures already available and the practice reported by service providers. Orders restricting the perpetrator's contact or removing them from the shared household are among the measures that could be implemented. Participants' concern was the distribution of consequences in practice. The experience of a

woman and children trying to keep work, school and support arrangements in place gave the group a concrete basis for examining how the system protects them.

Qualified staff in education. Where schools and kindergartens cannot recruit enough qualified staff, they may engage people who do not meet all the professional requirements for a post. Participants described the resulting additional workload for qualified colleagues and specialist services. They also described increasingly complex developmental, psychological and behavioural needs among children and pupils. Both the number of staff and access to continuing professional development affected the support institutions could provide.

Preschool legislation addresses recruitment where no qualified teacher applies, while school legislation and ordinances set out categories of acceptable qualifications and circumstances in which a temporary appointment can be made. The participants' concern was that an arrangement used to fill a vacancy can redistribute pedagogical and administrative work to qualified colleagues. This directs attention to what happens inside an institution after it has been able to fill a post.

Continuity of domestic support. Through the Zaželi programme, older people and adults with disabilities receive help with everyday life in their homes. A gap between funding cycles can leave a person without assistance while the worker providing it loses continuity of employment. The participants emphasised the mismatch between an ongoing need and a time-limited funding arrangement.

The home-support case brought together a long-term goal and a short-term delivery arrangement. Zaželi's prevention-of-institutionalisation objective is linked to national plans for social services and deinstitutionalisation. Participants pointed out that interruptions also affect the employment of the people who deliver assistance. When a provider has to re-establish staffing after a gap, there are consequences on both sides of the service even if the next project is subsequently approved.

Taken together, the cases gave participants a practical way to judge implementation. In education the test was whether qualified support reached a child. In Zaželi it was whether assistance was still available between projects. Adoption of a plan or approval of a funding round could not, by itself, answer either question.

Proposed solutions

Organise integration locally. The group proposed a City of Sisak integration action plan setting out objectives, measures, responsibilities and how implementation would be monitored. A formal coordination body would bring together City services, public institutions, civil society organisations, representatives of foreign residents and other relevant bodies. It could connect activities and ensure that residents’ needs informed the work.

The two integration proposals concern different tasks. The plan would provide a record of the measures, responsibilities and objectives that the City and its partners agree to pursue. A coordination body could bring the people delivering those measures into regular contact and allow information from foreign residents to reach the relevant services. The group's suggestion

to include representatives of foreign residents concerns who would inform that work as it develops.

Fund and coordinate protection. Safe houses need predictable public funding for the full cost of the service. Participants identified technical and support staff, repairs and building maintenance as costs to include alongside professional support for women and children. They called for closer cooperation among the police, courts, social work services and shelter operators, together with better public information on domestic violence and available help.

Participants coupled coordination of protection with public information and awareness. The Croatian Institute for Social Work, police, courts and local organisations would bring different parts of the response to a case. A shelter can explain the support it provides, while other institutions have their own responsibilities for assistance and protection. Public information matters at the point of seeking help, when somebody may be unfamiliar with the sequence of contacts or the support available.

A further proposal concerned the burden of moving. Participants wanted the competent institutions to direct protection measures more firmly towards perpetrators, so that women and children can be safe without routinely having to give up their home and everyday surroundings.

Plan for the education workforce. Participants proposed better planning, recruitment and working conditions for education staff and professional associates. The aim was to reduce prolonged reliance on staff without the qualifications required for a post. Schools and kindergartens, their founders, the relevant ministry and professional development bodies would also need to make training accessible and responsive to the needs staff encounter.

The group regarded workforce planning and professional development as complementary responses. Founders and institutions can examine how positions are filled and create better conditions for retaining qualified people. Agencies or institutions responsible for training can keep professional development responsive to changes in the needs encountered in classrooms and early childhood settings. Each part addresses a different constraint on good support.

Bridge gaps between Zaželi projects. The group proposed maintaining assistance between individual project cycles and developing a more stable long-term model for organising and financing the service. The first proposal concerned the person waiting for help during a funding gap. The second concerned how future interruptions could be prevented rather than relying exclusively on time-limited project cycles.

The distinction between an immediate bridge and a longer financing model affects who can act. Local providers can describe when interruptions arise and what that means for users and workers. The bodies responsible for programme design and funding can address dependence on individual project calls. The discussion placed both tasks in view because resuming a service after a call still leaves a question about how the next interruption would be avoided.

Build information into the service. Across the cases, participants called for clear, timely information on entitlements, programmes, responsible services and practical access. Ministries, local and regional authorities, providers and civil society organisations each have

contact with people seeking assistance. The group wanted information to form part of how a service is delivered, including for people facing language, social or administrative barriers.

Recommendations from the Local Democracy Lab

1. Secure stable and predictable resources. The Government, responsible ministries, regional and local authorities and funding bodies should provide the resources needed to maintain policies, programmes and services over time. Continuity is particularly important where an interruption immediately affects a person's safety or ability to live independently.

From the funder's perspective, continuity requires looking at when an existing arrangement ends and when resources for the next period can actually be used. An analysis restricted to the sum allocated during a project can miss the consequences of what happens in between. This was most apparent where participants were discussing services that people need regularly, including accommodation for people seeking protection and assistance in their own homes.

2. Fund the actual conditions needed to deliver a service. Public funders and service providers should account for the people, facilities, technical support and organisational work required for safe and reliable delivery. The safe-house example showed why a funding model based only on direct professional support can leave essential operating costs uncovered.

The cost recommendation also concerns the quality of information available to funders when they design programmes. Providers and practitioners can account for different kinds of work required to sustain service standards. Users can identify the consequences when a service becomes unavailable or its capacity changes. Their involvement during design would help authorities plan for conditions they might otherwise discover only once delivery begins.

3. Assign responsibility and establish permanent coordination. Where several institutions share delivery, public authorities should identify a lead, name those responsible for individual tasks, agree how they will work together and specify who monitors progress. Public services, civil society organisations and representatives of people affected by the policy should have defined roles where relevant. The integration case illustrated what becomes difficult when no local body is responsible for connecting those contributions.

Participants included representatives of affected groups among those who could be involved in coordination. Their contribution can help an institution identify how tasks assigned across bodies are experienced by somebody trying to use the service. For a measure spanning several organisations, this information can reveal when a referral or division of responsibility works in administrative terms but still leaves a practical obstacle for a user.

The recommendation on coordination applies where the institutions concerned have their own mandates and may work with different groups of people. In the integration example, services and civil society organisations have experience of different points at which foreign residents seek information or help. Bringing that experience into the coordination arrangement would give the City a basis for seeing whether measures cover the different stages of access.

4. Assess effects on the people concerned. The relevant ministries, public services, authorities and providers should examine the consequences people experience and use that evidence to

adjust practice. In protection from domestic violence, this includes the impact of arrangements on the safety and everyday lives of women and children. Police and judicial bodies have responsibilities where those arrangements fall within their remit.

5. Maintain professional capacity and invest in knowledge. Ministries, founders and governing bodies of institutions, training providers and service organisations should plan for enough qualified staff. They should address recruitment and retention and make continuing professional development available as needs and professional knowledge change.

Appropriate support also depends on retaining qualified staff. Founders and governing bodies can see how vacancies and temporary arrangements affect individual institutions, while national education authorities and training bodies can influence recruitment conditions and access to professional development. The recommendation connects those responsibilities because both staffing shortages and gaps in specialist knowledge affect what schools and kindergartens can deliver.

6. Make information part of implementing every right or service. The authorities and organisations delivering a measure should tell intended users what is available, who is responsible, how to access it and where to obtain help. Information should be timely and understandable, including for people facing language, administrative or social barriers. Participants associated good information with the ability to exercise a right in practice.

7. Strengthen civic involvement in design, advocacy and monitoring. Citizens, informal initiatives and civil society organisations need opportunities to understand policy processes, formulate proposals and follow their implementation. The group encouraged organisations to form thematic networks and advocate jointly where an initiative stalls. Public authorities should involve citizens, experts, providers and affected groups during delivery and monitoring as well as when a policy is designed.

This recommendation can be connected to thematic networks and coalitions. A group may have enough knowledge to document where one initiative stopped but limited capacity to pursue a response on its own. Other organisations working on the same subject can bring related experiences and help maintain attention over a longer period. Authorities have a corresponding role in giving users, experts and providers opportunities to remain involved in implementation and monitoring.

8. Plan for implementation when a decision is adopted. National, regional and local authorities and the institutions responsible for a policy should identify the lead, resources, coordination arrangements and means of assessing effects at the design stage. They should also agree how participants will hear about progress, results and the fate of proposals they contributed.

The four cases showed why the appropriate emphasis can vary. A new initiative may first need a lead body and a way for partners to coordinate. A service already in operation may face an immediate continuity problem, even when the policy and the institutional lead are clear. The recommendations give public bodies a way to identify which part of delivery needs attention in a given case.

The two recommendations describe responsibilities on both sides of a participatory process. People who put forward an idea need the capacity to follow it. The body adopting the decision needs an arrangement through which they can do so. Participants endorsed all eight recommendations and gave them no formal order of priority.

Looking ahead

Participants proposed using the findings in advocacy, meetings with decision-makers and monitoring of existing measures. A civil society representative described the intended use directly. “Processes that were initiated in the community but then came to a standstill should be continued through intensive advocacy towards decision-makers.”

LDA Sisak plans to present the findings and recommendations to local and regional decision-makers, other competent authorities, civil society organisations and interested stakeholders. It also plans to communicate the main messages through the media. Sharing the results and opening further dialogue were the immediate steps identified at the Lab.

Participants expressed interest in applying the same approach to issues such as health, education, social welfare, disability access, protection from violence, environmental protection and waste management. Their common concern was that a civic proposal should remain open to public scrutiny after it has been accepted and that people should be able to see whether implementation improves the service or support they receive.

Participants also named animal care and sheltering among the local topics that could be examined through similar discussions. Participants expressed interest in keeping public authorities, practitioners and civil society in contact across these issues. Presenting the findings to the relevant stakeholders and using them in advocacy and dialogue were identified as immediate next steps.

The intended longer-term change also includes strengthening the capacity of local institutions and decision-makers to link a national objective to a concrete measure and a budget. Monitoring would then give authorities evidence to consider whether the way the measure operates should be adjusted. Participants' proposals for civic oversight concern access to that continuing process after the public announcement or formal adoption has passed.

COUNTRY REPORT – FRANCE

Implementing partner: Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South-East Europe (NALAS)

Local Democracy Lab: From Participation to Impact: Deliberative Approaches, Youth Voices and Meaningful Follow-up in Local Democracy

Date: 21 and 28 October 2026, with follow-up sessions on 23–25 November 2026

Location: Strasbourg

Country population: 68,094,000 residents on 1 January 2023 (INSEE)

Population of the City of Strasbourg: 293,771 residents on 1 January 2023 (INSEE)

Local context and the issue addressed

Strasbourg is a multicultural and international city located on the French-German border, with a diverse population and a large student and youth community. As the seat of major European institutions, including the European Parliament and the Council of Europe, it has strong links to democracy, human rights and citizen participation.

The city benefits from active civil society organisations, universities and local participatory initiatives. However, challenges related to social inclusion, youth representation, equal opportunities and access to decision-making remain relevant.

This makes Strasbourg a particularly suitable setting for a Lab focused on strengthening citizens' and young people's engagement in democratic life and public decision-making.

Strasbourg has a large student community, active civil society organisations and established opportunities for residents to contribute to local decisions. These include neighbourhood citizen councils, a participatory budget and the Strasbourg Youth Council. The Youth Council's 2024–2026 membership covered ages 11–14, while complementary project workshops offered opportunities to people aged 15–25.

The city's À la hauteur des enfants approach encourages children and young people to help shape their living environment. Its relevance to the Lab lies in the relationship between work begun in a school or on a local project and decisions made by the city. Citizen councils in priority neighbourhoods raise a related question of local representation. Their role gives residents a route into neighbourhood development, while young residents outside associations remain a group that can be harder to involve through those councils.

Each of the municipal routes offers a different sequence of decisions. Work begun through a youth council can involve developing an initiative with a group of peers. A neighbourhood council gives residents a means of raising concerns about local development. In the participatory budget, proposals travel towards a collective selection and a decision about spending. Experience of Strasbourg points to the importance of telling young contributors what happens after the step by which they first became involved.

The Eurométropole's Territorial Youth Diagnosis, conducted in 2023–2024, gathered priorities across the 11–30 age range. It provided an example of a process that reaches people at several

stages of education and working life. There is an ongoing challenge in connecting that evidence to youth participation in the development and review of the policies that follow.

The local context was explored through a contribution from the City and Eurometropolis of Strasbourg, focusing on outreach and citizen participation. The discussion brought together the municipal perspective, experiences from youth organisations and comparative examples from South-East Europe.

The comparison with examples from South-East Europe broadened the workshop's frame. The group could consider how a practice that worked where an institution already had reliable community contacts might operate elsewhere. The Strasbourg case contributed experience from a municipality with several established mechanisms, while the shared question concerned the choices organisers make in using those mechanisms.

The Lab examined how these opportunities reach young people with different circumstances. It focused on a practical difficulty for organisers. Someone who contributes to a discussion today may have moved away, taken up another commitment or lost contact by the time the municipality can explain what changed. The quality of participation therefore also depends on how people learn the outcome.

The participatory budget provides a concrete case of different forms of influence within one initiative. Residents can put forward projects and can take part in voting on them. For younger contributors, the ability to use one of those routes says little about whether they know how to use the other. NALAS also drew on ROOT WB's earlier assessment, which pointed to barriers for people in low-income or disadvantaged communities and for smaller organisations trying to retain active members. Together these examples explain why the Lab considered both the institutional mechanism and the capacity of people to remain involved.

Relevant fundamental rights included freedom of expression and information, freedom of assembly and association, and the right of children to be heard. In a neighbourhood decision, the relevance of those principles can be seen in concrete questions about access to information and whether children or young residents have a feasible way to express a view. The Lab's focus on formats and outreach was part of considering equal opportunities to contribute.

The Local Democracy Lab

The workshop combined contributions about municipal practice with accounts from people active in civil society and youth work. These different perspectives allowed the group to examine whether a participation process is understandable at the point when someone decides to enter it. This gave the discussion a practical question that could be asked of local initiatives in Strasbourg and of examples brought from elsewhere.

NALAS convened the main workshop on 21 October and organised further exchanges with its secretariat, the City and local stakeholders, including additional follow-up sessions in October and November. Together, the sessions brought in perspectives from young people, municipal actors, civil society organisations and other stakeholders working on participation, youth engagement and local democracy. The follow-up exchanges broadened the range of institutional and youth perspectives considered in the discussion.

Participants included the City of Strasbourg, local and European civil society, youth and human rights organisations, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe and NALAS. Their experiences offered several perspectives on organising participation.

The follow-up work widened the range of institutional and youth perspectives available beyond the October workshop and allowed the proposals to be considered in relation to the work of several organisations.

Following a contribution through to its outcome. Participants shared examples and mapped the stages of a participatory process, from the first invitation to institutional consideration and a response. A moderated plenary and a visual record helped the group compare outreach methods, discuss tensions and agree principles. Young participants considered how the same choices looked to someone with limited time or an uncertain length of stay.

The opening practice exchange gave participants examples to refer to before they mapped a process. Mapping let them place a difficulty at a particular point, such as the decision to respond to an invitation, the opportunity to speak during the discussion or the period in which institutions consider contributions. The group could then examine whether a method that addressed one of those stages would be useful at another. A visual record of topics and proposals provided a reference when the discussion returned to the recommendations in plenary.

The follow-up groups reviewed the findings, tested their relevance to their own work and discussed how the recommendations could be applied.

The youth discussion helped test assumptions made by organisers against everyday circumstances described by participants. It sat alongside a deliberative exchange about the practical benefits and limits of different approaches. The closing review gave participants a chance to consider the recommendations and discuss future uses before feedback was collected. This sequence allowed the final discussion to refer to specific examples brought by the municipal, community and youth sectors.

A smaller plenary gave participants a direct opportunity to hear and question one another's examples. The need for a balanced facilitation is as important in making that format transferable. A discussion intended to test a municipal practice needs to give people who operate the practice room to explain it and young participants room to describe difficulties with it. The practical value depends on making both accounts available for collective consideration.

Key findings

A clear invitation establishes what is open to influence. Participants described the difference between a meeting intended to inform residents, one that seeks their advice and one in which they can help make a decision. An invitation that leaves that distinction unclear sets organisers and residents up to expect different outcomes.

Different expectations can affect the way the same meeting is evaluated. A participant who expected to select a project may judge the exercise by whether their preferred option remains open. An organiser who arranged a consultation may be satisfied once the views are recorded for

the competent body. Participants' call for clarity on influence concerns the ability to make that distinction before either side invests time in the process.

Residents wanted to know the purpose, what they were being asked to contribute and what could reasonably result. Organisers also needed to know which experiences and skills people brought. Participants referred to the value of agreeing responsibilities and discussing how collective choices would be made before asking a group to prioritise proposals.

A process that seeks a collective decision has to explain how individual suggestions will be brought together. Participants' interest in agreeing responsibilities was relevant here because a group can have useful expertise without knowing who is expected to synthesise proposals, test alternatives or decide between them. Agreeing those tasks provides a way for residents to judge what kind of input is useful at a particular meeting. It also helps facilitators explain the relationship between an individual's contribution and the group's eventual position.

Trust depends on who runs the process. Participants connected confidence in a discussion to institutional openness, an impartial moderator and the community's ability to shape the work. An example of citizens contributing to a local action plan illustrated what shared work could look like. Concerns about political influence and unclear rules showed how readily confidence could be lost when participants could not see who controlled the process.

Political influence was raised as a potential risk to confidence in a local process. A facilitator trusted to handle disagreement can give residents room to express a position that differs from the views of institutional participants. The local action-plan example also showed what community ownership means in practice. Residents' role in developing the plan was part of the reason it could serve as an example of participation that extends into policy work.

The group associated trust with institutional openness as well as moderation. An independent facilitator can provide fair conditions for people to speak, while the organisation responsible for the policy can explain what happened to the input. Residents' confidence may depend on both roles being visible. A well-run meeting can otherwise leave the authority's role in the final decision unclear.

The same people are often the easiest to reach. Participants described invitations circulating among people already active in local affairs. Other residents might have little initial interest in a topic, lack an institutional contact or be unfamiliar with the available channels. Direct invitations, personal conversations and visits to different neighbourhoods helped organisers make contact beyond their usual networks.

Smaller associations have a related difficulty in retaining people after they first respond to an event or campaign. The earlier ROOT WB assessment raised this concern, and it was relevant to the Lab's interest in continuity. Participation opportunities depend partly on the organisations that keep in contact with prospective contributors, including between the individual processes convened by public bodies.

The group also considered who chooses the topic. Allowing residents to help identify the subject can make the invitation more relevant to people with little reason to attend a meeting on an issue chosen elsewhere.

Participants considered digital invitations alongside personal contact. A QR code can provide a short route to further information when the person receiving it has a device and a reason to follow the link. The group questioned how far that approach can reach people who have yet to see a connection between an issue and their own neighbourhood. Direct outreach gives organisers a chance to explain that connection and hear why existing participation opportunities may attract little initial interest.

A visit to a neighbourhood can serve as an opportunity for residents to identify an issue of their own. This makes outreach a means of hearing about local concerns as well as a way to publicise a topic. Youth workers and community representatives have a role in this approach because their existing relationships can open a conversation without assuming that the reasons for taking part are the same in each area.

Being present and being able to contribute are different experiences. A suitable venue, a way to join online and facilitation adapted to the group all affected who could speak. Young people with fewer opportunities may have several demands on their time. Digital tools could widen access for some, while requiring skills or support that others lacked. The group therefore attached importance to offering more than one route into a discussion.

The youth perspective also drew attention to the ability to use the tools selected by an organiser. An online option can help a participant avoid a journey or attend from another location. Its accessibility still depends on the equipment, connection and skills available to the person who wants to contribute. The same consideration applies to a venue chosen for an in-person conversation, where suitability includes the arrangements that let people take part once they arrive.

Some of the experiences discussed showed the importance of participants feeling entitled to contribute. Organisers can provide a meeting space and an invitation, but the role a person is asked to play also affects whether their experience will enter the discussion. Adapting a facilitator's questions and tools to the people present gives them a means of contributing through what they know about the issue.

Continued involvement has a cost for participants. Long processes and repeated demands on people’s time can make it difficult to stay engaged. Young participants drew attention to mobility. A person may leave Strasbourg before a decision is made and still have a legitimate interest in the result. An update that is available only at the next physical meeting misses that person.

Participants distinguished ongoing involvement from continuing access to the results. A young person may be unable to join later meetings after travelling or moving, although they still have an interest in what happened to their proposal. A process organised solely around attendance at successive sessions can lose the relationship with that contributor. Feedback that people can find independently allows them to follow the outcome even when their active participation pauses.

Participants valued regular contact, opportunities to work on a project and conversations in person. They also saw a role for short messages that could travel with the participant. A lengthy

report or a series of online meetings could be a poor fit for someone who wants to know what happened to a particular suggestion.

Communicating well takes staff time, timely access to information, resources and knowledge of the intended audience. A podcast or message designed for one group may reach few people outside it. These trade-offs informed the group's emphasis on combining personal contact with several digital and offline channels across the life of a process.

Communicating the impact of participation was discussed as a task involving institutional as well as editorial work. Somebody needs access to the account of how a proposal was considered before a concise version can be prepared for the public. Different forms of communication place different demands on a team, including the expertise to produce a format and the capacity to keep it updated. The group treated those requirements as part of the resources a participatory initiative needs.

The same communication method may need to serve different purposes at different times. An invitation has to give someone enough context to decide whether to join, while a short update can remind an existing contributor where the work stands. Information about impact has to connect with an outcome the organiser can substantiate. The discussion about resources concerned the ability to produce these different messages when they are needed.



Photo 4 Democracy Lab session in Strasbourg

Proposed solutions

Agree the purpose and the rules together. Organisers and intended participants could clarify the expected contribution, the decisions that are open and the intended outcome. Mapping participants' experience would help the group use the expertise available. Participants also proposed a transparent ranking method where the group needs to prioritise options.

Working with the intended participants on the design would show organisers which rules require explanation and which choices the group wants to make itself. This is especially relevant where a familiar municipal timetable or consultation procedure is being used with young people who

have never encountered it. Giving time to those decisions early can also reveal where a proposed activity depends on expertise or resources the group has yet to secure.

The group also proposed a transparent means of ranking options when a process calls for collective prioritisation. That would allow those taking part to understand how a preference becomes a group decision and how their expertise informs it. The proposal connects decisions about facilitation and participation with the point at which a group has to choose among the suggestions it receives.

Make the invitation personal. Youth workers, community representatives and organisers could contact people in their neighbourhoods, use trusted intermediaries and offer an accessible information point. Bringing residents into the choice of topic would give them an earlier role in the process. The proposal linked that initial contact to opportunities for continued involvement.

An accessible information or help point would serve people with questions about what an invitation means or how to enter the process. A community representative or youth worker could use it to connect individual outreach with something residents can return to after the first contact. The proposal was directed in part at people whose interest may develop after that initial encounter.

The proposed information point would also give an organiser a place to learn which questions recur among people who receive an invitation. Some may want to check whether the topic affects them. Others may need to know what support is available before contributing. This makes contact with community representatives and youth workers relevant to refining the arrangements as well as bringing people into the process.

Match the method to the participant. Groups could choose accessible venues, adapt facilitation and offer an online option for those unable to attend. Young people with fewer opportunities may need additional help with the chosen tools. Participants also proposed competent, independent facilitation and local ownership to protect the credibility of the discussion.

The proposals give youth workers a role in helping participants use an unfamiliar tool or format. An organiser may need technical or facilitation support to offer that option reliably. These responsibilities are distinct from outreach. The aim is to give someone who has chosen to join an appropriate means of contributing once the discussion begins.

Maintain contact in ways people can sustain. Participants proposed combining personal conversations, dedicated meetings, in-person exchanges and work on practical projects. Young people whose location or availability changed could remain connected at a level they could manage. Organisers would need to make realistic demands on their time.

The option of collaborating on a practical project addresses a different reason for remaining involved from a recurring meeting. A participant can see the effect of a contribution while the work is still under way and has a concrete point at which to offer further input. Dedicated meetings and individual conversations can serve contributors whose availability is intermittent. These approaches can be used as elements that can be combined according to the circumstances of the group.

Communicate results where contributors can find them. Short updates could explain which proposals were considered, what resulted and what would happen next. Participants identified flyers, comics, podcasts, social media and direct contact as possible formats. The choice would depend on who needed the information. Communication teams would need adequate staff time, skills and resources to prepare it promptly.

A follow-up item can reach people who were not in the room when the organisers reviewed the results. A written or audio format gives them a point of reference they can pass on or revisit. The choice of format is decided in relation to the intended audience, with the reminder that an accessible item for one group may need a different distribution channel to reach another.

Give organisers a practical tool. A participation canvas could bring together purpose, roles, missing voices, decision-making and follow-up. Participants also proposed explaining the value of participation to decision-makers and supporting people who champion it within institutions. Institutional backing matters when a facilitator can collect residents' contributions but another body has authority to respond.

The organisers' proposal to support people who advocate participatory practice concerns the place that the work occupies inside the institution. Such a person can explain to decision-makers when community input is needed and what the process requires of officials. If the expected contribution is understood internally, an organiser has a better chance of arranging the institutional response before residents are invited into the discussion.

The participation canvas would place the parts of a process on one working surface. It could help an organiser see a gap between the promise in an invitation and the action an institution is prepared to take after deliberation. Its role would be to guide planning before the process is under way. It can also provide a record of who has agreed to act at each stage.

Recommendations from the Local Democracy Lab

1. Allow enough time to design the process with participants. Organisers, facilitators and decision-makers should involve intended participants in defining the purpose, rules, methods and opportunities to contribute. Planning should take account of affordability, accessibility and the time, skills and resources required of those taking part.

The first recommendation includes decision-makers in the design work because some choices about influence need to be settled by the body responsible for the eventual outcome. Facilitators can determine how to organise discussion, while institutional participants can clarify what is possible within the process. Shared planning gives the people being invited a more reliable basis for deciding what they want to contribute.

For a municipal or youth initiative, this means giving people a say in how they will work together before the invitation and schedule are settled. The practical questions include which decisions are open, what support people will need and whether the proposed approach is realistic for someone with limited time or resources.

Affordability in the first recommendation includes the resources people themselves need to take part. Time and skills have practical costs, even where joining a process carries no fee. Decisions

about methods and support are part of the initial design work. An approach agreed with those expected to use it is more likely to reveal those costs early enough for the organiser to take account of them.

2. Make expectations clear and sustain trust throughout the process. Organisers and facilitators should explain what participants can contribute, who will consider their input and what outcomes they can reasonably expect. They should maintain contact through accessible channels and allow people to vary their involvement as their circumstances change. Progress updates and opportunities to reconnect can preserve that relationship between meetings.

3. Provide visible, concrete and accessible follow-up. Organisers and decision-makers should explain how contributions were considered, what resulted and what happens next. The update should reach the people who contributed, including young people who move or who are no longer regularly present in the community.

The youth contribution was particularly important to the third recommendation. Its concern was what a process owes to someone whose residence or availability changes before the work is finished. Arranging for contact after meetings end would make the participants' ability to follow the result less dependent on their continued membership of a group or their presence in the city.

Participants identified this as a design question from the outset. A process needs someone able to explain the decision and a means of contacting contributors once the meetings end. Communicating a result through several suitable channels gives mobile participants a chance to see the impact of their work.

A short record of the result has to make sense to someone who has not heard the later deliberations. The person should be able to relate the update to the question that originally brought them into the process. Where a decision is still pending, the people providing the update can explain the stage reached and what is expected to follow. This gives follow-up a useful function even before a final decision can be communicated.

The recommendation applies to the result that can be communicated at each stage. A short account of what participants said is possible after the discussion. The decision-maker can subsequently explain how the organisation used that contribution. The distinction is important in processes where institutional consideration takes longer than the period in which the group meets together.

The group formulated the three recommendations without a formal ranking. Three principles informed them. People should receive clear instructions about what the process asks of them. The outcome should remain accessible to those who contributed. Participation should be affordable and offer further opportunities for involvement. The follow-up discussions confirmed the relevance of these principles for stakeholders working in different settings.

The confirmation from the follow-up discussions concerned the relevance of the principles to the work of the participants and their organisations. Those involved were able to consider how they might apply or promote them in their own settings. This is an indication of potential use, alongside the three specific next steps proposed by NALAS.

Looking ahead

Existing NALAS and ROOT WB activities can be used to carry the work forward. In Strasbourg, the prospective effect would be closer cooperation among residents, the City and the community or youth organisations already working with them. The proposals are framed as improvements to the operation of existing participation mechanisms. The follow-up therefore offers opportunities to test tools and communication practices within activities that already have an organisational home.

NALAS proposed three practical uses for the Strasbourg results. First, it will take the recommendations into the ROOT WB Regional Community Dialogue Forums. A short set of discussion questions would allow partners to test which issues recur elsewhere and which reflect the Strasbourg setting.

Second, NALAS proposes drafting a one-page Participation and Follow-up Canvas and piloting it in an existing activity. It would help organisers identify who is missing, what participants can influence, who will consider their input and how they will receive a response.

Third, NALAS proposes testing a short “What we heard / What happens next” update with the Strasbourg Lab itself. This could be shared by email, through a brief web or social media post, or as a participant note. Where relevant, NALAS also sees applications in its Community of Practice on deliberative democracy, Bridges of Inclusion and LORAI. The intended use in each case is to make the relationship between a contribution, an institutional response and subsequent action visible to the people involved.

NALAS also links the pilot update to the project's civic participation campaign under Work Package 6. In the Community of Practice, the corresponding question is how institutions respond when people have generated a set of recommendations. Bridges of Inclusion would apply it to the way stakeholder evidence informs municipal services. In LORAI, the focus would be on how local-government evidence and positions are reflected in wider policy and reform discussions.

COUNTRY REPORT – MONTENEGRO

Implementing partner: Centre for Democracy and Human Rights (CEDEM)

Local Democracy Lab: Where Democracy Listens

Date: 20, 22 and 30 October 2026

Location: Podgorica

Country population: 623,633 residents, 2023 census (MONSTAT)

Population of the City of Podgorica: 179,505 residents, 2023 census (MONSTAT)

Local context and the issue addressed

The Lab was implemented in Podgorica, the Capital City of Montenegro, which is home to almost 29% of the country's population. Podgorica hosts the Government, the Parliament and most state institutions, as well as the main campus of the University of Montenegro and a large share of the country's civil society organisations. This makes it a natural setting for bringing together local and national institutional actors, CSOs and young people in one process.

Institutionally, local participation in Montenegro is regulated by the Law on Local Self-Government, which requires public debates on budgets, development plans and general acts, while each municipality defines the details through its own decision on citizen participation. A new law was adopted in September 2026 and will apply from June 2027, requiring municipalities to revise their statutes and participation rules. This makes the timing of the Lab particularly relevant. At the same time, citizen engagement through formal channels remains low: only 3% of citizens reported taking part in public debates in 2022, compared with 15% who took part in protests (Balkan Barometer 2022).

Under the provisions discussed in the Lab, a municipal debate on a covered act lasts at least fifteen days. The municipality has to consider the comments and report reasons for non-acceptance to the proposer of the act. Article 168 does not itself require that report to reach the person who submitted the comment. CEDEM used this distinction to focus the Lab on what happens when internal reporting is completed and the contributor is still waiting for an answer.

The discussion identifies the 13 June 2027 application date for the new local-government law as a point around which municipalities would have to consider their existing rules. Reviewing participation procedures at the same time as municipal statutes creates an opportunity to examine whether residents will be able to see the treatment of their comments. It also makes clear which elements may still differ between municipalities if the national framework leaves them to local decision.

Podgorica brings municipal and national authorities, civil society organisations and the University of Montenegro together in one city. CEDEM examined a point at which their experiences of public consultation often diverged. A public body could hold a debate and produce a report while a person who submitted a proposal still had no explanation of the outcome.

Municipalities determine the details of local participation through their own decisions. CEDEM reported that many already require a report to be published and sent to participants, but that practice varies. At national level, publication does not necessarily mean that an individual contributor receives a response.

Local and national consultation practices need to be considered separately. Municipal decisions can provide for a report to be published and sent to participants, as illustrated by the local rules and draft rules reviewed in Tuzi and Kotor. The national decree calls for publication of a report within fifteen days, but does not provide for delivery to individual participants. For a resident or civil society organisation that deals with different authorities, the ability to obtain a reply therefore depends partly on which body is running the consultation.

The national rules examined by CEDEM also contain exceptions to public debate for certain circumstances and types of measures. The 2025 government report on implementation of the consultation decree identified selective early engagement, limited substantive use of working groups and weak explanations for rejected comments. These observations helped place participants' experiences alongside evidence about how the rules had been applied by state institutions.

The national Public Administration Reform Strategy and its action plan provided a further reform context. The plan set a target for consultations to comply with the legal framework and SIGMA principles. CEDEM identified a difference between that stated aim and the practical arrangements for quality control, noting that proposed changes to the Government's rules of procedure had yet to be adopted. This put the participants' concern with enforceable practice in a concrete reform context.

National obligation to consult on certain laws and strategies is contrasted with the local obligation to debate specified municipal acts. This affects the point at which a particular obligation might apply to a budget, a plan or a subordinate regulation. The differences explain why the Lab examined a common standard for feedback without assuming that local and national bodies were using the same procedures.

Revisions to municipal statutes and participation rules under the new Law on Local Self-Government, due to apply in June 2027, gave the discussion a practical focus. Participants considered what a feedback standard would need to cover at both levels of government.

The issue had already become concrete in Podgorica before the event. In September 2026, the Capital City's executive sought a ministerial inspection of the City Assembly's consultation process. CEDEM and four other organisations publicly opposed the request because they saw a risk that consultations could be suspended. That dispute gave the Lab a local example of the institutional choices involved when concerns arise about how a consultation is carried out.

The EU Charter can be used as a common European reference for good administration, information and non-discrimination. Montenegro's constitutional framework includes a right to address a state body and receive a reply, as set out in Article 57. For this discussion, those references made the response to a submission a matter of democratic accountability as well as

administrative procedure. The question was how the practice of consultation could give a person an understandable account of the treatment of their contribution.

The earlier ROOT WB assessment gave Montenegro scores of 2.74 out of five for the effectiveness of participation and 2.84 for institutional openness. These figures describe the assessment context, rather than the views of the people who attended the Lab. They helped motivate a closer look at one part of the process that institutions can change, namely the quality and accessibility of the information contributors receive about an outcome.

The Local Democracy Lab

CEDEM brought together representatives of the Municipality of Zeta and the Capital City of Podgorica, national ministries, civil society organisations, academia, an international organisation, citizens and students through three linked sessions. This mix connected questions about rules and institutional practice with the perspectives of young people and others whose experiences could help explain why an invitation to discuss a draft does not always lead to participation.

Identifying what makes a consultation fail. In the first session, municipal representatives and civil society participants began with a reversed question. What would make a public consultation completely meaningless? They compared the answers with practices they recognised and drew up a checklist covering information and invitation, participation, consideration of input, and feedback and follow-up.

The first session used an adapted Creative Destruction exercise. Mixed groups initially described hypothetical ways a consultation could go wrong, then checked which of those practices they recognised from actual experience. The sequence gave officials and civil society participants room to identify a failure without attributing it to a particular authority at the outset. They then used a checklist exercise to convert the practices into conditions that would make a consultation function effectively.

Assigning responsibility. A second group of citizens and civil society representatives reviewed the emerging checklist. They considered which improvements a municipality could make itself and which required action by the national government.

Assigning the checklist items to the appropriate level helped clarify how much could be achieved through a change in local operations. A municipal office can alter its own methods of reaching people, for example, while an obligation applying across municipalities may depend on a national framework. The second group could therefore consider each proposal in terms of the authority needed to act on it and refine the checklist before it reached the student session.

The checklist was organised around information, invitation, engagement, consideration of proposals and the reply. Discussing responsibility after that sequence had been established allowed participants to identify stages that a particular actor could influence. A public communication team and an institutional body preparing a decision may be involved in the same consultation but accountable for different tasks.

Testing the proposals with young people. In the third session, students debated whether protest offered a more effective way to influence government decisions than taking part in public debates. They then discussed the proposals with a representative of the Capital City. Outputs passed from one session to the next, so each group could examine and refine the work of the preceding group.

The debate at the Faculty of Political Science on 23 October was organised around proposition and opposition teams. It was followed by an open exchange with Danilo Vučinić from the Capital City of Podgorica. Students were able to put questions to a municipal representative after developing competing positions on how young people can exercise influence. The discussion provided a test of whether the emerging commitments would address what students wanted from a formal public debate.

Its debate and subsequent exchange offered a different form of participation from the exercises used earlier. Young people could make a case for either method of influence and then use the dialogue with a city representative to test how the proposals would work in the institutional route under discussion.



Photo 5 Session 3 of Podgorica Lab

Key findings

The missing response. The strongest agreement across the three sessions concerned what happens to a contribution once a consultation closes. Participants described investing time and expertise in a proposal and receiving little indication of whether anyone had considered it. Even where a published report existed, contributors might not receive it. A brief, general reason for rejecting a comment gave little insight into the decision.

One difficulty the groups identified is knowing whether a response addresses the point a participant made. A summary may group proposals under a broad topic even when contributors

raised different questions about a provision. If the reasons are also given at that broad level, a participant cannot easily tell which part of their submission the institution considered. This was a reason for treating the structure of the report as a substantive issue.

The distinction mattered to trust. People could accept that an authority would not adopt every suggestion, but wanted to understand the reasons and whether their proposal had made any difference. Participants linked the absence of a response to declining interest in future consultations. Students made the same connection when discussing the relative value of formal participation and protest.

For organisations that invest specialist time in submissions, silence creates uncertainty about whether to continue working on the issue. The organisation may need to decide whether to revise the proposal, take it up with another institution or monitor an agreed change. A reasoned response supplies information relevant to each of those choices. The demand for feedback thus concerned the practical use of an answer as well as confidence that officials had considered the submission.

Mirjana Vuković, a civil society representative, described the need. “People need to know what happened to their proposals. A clear explanation of what was accepted or rejected would make participation more meaningful.”

The distinction between a partly accepted and an accepted proposal is important where a contributor wants to know what will change. A reply can identify which element the authority intends to carry forward and explain why other elements were set aside. Participants' interest in explanation therefore went beyond the simple question of whether the authority had treated the submission favourably.

Who hears about a consultation. Participants said notices often appeared only on institutional websites. Generic announcements were unlikely to reach some young people, residents outside urban centres and groups with little previous contact with public institutions. Even someone who located the notice could struggle to see why the proposal concerned them.

The attendance concern extended beyond the number of website visits. Some people have little reason to search a ministry or municipal site regularly, particularly if they have yet to take part in a public debate. Students' accounts linked that information barrier to their low use of consultations. This highlighted a difference between publication through an official channel and communication that actually reaches people affected by the subject of a draft.

The wording of draft acts, explanatory material and reports created a second barrier. Participants described technical legal language that limited discussion to specialists and organisations already familiar with the procedure. Students connected inaccessible information with their limited involvement in consultation processes.

A person reading a draft also needs to understand the relevance of its provisions to a practical issue in their community. The participants' concern with technical wording covered both the draft and the explanation of the measure. Making the latter usable can lower the amount of specialist knowledge a person needs before deciding whether to examine the full draft or ask for advice.

The group also discussed the position of people with specialist knowledge. Expert organisations, academics and professionals may be asked for comments only when a draft has already taken shape. Earlier involvement would give them a better opportunity to contribute to the substance of a proposal. Participants saw a need for both broader public access and a better route for relevant expertise at the drafting stage.

The consultation of experts at different stages can address different questions. Once an act has been drafted, an expert may be able to point to a technical problem with a particular provision. Their contribution at an earlier point can inform what is investigated and which alternatives reach the draft at all. Participants' concern about the timing of expert input therefore extended to the quality of the options eventually offered for public discussion.

What an outsider can trace. Participants could find no simple way to follow a proposal from submission through a reasoned decision to later action. Reports that listed comments in aggregate obscured which point had been accepted and what had changed. In an evaluation, a participant identified a public register of recommendations and responses as the most important idea.

Balša Dragović, a young participant, explained its purpose. “A public register of proposals would help us follow what institutions do with citizens’ input, even after the consultation has ended.”

Where participants differed. The group agreed that obligations to consult and provide feedback need to be followed in practice. Civil society representatives placed more emphasis on sanctions where a public body ignores those obligations. Local government representatives favoured support and capacity building. This difference concerned how to secure compliance. It did not displace the broader agreement on sending contributors a reasoned response.

The disagreement about enforcement involved two different accounts of the institutional problem. Civil society participants emphasised what happens when an authority can disregard an obligation without consequence. Local government representatives pointed to the need for practical support and the capacity to meet the standard. The distinction is relevant when considering which failures reflect unclear or under-resourced procedures and which would require stronger oversight.

The student debate also put institutional participation and protest in the same discussion about influence. A lawful protest can make a concern visible to a wider public, while participation in a debate may give an authority a concrete amendment or comment to consider. The exercise asked the students to weigh the effectiveness of the two routes in light of their experience. Their accounts of weak feedback help explain why the formal route could be less attractive even where it was available.

Proposed solutions

Give each contributor a usable answer. Municipal secretariats and ministries could send a short written response within a set deadline. A common template would show whether a proposal was accepted, accepted in part or rejected, with an explanation for each decision. A standard consultation report could use the same structure to make the public record understandable as well as the individual reply.

Participants identified the Ministry of Regional Investment Development and Cooperation with NGOs as a potential contributor to common guidance. The secretariat or ministry conducting the consultation would be responsible for giving the individual answer. A shared format would let authorities explain the disposition of a proposal consistently while retaining the need to give reasons specific to its substance.

The group distinguished the response sent to a participant from the record available to everyone. It proposed a public online register of consultations, recommendations and institutional responses. Citizens, civil society organisations and the media could then see the status of a proposal over time. Municipalities, the Union of Municipalities and the ministry responsible for e-government would have roles in establishing the register.

The register proposed by the groups could record recommendations from consultations at different levels. A particular responsibility would remain with the body that considers each proposal. For the register to be useful, the entry would have to identify that institution and show how far it had progressed in dealing with the input. This would allow follow-up by an organisation observing an issue across several consultations.

The proposals address different points in the process. A direct response tells an individual what happened to their own contribution. A public record makes it possible to see how an institution deals with proposals across a consultation and to follow up after the final report.

Timeliness is a separate requirement from the content of the reply. A consultation can close while the act is still being prepared, and contributors may want to know where their proposal stands during that period. Participants' suggestion of a set deadline would give both the authority and the contributor a reference point. The public record would then serve a longer period, including when an organisation comes back to examine implementation.

Plan communication before launching the consultation. Participants proposed an annual public list of planned consultations and a communication plan for each one. Local authorities and ministries could work with civil society organisations, schools, faculties, local media and community groups to reach people beyond their websites. A one-page summary of each draft would explain what was proposed, what would change and why. Accessible formats could be added where needed.

An annual list would allow organisations and individuals to see forthcoming debates before a single notice is issued. The plan for an individual consultation would help officials choose channels suited to its audience. In addition to municipal or ministerial communication units, participants identified faculties, schools, local media and local communities as possible points of contact. Their roles would vary according to who is affected by the proposed act.

Use expertise early. Ministries and municipalities could involve academic, professional and civil society experts during drafting, including through working groups. Participants connected this proposal to the quality of the draft being discussed.

Monitor whether obligations are met. The group proposed regular monitoring and an annual public compliance report. Some participants also called for sanctions. The suggested actors included the Government, the responsible ministry, the Administrative Inspection and local

assemblies. The institutional roles and the divergence of views on sanctions were both relevant to this proposal.

An annual compliance report would let the responsible bodies review consultation and feedback practices across more than one case. Inspectors, local assemblies and the Council for Cooperation between State Administration Bodies and NGOs were among the potential actors named by participants. The proposed monitoring would provide an empirical basis for distinguishing cases where a consultation was omitted from those where it took place but the response required by the rules was incomplete.

Recommendations from the Local Democracy Lab

1. Require reasoned feedback for every contributor. Municipalities, the Government and ministries should ensure that each participant receives an explanation of how their proposal was treated. The rule should apply at local and national level, with Parliament involved where legislative amendments are needed. This recommendation attracted broad agreement across the sessions.

There is the possibility of action by Parliament if a statutory amendment is needed. A municipality can take a decision about its own arrangements under the existing framework, while Parliament or the Government can address obligations with wider application. This distinction explains why participants directed the recommendation both to bodies that conduct consultations and to institutions that can set common rules.

2. Establish a public register of recommendations and responses. The ministry responsible for e-government, municipalities and the Union of Municipalities should provide a way to see what was proposed, how the authority dealt with it and what happened afterwards. The register would make follow-up possible beyond the person who originally submitted a comment.

A register would also give civic organisations and journalists a way to compare institutional replies over time. Its value depends on being able to identify a proposal in the public record after the consultation has ended. The ministry responsible for the e-government portal could contribute infrastructure, while the authorities that handle submissions would have the information needed to keep the status of the proposals current.

3. Adapt consultation outreach to the people affected. Municipalities, ministries, the Union of Municipalities and civil society organisations should use a communication strategy suited to different audiences. Participants singled out young people and residents outside the capital. The intended improvement is to reach people through channels they use and to give them enough information to decide whether and how to contribute.

The communication recommendation identifies the Union of Municipalities as relevant alongside individual local bodies and civil society. That gives the work a potential link across municipalities while leaving room for each authority to assess its own audience. The choice of channels for a national draft can differ from that for a municipal service, even when the aim of reaching a wider set of contributors is shared.

4. Make consultation documents understandable. The local or national body proposing an act should provide plain-language summaries of drafts and reports. Residents should be able to tell what an act would change before being asked to comment on it.

Its scope covers both the point at which a draft is open for comment and the report that follows. The bodies proposing acts were identified as the relevant actors because they can explain the intended change and make the explanation available within the consultation process.

5. Improve the quality of consultation reports. The ministry responsible for the consultation decree and the municipalities should require item-by-item reasons for accepting or rejecting proposals. Publication is more informative when readers can connect the explanation to a particular contribution.

The recommendation for item-by-item reporting would make it easier to understand responses to submissions that contain several distinct proposals. A general statement about the whole submission can conceal instances where the authority treated individual points differently. Revising the report form at national level and applying the same principle in municipal reports would make it possible to link the reasons given to the actual issue raised.

6. Strengthen accountability for consultation and feedback. Government, Parliament, the Administrative Inspection and local assemblies should address failures to hold consultations or give feedback. Civil society participants supported sanctions. Local government representatives placed greater weight on assistance and building institutional capacity.

The recommendation on accountability applies at two points. One concerns whether an authority properly opens a public debate or explains reliance on an exception. The other concerns whether it delivers the feedback required after the debate. Oversight focused on the number of consultations would miss the second question. The range of actors named reflects the fact that responsibility for reviewing those practices differs at local and national level.

7. Involve experts earlier. Ministries and municipalities should consult expert civil society organisations, academics and professional bodies while drafts are being prepared. The group wanted their experience to inform the options presented to the wider public. This recommendation complements the measures for extending participation to residents who lack specialist knowledge.

The proposed involvement of expert bodies includes use of working groups. Such a group gives specialist organisations, researchers or professional associations an opportunity to discuss the basis of a provision with the people preparing it. This is an earlier function than that of a public consultation, which also needs to be accessible to residents who do not have professional knowledge of the subject.

The use of working groups to develop a draft should be distinguished from the consultation that follows publication. Greater involvement of relevant experts at the first stage could help clarify which evidence informs the options. The proposals for plain language and intelligible reports would support the second stage, where a wider public needs to understand what the institution is considering and what it decides.

Looking ahead

CEDEM identified a meeting with the Ministry of Public Administration as a next step and requested a separate exchange to present the recommendations. A representative of the Capital City also proposed that his office organise a meeting about the initiative and ideas raised.

The two proposed exchanges would involve actors with different responsibilities. A meeting with the Ministry of Public Administration could consider the recommendations in the context of wider consultation practice. A discussion organised through the Capital City would give local actors an opportunity to return to issues put forward in Podgorica, including ideas raised in the dialogue with students.

The recommendations can inform municipal discussions about revised participation rules and national discussions about consultation practice and cooperation with civil society. CEDEM identified the preparation of the next strategy for cooperation with NGOs as a further opportunity to raise the quality of feedback.

CEDEM identified the planned strategy for cooperation with NGOs for 2027–2031 as one setting where the recommendations could be considered. The national cooperation council's work programme also envisaged discussion about consultation quality with municipalities and NGOs. Those settings concern the way authorities support and monitor consultation practice, while the revisions to municipal participation rules concern the procedures that residents would use locally.

CEDEM also linked the register proposal to the underused national e-participation portal. A tool designed to collect comments can be extended to show what happened to them, provided authorities have arrangements to keep the information current. The recommendation therefore offers a concrete use for digital infrastructure in the wider public administration reform discussion.

The change participants sought can be seen from the contributor’s perspective. A resident who takes the time to comment would receive a reasoned answer, could look up the status of the proposal and would know where to find the next opportunity to participate.

The youth discussion suggests how the results of better practice could be observed from outside the administration. A student who chooses an institutional channel would be able to see a proposal reach the responsible authority and receive a reply tied to that proposal. CEDEM presents the resulting increase in trust as a possible effect of a more accountable process, particularly for young people who have had little reason to use consultations in the past.

COUNTRY REPORT – NORTH MACEDONIA

Implementing partner: European Movement in the Republic of North Macedonia (EMMK)

Local Democracy Lab: I Want to Participate – But How? A Dialogue on Inclusive Local Governance

Date: 26 October 2026

Location: Municipality of Aerodrom, Skopje

Country population: 1,819,074 residents, State Statistical Office estimate at 31 December 2025

Population of the City of Skopje: 526,502 residents, 2021 census

Local context and the issue addressed

The Lab was implemented in the Municipality of „Aerodrom“, part of the City of Skopje, North Macedonia's capital and largest urban centre. Aerodrom is an urban municipality experiencing ongoing residential development, which places pressure on communal infrastructure, public spaces and local services. Local governance involves the municipality, the City of Skopje and various public enterprises, with responsibilities distributed across different institutions. This institutional structure can make it difficult for citizens to identify the competent authority and obtain timely responses to local concerns. A resident reporting a fallen tree or a problem with parking may have to identify several institutions before finding one that can act. The Lab brought together citizens, municipal representatives from several different municipalities, and civil society actors to discuss these challenges and identify practical ways to improve communication, institutional coordination and citizen participation in local decision-making.

The discussion of communal services centred on the conditions in which residents use their neighbourhoods. Accessibility, the upkeep of shared spaces and pressure on infrastructure can be related even when different offices manage them. The distribution of responsibility across Skopje's ten municipalities, the City and public enterprises can be used to explain why a participation issue is also an issue of service administration.

The Lab addressed the connection between these everyday experiences and citizen participation. Residents already have opportunities to raise concerns, but a complaint can pass from one body to another without anyone explaining what will happen. Repeated experiences of this kind shape whether people consider it worthwhile to take part in a public discussion or propose an improvement.

These local responsibilities can be placed alongside North Macedonia's provisions on direct participation. The Constitution recognises participation in local matters such as planning, services and environmental protection. The Law on Local Self-Government identifies channels including citizens' initiatives and gatherings and provides for appeals and proposals concerning municipal authorities. The discussion connects the right to submit a petition and receive a reply with the concern raised by residents who had used a formal route and still found it difficult to obtain a clear response.

The Open Government Partnership Action Plan for 2024–2026 provides a wider context for the problem. In the evidence cited for its municipal participation commitment, about two-thirds of

400 citizens interviewed across the eight planning regions did not know how to become involved or lacked information on doing so. The plan also identified differences among municipalities in the channels available. This was relevant to a Lab considering how a person can use a procedure when the issue or the responsible body extends beyond a single municipality.

Article 29 of the Law on Local Self-Government is specifically relevant to proposals and appeals concerning municipal authorities. There is a provision for a detailed reply from the mayor within a prescribed period. For the Lab, the practical question was how arrangements for recording and referring concerns help residents reach the point at which the competent institution can answer them.

The discussion drew on experience in Skopje and other urban municipalities, including Kumanovo. Aerodrom provided a setting in which residents and municipal representatives could examine how they communicate and how responsibilities work in practice.

In 2025 a survey on satisfaction with municipal services was undertaken. Among respondents who reported participating, citizens' gatherings were used more often than hearings or municipal council meetings. Communal services and urban planning were among the most frequent subjects of proposals. These findings help explain why the organisers used familiar problems with services and neighbourhood facilities as the point of entry into a discussion about how residents influence local governance.

Local responsibilities are also relevant to the fundamental rights institutional obligations. North Macedonia's Constitution recognises a right to a healthy environment, and environmental protection and communal activities are subjects of local governance. In the Lab, the practical link between those principles and residents' lives could be seen in the discussion of waste, cleaning and the maintenance of spaces people use daily.

The Local Democracy Lab

The four-hour Lab brought together citizens, students, representatives of civil society organisations working on local democracy, municipal representatives and university professors, with experience from several municipalities.

Students and academics were among the participants alongside people with direct experience of municipal work. The universities' presence helped bring civic learning into an exchange that otherwise concerned very concrete service encounters. Students could consider how people first learn to use the mechanisms, while representatives of municipalities could explain the processes through which a local problem normally reaches a service.

Starting with residents' experience. Representatives of the European Movement, the Municipality of Aerodrom and ALDA Balkan opened the session. A moderated plenary invited participants to describe concrete encounters with local authorities. They discussed reporting problems in public spaces, finding the competent service and obtaining information about infrastructure, maintenance and urban planning.

Professor Konstantin Minoski, Mayor Dejan Miteski and ALDA Balkan Executive Director Katica Janeva brought academic, municipal and civil society perspectives to the opening. Professor

Marina Mitrevska then moderated an exchange in which participants set out where they had encountered problems with services, public space and institutional communication. The plenary allowed an individual experience to be heard before groups were asked to decide whether it indicated a recurring difficulty and consider a response.

The introductory discussion allowed participants to draw on cases beyond Aerodrom, including experience from Kumanovo. The value of including those cases was the opportunity to compare a concern about services in one municipality with what residents or municipal participants had encountered elsewhere. The groups could then distinguish the features of Skopje's particular division of powers from difficulties that can arise wherever several bodies contribute to a response.

Developing responses in smaller groups. A World Café allowed participants to revisit issues from the plenary in more detail. They compared what residents had done, which body they had approached and where a response had broken down. They then identified changes that municipalities, the City and other actors could make.

Moving to smaller groups made it possible to examine what had happened between a resident's initial concern and an institutional answer. A case might involve finding a reporting channel, an exchange with one service and a referral to another institution. That sequence mattered because the visible problem in a public space could be similar across several cases even when the breakdown in administration occurred at a different point. The World Café gave participants time to trace those differences before formulating their proposals.

The format was especially useful when one type of problem brought several different experiences into the same discussion. A facilitator could ask comparable questions of residents who had contacted different institutions. The answers could then be considered against what municipal participants knew about the distribution of duties. This gave the discussion a practical basis for distinguishing problems that arose in a particular case from ones that called for a common response.

The groups developed three recommendations. Each built on an existing public responsibility and addressed a different point at which local governance could be improved, from the handling of an individual complaint to joint work between municipalities and decisions about the budget.

EMMK identified the combination of an open exchange and structured group work as transferable to settings with overlapping responsibilities. The two formats serve different purposes. The plenary gathers cases and points of view, while the small groups can examine relationships among particular institutions and assess what can realistically be changed. In another setting the relevant local services or planning powers might differ. Clear questions and a record of the group discussion would help retain the connection between the cases and the resulting recommendations.



Photo 6 World Cafe in Skopje

Key findings

Participants' accounts linked control of public space to several kinds of experience. Some spoke about the quality of maintenance or municipal services, while others focused on what residents do when those services fall short. Bringing the two experiences together allowed the Lab to consider both the capacity of institutions to act and how the institutions treat the public knowledge available to them.

A complaint can reach several offices without reaching a decision. Participants described residents being referred between municipalities, the City and public enterprises. Fallen trees, parking management and the maintenance of public space were examples. The difficulty was greatest where more than one body had a role and the resident was left to coordinate between them.

A local participant described one outcome. “Citizens were referred from one institution to another and eventually had to clear the public space themselves.” Residents needed an explanation of who was responsible, but information alone would not resolve a case that required two institutions to act together.

In a referral that fails, the institutions may each explain why they do not handle a matter without establishing which body will act. The resident is then left to carry the information from office to office. The cases raised at the Lab made this a question of coordination as well as public information. Even if the first body contacted has no authority to do the work, its response can affect whether the report ever reaches the organisation with the relevant responsibility.

Participants treated fragmented responsibility as the most urgent concern. They wanted a means of raising the problem once, identifying the body that would act and following the case until the resident received a response. They also connected coordination across institutional boundaries

to accountability. Without a named service or a record of what it had done, it was difficult to tell where the delay had occurred.

The gap between reporting and taking part in decisions. Public meetings, consultation procedures and digital channels were available, yet several participants doubted their influence. As Dejan Miteski, Mayor of Aerodrom, observed, “Citizens are willing to report problems and express criticism, but far fewer participate in public discussions to help develop solutions.”

The youth participation studies give a wider context for the gap described in the room. The 2025 study reported that 70 per cent of young people had never been consulted by local or national authorities. More than half felt unable to influence the authorities at all. These findings help situate participants' interest in activities through which younger residents can work on a specific local problem and see the public body involved.

Other participants described what happened after residents raised a concern. Dialogue could stop once the problem had been identified. People were seldom invited to help develop a solution and often received little information about the outcome. Some said a public complaint on social media could attract attention more quickly than a formal submission.

The difference in views described by the mayor and other participants also concerns what residents expect from a channel. Reporting an urgent service problem typically begins with a defined issue and a request for a response. A public discussion about local priorities asks people to invest time before they know what will be decided. If participants have little information about what happened in previous exchanges, it can be difficult for them to judge the value of making that additional commitment.

Neighbourhood communities were identified as an underused link between residents and municipal authorities. Regular dialogue at that level could give people a way to propose improvements and return to them. Participants broadly agreed that access needed to extend beyond an occasional hearing or an individual complaint, especially if residents were to influence local priorities.

The Code of Good Practices distinguishes informing, consultation, dialogue and partnership. The Lab examples illustrate how those stages can differ in a neighbourhood. The municipality can tell people about a planned action or collect views on it. A regular exchange gives residents an opportunity to discuss which problem should be addressed and to bring their experience into the development of the response.

Neighbourhood communities could also help surface priorities before invitations to a formal consultation are issued. Residents may bring several issues to a meeting because they encounter them in the same place, even though they concern different municipal functions. A continuing relationship with the municipality would give the community a way to establish which issues have been referred, which remain open and which need to be considered together.

A representative of the Association Kreativa observed that municipalities tended to focus on meeting statutory requirements. The statement put a civil society perspective beside the mayor's account of the lower turnout for discussions than for reports of problems. The two accounts

identify different points at which a municipality and its residents can lose contact. They informed the emphasis on more sustained opportunities to shape public action.

Growing demand on municipal services. Participants linked slow responses to limited inspection capacity, pressure on infrastructure and the demands of maintaining communal services. They understood administrative capacity to include staff skills in communicating with citizens, using digital tools and coordinating a response with other institutions. In densely populated Aerodrom, additional housing increased the demands on existing infrastructure.

Participants described capacity from the point of view of the service as well as the resident. An official needs a way to record a complaint, find out whether another institution is already dealing with it and explain subsequent action. Where inspection or maintenance resources are stretched, a clear record can still help the authorities identify recurring problems and the residents concerned. Communication and coordination were therefore treated as part of the ability to deliver a service.

Waste management, illegal dumping of bulky waste, littering and vandalism illustrated both public and civic responsibilities. Residents were concerned about poorly maintained spaces and construction that outpaced communal infrastructure. They also discussed behaviour that damaged shared facilities.

The criticism of housing construction included concern about the relationship between new development and the capacity of communal infrastructure. Residents experience the combined effects when existing services or spaces need to support more users. Because the issues involve upkeep as well as development, participants had reason to ask how operational concerns can inform a wider discussion about future planning and investment.

Participants differed on which response should carry most weight. Some favoured inspections, fines and enforcement. Others emphasised education, work with young people and community action. They saw room for both approaches. Their common priorities were clearer institutional responsibility, more reliable follow-up on residents' concerns and a larger role for citizens in developing practical responses.

The environmental discussion exposed a difference in the time horizon of possible responses. An inspection or penalty is directed at current conduct and can be relevant at a site where damage recurs. Learning and community projects concern how people use public spaces over time. An academic participant's concern about the loss of responsible urban living captured the reason several participants also gave attention to everyday behaviour, including the role of young residents in caring for shared facilities.

Proposed solutions

Identify the responsible service. Participants proposed a municipal services guide, available online and in print, that would identify the competent institution, contact details and the procedure for reporting different problems. Municipalities, the City of Skopje, public enterprises and civil society organisations could contribute. The printed version would allow residents to use the guidance without relying on a digital service.

The services guide was proposed as a practical explanation of where responsibility normally sits. Its printed version would serve residents who do not use online information routinely. The unified reporting proposal serves a different function where responsibility is difficult to determine from a guide alone. It would give staff a case to verify and route internally, saving a resident from having to resolve a complicated division of responsibilities before making contact.

Strengthen the people who handle cases. The groups proposed practical training for municipal staff in citizen communication, complaint handling, coordination and digital case management. This would help services deal with a request involving several bodies and give residents useful feedback. A digital tool would still need staff able to verify, transfer and follow a case.

The training proposal concerns the existing municipal teams that would handle the work. Staff dealing with residents need to explain what information is required to open a case. Staff coordinating with another body need to know which information can move with it and whom to contact. Learning to use a digital system would be one part of that preparation, alongside the practical work of communication and case handling.

Handling a service request and communicating with the person who made it may involve different work inside a municipal department. The proposed training would help staff connect those activities. An official coordinating the institutional response would need to ensure that the next person contacting the resident has the information necessary to explain the decision or referral in practical terms.

Give neighbourhoods a regular route into the municipality. Participants proposed strengthening neighbourhood communities, with procedures for sending initiatives to the municipality, receiving an institutional response and monitoring follow-up. This would provide a place to raise a concern collectively as well as a way to report a single incident.

Using neighbourhood structures regularly would also allow discussion of matters that are hard to resolve through a single report. A proposed improvement to an area may require residents to agree on a priority and the municipality to consider the work alongside other demands. The approach gives residents a recognised place to develop a proposal together and an institutional route through which to learn what action follows.

A neighbourhood community can also help establish when an issue reflects a concern shared by several residents. That can give a public office context for considering it in a programme or a budget, alongside reports received from individuals. The group proposed retaining a means of institutional feedback so that the neighbourhood can follow how the initiative is handled after the meeting that produced it.

Connect young people's participation to visible work in public spaces. Participants proposed supporting youth-led environmental initiatives through schools, digital media and local community activities. Municipalities, young people, youth organisations, schools and civil society groups could combine public awareness with practical action in the places residents use. This responded both to limited participation in organised civic activities and to concern about the treatment of shared facilities.

Schools were identified as a place to involve young people whose contact with civic organisations may be limited. Digital media can help them bring an issue to the attention of others, while a practical activity in a public space gives them an opportunity to work on the issue itself. The proposal links education about the use of shared facilities with something residents can observe in the neighbourhood.

Prevent recurring damage. In public spaces affected by repeated vandalism, participants proposed targeted preventive measures and coordinated inspections. The municipalities and Ministry of Interior would have roles alongside schools and local communities. The groups paired enforcement with education and community activities.

Participants envisaged preventive work at locations with repeated problems, which would require relevant services to coordinate their interventions. The role of enforcement authorities would depend on the conduct involved. Educational and community activities would support a separate part of the response by involving the people who use those locations in the continuing care of the space.

Participants identified a difference between a service responding to a particular incident and residents helping to shape priorities. The first set of proposals would improve reporting and the response to damage. The neighbourhood and youth proposals would also give people a role in looking after shared space and in identifying what the municipality should address next.

Recommendations from the Local Democracy Lab

1. Introduce a unified system for reporting and tracking complaints. The City of Skopje and its municipalities should strengthen existing citizen service units and introduce a common digital platform covering municipal services, City departments and public enterprises. Residents would enter the type and location of a problem. The proposed system would use AI-assisted classification to suggest the competent service and notify it. Designated staff would verify assignments, coordinate action and provide feedback.

Each complaint should receive a reference number, a response deadline and a status the resident can check. The system should produce regular public reports on how institutions respond. Municipal information and public relations services and the relevant public enterprises would need to participate.

The case number would provide a reference for communication across institutions as well as for the resident. With public enterprises and municipal services using a shared route, a transfer of responsibility could remain part of the same record. Aggregated reports could then show where cases are progressing and where handovers repeatedly cause delays. The emphasis on verification reflects the importance of establishing the facts and the competent service early in the process.

The group gave this a high priority. A single point of entry could help residents who cannot tell which institution is responsible. Staff verification and a traceable case are central to the proposal because a wrongly assigned complaint would otherwise leave the resident with the same problem on a new platform.

A response deadline gives the resident a reference point for checking progress. It would also enable participating bodies to see whether a complaint has remained open through a transfer between services. The recommendation concerns strengthening the teams that handle incoming cases as part of introducing the shared system. Practical accountability would continue to depend on who verifies the assignment and acts on the report.

2. Establish an inter-municipal cooperation forum. Neighbouring municipalities should bring designated municipal representatives, neighbourhood communities and civil society organisations together quarterly. The forum would identify shared problems, agree actions, assign responsibilities and monitor implementation. Coordination could rotate, and agreed actions and progress should be public. The City and public enterprises should participate when the subject falls within their remit. Participants gave this high priority because many problems extend beyond one municipality.

A quarterly meeting would give municipalities a place to identify problems where separate action is unlikely to be sufficient. For example, the authority responsible for one part of a shared service might need another municipality or a public enterprise to act before residents see an improvement. The forum could record what each body agreed to do and give representatives from neighbourhood communities a way to raise related concerns at a subsequent meeting.

The proposed forum is designed for problems that require common action but can be handled through existing institutional responsibilities. Regular meetings would give designated representatives a place to compare information about those problems. When a shared action is agreed, a public account of progress could help communities in both municipalities understand the contribution expected from each body.

3. Link neighbourhood proposals to municipal planning and budgets. Municipalities should establish an annual cycle in which residents propose and prioritise improvements through neighbourhood meetings and an online platform. Municipal departments would assess feasibility and costs. Councils would consider prioritised proposals when preparing programmes and budgets.

The annual cycle would connect public input to the point when municipal departments prepare programmes and budgets. That timetable gives a proposal about pedestrian safety or a public space a defined institutional destination. The recommendation also accounts for the need to consider feasibility, so that the results made public can explain the relationship between the priorities submitted and the decisions eventually taken.

Municipalities should publish accepted and rejected proposals with reasons, any funding allocated and subsequent progress. Residents could then see the path from a proposal for pedestrian safety, public space or communal infrastructure to a budget decision. Participants gave this medium to high priority. Municipal administrations and councils would lead, with neighbourhood communities and citizens involved and the Association of Local Self-Government Units (ZELS) in a supporting role.

The groups gave high priority to complaint handling and inter-municipal cooperation. They rated the planning and budgeting recommendation medium to high. Its annual cycle would give

residents a point at which to bring forward a neighbourhood priority and municipal staff time to assess costs and feasibility before the Council considers funding. The publication of decisions would then give the neighbourhood a record it could use to follow delivery in later years.

Looking ahead

EMMK intends to share the recommendations with the Municipality of Aerodrom, other relevant municipalities, the City of Skopje, public enterprises, ZELS and participating civil society organisations. The proposals provide a basis for dialogue on coordinating services, improving municipal responses and giving residents influence over local priorities.

Sharing the recommendations with bodies at several levels is relevant because one municipality would not be the sole authority for all three. Public enterprises would have information about the operation of services, while councils can consider planning and spending decisions. EMMK's proposed follow-up would place the relevant recommendations before those actors for discussion.

Municipal administrations and councils, together with the City and the relevant public enterprises, would be responsible for considering implementation. ZELS could help municipalities exchange experience.

Dialogue and advocacy could be potential uses for the three recommendations once the relevant institutions receive them. Discussions about a common complaint system would involve bodies that handle municipal services, while work on budgeting would require the attention of municipal administrations and councils. ZELS could help circulate experience among municipalities, leaving decisions about action with the competent public bodies.

For residents, the intended change would be visible at three points. They could follow a reported problem to the service responsible, see how neighbouring institutions worked together on a shared concern and find out whether a priority raised in their neighbourhood had been funded. Each of these outcomes depends on institutions maintaining the link between citizen input and the decision or action that follows.

The three proposals could offer institutions a fuller view of what residents experience. A recurring complaint can flag a service problem, while neighbourhood planning can show whether residents consider it a priority requiring investment. Cooperation between municipalities can help determine whether action needs to extend beyond one area. Using existing responsibilities and structures to make those connections possible is one way of approaching it.

COUNTRY REPORT – SERBIA

Implementing partner: Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP)

Local Democracy Lab: Conversations in the East and a follow-up meeting

Date: 30 September 2026 and 7 November 2026

Location: Serbia

Country population: 6,625,447 people in 2026, as reported by BCSP

Local context and the issue addressed

In eastern Serbia, communities affected by mining and industrial activity have raised concerns about air, rivers, soil and the livelihoods of people who depend on agriculture and natural resources. Environmental activists have sought information, organised public action and pressed companies and authorities to address pollution. BCSP's Lab examined what makes that work difficult for the people undertaking it.

Environmental activism is used as a way to put those local experiences before people who can act on them. Campaigning and protest can draw attention to a problem, while demands for more transparency concern what public bodies and companies disclose about their decisions. In the setting described by BCSP, the ability to move an issue from a local concern into public discussion formed part of the challenge.

BCSP framed the workshop around the circumstances in which people first become involved. The need for scrutiny is linked with an environment in which activists report pressure when they seek to make the issue public.

BCSP situated local experiences within a wider contraction of civic space. Activists in Eastern Serbia are increasingly operating in a shrinking civic space, facing government pressure, intimidation, and restrictions on their basic rights. This broader climate of repression makes it more difficult for civil society actors to publicly challenge decisions that affect their communities. A particularly pressing local issue is environmental pollution, linked to industrial and mining activities in the region, which poses serious concerns for public health and the environment. Activists working on these issues often face additional pressure when they challenge powerful economic interests or demand greater transparency and accountability from public authorities. Participants described intimidation, restrictions on public action and pressure on people who challenge powerful economic interests. These experiences were linked to freedom of expression, assembly and association, as well as personal security and the right to work.

BCSP did not identify a single policy or administrative practice as the principal source of the problem. There is generally a national contraction of civic space and the particular difficulty for people organising in places with fewer local safeguards or sources of support. This framing explains why the Lab examined conditions for collective action alongside environmental harms. A procedural improvement concerning mining would address only part of the experience described by people who faced pressure when raising objections publicly.

BCSP linked the ability to organise and speak publicly to the protections people need for their physical safety and livelihoods. These issues can arise together when a person decides whether to speak openly about a practice affecting their community. The Serbian constitutional context and applicable national and international protections provided the backdrop for the discussion. The focus of the workshop was the experience of acting on those rights under local conditions.

The choice of a regional focus also reflects the availability of support. Conditions affecting civic space are wider than eastern Serbia, but people active outside major centres have fewer options for reaching specialist actors directly. For the Lab, examining local alliances and resources was therefore pertinent to understanding what could be done even when the underlying pressures extended beyond municipal decisions.

The discussion focused on the conditions for civic action in eastern Serbia. The follow-up meeting considered how civil society could support local activists and maintain independent scrutiny of institutions.

The two meetings approached the issue at different levels. The first focused on what people in eastern Serbia encounter when working on environmental and civic issues and which local or external actors can assist them. The follow-up discussion considered the part that a wider group of practitioners could play in making local concerns visible and sustaining scrutiny beyond an individual campaign.

By the time of the follow-up meeting, the political context had changed following the parliamentary elections. Participants discussed how this transition could create new opportunities for civic engagement and democratic reform, while also placing civil society in a crucial position to monitor the work of new institutions and demand accountability. Civil society should retain its capacity to scrutinise the actions of new officeholders, identify shortcomings and demand accountability for unlawful conduct from the previous period as well as for any potential new abuses. One of the key priorities identified for future activities was strengthening civic activism at the local level, where numerous problems, irregularities and abuses often remain outside the public spotlight. Another important area for future engagement was the protection of whistleblowers, human rights defenders and security sector employees who speak publicly about unlawful conduct and abuses within institutions.

The Local Democracy Lab

The organisers used the Lab to look at how civic groups operate in the period between recognising a problem and taking public action. Human rights defenders, journalists and lawyers may be involved at different points in that process. Working together gave them a way to consider when support would change the options open to a person or group, before the discussion moved into specific proposals.

The three-and-a-half-hour Lab brought together human rights defenders, environmental activists, independent journalists and legal experts. They examined the pressures facing civic organisations and communities, who had power to influence the problems and which allies or resources were available. The aim was to develop practical responses to issues participants themselves identified as priorities.

BCSP opened the workshop by setting out the objectives of ROOT WB and explaining how the session would move from a description of the problem to possible responses. The different participant roles shaped the material available to the group. Local activists and defenders brought experiences from their communities. Journalists and legal specialists could consider where those accounts might enter public reporting or a legal process. That combination was relevant to a workshop examining the resources available after a concern has been raised.

Tracing causes and consequences. The group used a problem tree to relate immediate difficulties to their underlying causes. Participants documented the relationship they perceived between public authorities and polluting companies, and described effects on health, employment, personal security and the ability to speak publicly.

The exercise treated participants' observations about causes as matters to discuss together. A problem that appears first as difficulty getting a public answer may be linked, in their experience, to wider patterns of influence. Identifying those links allowed the group to ask which effects could be addressed through local cooperation and which would need a response from institutions with a different remit.

Mapping actors. Participants then identified institutions and groups they experienced as sources of pressure, as well as people who could offer support. Local organisations, lawyers and independent media featured among the potential allies. Using that map, the group connected priority challenges with strategies and recommendations.

Mapping placed resources alongside the actors who might be able to provide them. A local group could have direct knowledge of an issue without the specialist support needed for a response. An external organisation might have legal or communications expertise but need a connection to the people who could explain the circumstances.

BCSP identified the sequence of problem analysis, mapping and strategy discussion as an approach that could be adapted to other regions where civic groups have limited access to decision-making. This approach emphasises the conditions for a useful discussion, including an environment in which people can share experiences safely and enough time to develop responses after identifying the problems. In the Lab, the participants used the last phase to identify actions and the actors capable of taking them forward.

The problem analysis and mapping also helped the group decide when an issue called for work beyond the locality. Some responses could start with people in the community who knew the circumstances directly. Others required an external organisation, a professional adviser or an institution able to scrutinise the conduct at issue. The method provided a way to relate each suggestion to the level at which action might be possible.

A further exchange. The BCSP organised a follow-up meeting a month after the Lab. Participants considered local civic activism, public visibility, solidarity and oversight of institutions in the changed political context following the elections.

The participants’ exchange dealt with how civic oversight can continue if political institutions enter a period of transition.

Key findings

Participants raised experiences involving several kinds of public responsibility. Environmental conditions and the operation of industrial activities concerned one set of institutions. The protection of people raising concerns and the handling of pressures on employment involved others. The fact that these experiences came together in local accounts was one reason the group did not treat the problems as belonging exclusively to environmental policy.

The effects of mining were experienced in several parts of community life. Participants raised air and water pollution, risks to health and threats to water resources. They also described damage to property and poor working conditions.

The environmental and economic observations were closely connected in participants' accounts.. The discussion therefore covered the conditions of work and daily life alongside the environmental conditions. It also included the disappearance of rural communities and threats to Vlach cultural heritage. Participants raised these issues alongside the environmental damage, giving a wider account of what residents felt was at stake when they challenged industrial and mining decisions.

The group's concern about Vlach heritage put an additional dimension on the loss of rural communities. When people leave a place, the effect can reach local practices and connections that are sustained by people living there. Participants presented this alongside their concerns about health and livelihoods. These are dimensions of what communities considered vulnerable in the region, rather than findings of a separate heritage or demographic assessment.

Participants described public authorities as insufficiently responsive and expressed concern about the influence of mining companies on local authorities. These were the experiences and assessments brought to the Lab. For the people seeking a response, documenting damage and finding an institution willing to act were distinct difficulties. Both informed their interest in stronger legal assistance and cooperation across communities.

The cases as discussed raised questions about who can investigate a local problem and where residents can expect an independent response. Participants' concern about company influence is important to understanding why they paid attention to institutions outside the locality. A request for action by an authority is more difficult to pursue when the people making it have little confidence in the authority's willingness to scrutinise the conduct involved.

Speaking publicly could carry personal and economic costs. Participants reported legal and physical pressure, digital surveillance, attempts to discredit activists and threats to employment. The workshop’s problem tree also recorded fear, stress, pressure on family members and the financial strain associated with legal proceedings. Participants connected these experiences to the difficulty of continuing local civic work over time.

People described a need for both physical and digital security support and for protection of labour rights. They also wanted better documentation of environmental harm and human rights violations. These needs were particularly pressing for individuals and small rural organisations with limited access to lawyers, funding and public attention.

Participants distinguished the forms of help that would be relevant to different pressures. Legal advice can clarify what protections a person may invoke after a threat, a lawsuit or an employment problem. Security support concerns their ability to continue communicating and acting without exposing themselves or others to further harm. Smaller organisations and people working in rural areas were identified as having particular difficulty obtaining the combination of support they might need.

Local problems often remained outside public view. Participants identified gaps in sustained independent reporting on eastern Serbia. A community might document an incident or bring a concern to an organisation and still struggle to reach an audience beyond the affected area. Participants saw media visibility as one form of protection for people drawing attention to irregularities.

The description of media coverage also raises a geographic issue. From a locality with occasional reporting, it can be hard to keep a development in public view after the initial event. Campaigners in one community may have had little access to accounts of similar concerns elsewhere in the region. More sustained reporting could make those connections easier for residents and local organisations to see.

The discussion linked the resources of local organisations and media outlets. Smaller groups had limited capacity to document and communicate what was happening, while independent outlets faced difficulty maintaining coverage. Participants identified solidarity across communities, stronger national and international links, and financial support for local organisations and independent media among their needs.

Independent reporting was discussed as a separate resource from the material collected by activists. A local group may hold records that help explain an issue, while a journalist needs the time and means to examine the account and report it to a wider audience. There are funding difficulties on both sides. Their combined effect can make it difficult to sustain attention to a concern after the first report or public intervention.

At the follow-up meeting, participants likewise emphasised problems and abuses that receive little public attention locally. Its members identified public visibility and solidarity as practical support for individuals under pressure.

They described public solidarity as especially relevant when people face pressure for exposing irregularities. A local organisation or resident may be able to raise a problem within a community but have little access to the audiences that would make it harder for the issue to be overlooked. The discussion placed cooperation with local stakeholders at the centre of that work because they bring the knowledge needed to explain why a particular incident has wider significance.

Proposed solutions

Bring legal assistance within reach of local groups. Participants proposed connecting environmental organisations and affected residents with civil society organisations providing legal aid and with human rights lawyers. People raising a pollution issue may need help documenting environmental harm. Activists facing proceedings or arrest may also need specialised assistance to protect their rights.

The legal aid proposal was relevant both to people reporting environmental harm and to defenders facing action in connection with their civic work. The legal questions in those two circumstances can differ. A community may need help understanding which obligations apply to the polluting activity. An activist may need advice about a claim or measure directed against them. Building contacts with organisations that provide specialised assistance would make it easier to identify what kind of support is relevant to each case.

The discussion of environmental harm also stressed the need to bring the conduct of polluting companies within the applicable law. Participants expected state institutions to respect and apply relevant laws. Independent legal support could help local actors pursue concerns in circumstances where they described institutional inaction.

Participants separately called for state institutions to uphold relevant laws where activists face legal pressure or arrest. Access to a lawyer can help a person respond to an immediate case. The compliance issue concerns how the public authority exercises its powers and how its actions can be reviewed. The two responses address different responsibilities and were discussed alongside each other because deficiencies in each can affect a person's ability to continue participating.

The actor-mapping exercise identified the people who could support that work. Local organisations brought knowledge of incidents and the communities affected. Lawyers and organisations providing legal aid brought specialist expertise. The proposed links would make both available when a smaller group faced a case it could not pursue on its own.

Support sustained reporting on eastern Serbia. Participants proposed greater visibility for activists and more independent coverage of the local problems they raised. The working group identified financial support for local media as a practical response to the region’s marginalisation. Donors supporting independent journalism were relevant because an outlet needs reporting capacity to follow local developments.

Donors that support independent media were identified as relevant to the proposed response to regional marginalisation. Their role concerns the conditions that make local reporting possible over time. Editorial decisions would remain with the outlets and journalists doing the work. The proposal is grounded in participants' accounts of a reduction in the independent reporting resources available to follow developments across eastern Serbia.

Make local concerns visible through cooperation. The follow-up meeting discussed media partnerships, public debates, local events and participation by citizens in public discussions. These were ways local initiatives could be brought to a wider audience and connect people confronting similar problems. Public attention was particularly important where individuals faced pressure for raising concerns.

The Lab participants also saw value in documenting environmental damage and violations of rights across communities. Shared evidence and contact with national and international networks could support joint advocacy, while allowing local actors to keep their own experiences and priorities at the centre of the work.

Documentation also has a function beyond the immediate public response to an incident. Accounts from several places can help civic organisations identify whether the same type of environmental damage or pressure is being reported across communities. A record of the circumstances gives other organisations a basis for understanding which issues can be taken forward together and which need a response specific to one locality. That work can be connected with national and international advocacy.

Recommendations from the Local Democracy Lab

1. Connect local organisations with organisations providing legal aid. Civil society organisations should strengthen links between groups working in eastern Serbia and organisations and lawyers able to provide specialised legal assistance. The recommendation responds to local groups facing environmental harm, legal proceedings or pressure on activists with limited resources of their own.

The practical value of the link depends on the different contributions the organisations can make. A local group may know the people affected and have records of what happened. A legal organisation can help it pursue assistance and understand how the applicable law relates to the case.

The recommendation identifies civil society organisations as the actors able to develop the connection. Their relationships can make it easier to seek relevant advice when an affected resident or activist has limited contacts outside the region. The possibility of assistance also matters at the start of organising around a concern. A group that knows where specialised expertise is available has more information when deciding how to pursue a case.

2. Act jointly to restore the independence and accountability of state institutions. Participants identified a role for civil society organisations, media, social movements, academia and the international community in addressing what they described as state capture. They connected the issue to their experience of authorities failing to act and the influence they attributed to economic interests. Joint pressure and independent scrutiny of institutions were central to the recommendation.

The term state capture in the workshop discussion referred to participants' concern about the loss of institutional independence. The second recommendation therefore extends beyond assistance for people facing pressure in an individual case. Civil society groups, social movements, journalists and researchers can bring different evidence about the way institutions act. The international actors named in the recommendation offer a potential route for making those concerns visible outside national channels.

The recommendation on institutional independence calls for work across parts of civil society with different ways of contributing. A social movement can bring together experiences of people affected by a decision. Researchers can help compare accounts and examine broader institutional patterns. The range of actors identified reflects a concern with how those contributions can reinforce scrutiny over a period longer than an individual case.

3. Give local issues greater visibility in independent media. Independent outlets should give greater attention to the environmental, social, labour and civic concerns raised by eastern

Serbian communities. Participants linked that aim to the difficulties facing local outlets and to the need for financial support that would make continuing coverage possible.

The recommendation concerns both the issues and the people who make them public. Coverage can draw attention to damage affecting a community, as well as to pressure faced by residents or activists who speak about it. Participants also saw value in bringing concerns from smaller rural organisations into wider public debate.

Participants' emphasis on independent outlets reflects the value they attached to reporting that can examine the accounts of residents alongside the conduct of institutions and companies. The range of subjects involved matters to the recommendation. An employment consequence or a threat to an activist can be part of explaining why a community has difficulty bringing an environmental issue into public view, even when the incident first reported concerned a river, soil or air pollution.

The three recommendations assign distinct roles. Civil society organisations can connect people with legal support. A broader group of civic actors can press for institutional accountability. Independent news outlets can give public attention to local issues, with donors supporting reporting capacity.

Looking ahead

BCSP identified continued networking among human rights organisations, joint pressure on institutions and international advocacy as follow-up to the Lab. The follow-up meeting emphasized the importance of closer cooperation with local actors, support for people raising concerns in their communities, and greater public visibility through media partnerships, debates and local events.

BCSP links the intended national networking with the capacity of local groups to cooperate across eastern Serbia. The groups would bring experience of the specific communities they work in, while country-wide links could make it possible to pursue similar issues with national institutions. International advocacy was identified as a further route for bringing documented concerns before audiences able to examine them in the context of rights and institutional accountability.

The follow-up meeting also identified protection for whistleblowers, human rights defenders and security sector employees who speak publicly about unlawful conduct. It intended to advocate stronger protection mechanisms, including work on a draft law concerning whistleblowers in the security sector. Examining the legality of past surveillance measures was another area of intended work.

Participants discussed the political transition and the continuing role of independent civic oversight.

They envisaged combining independent watchdog work with a contribution to reform processes. For BCSP, the longer-term direction of the Lab and the subsequent exchange is stronger civic capacity to document concerns, bring them into public discussion and hold the relevant bodies to account over time.

REGIONAL SYNTHESIS

The seven Local Democracy Labs examined the difficulties residents face when trying to influence decisions that affect their everyday lives. Participants described difficulties finding out how to take part, getting a response to a proposal and following what happens once a decision is adopted.

The synthesis draws on the seven country reports. It compares findings, proposed changes and recommendations across the Labs and identifies common patterns as well as issues arising from particular local or national contexts.

Seven Local Democracy Labs in Different Contexts

Tirana (Albania) and Strasbourg (France) examined young people's influence on local decisions. Mostar (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and Podgorica (Montenegro) examined how existing participation and consultation procedures work. The discussion in Aerodrom (North Macedonia) focused on municipal services and neighbourhood priorities in the Skopje area.

Sisak (Croatia) traced four policy and service examples from approval to delivery. Serbian Lab examined the pressures on environmental and civic actors in eastern Serbia, with follow-up. The Labs used scenarios and participants' experiences to trace problems, identify who could act and develop recommendations.

A common question at different stages. The Labs began with different kinds of decisions. Some asked how a resident can enter a process that an authority has opened. Others began with a problem residents had already raised or a service that had already been approved. The Serbian discussions examined whether civic actors could continue to put problems on the public agenda under pressure. Taken together, these starting points show why the quality of a consultation is only one part of the relationship between a community and the institutions able to act.

What the workshop cases made visible. In Mostar, a proposal for a children's playground, an initiative for a circular city bus line and residents' reactions to proposals from city-owned public companies, gave groups specific issues to examine. In Sisak, decisions on an initiative or a public programme gave participants a point from which to examine delivery. In Montenegro, the checklist developed across successive sessions made it possible to ask which authority could change each step of a consultation. Starting with a case or procedure helped the groups distinguish a difficulty a single office could address from one involving several institutions.

The discussions also demonstrate the value of matching the method to the problem. A scenario can reveal the different decisions that residents and officials expect at each stage. A comparison of real cases can show how the same implementation problem recurs across services. A discussion about pressure on civic actors requires space for participants to explain how public action affects them personally. The country reports are most informative when read in relation to the questions each Lab set out to answer.

Participants and Issues Addressed

Who took part. Across the seven countries, the Local Democracy Labs involved 212 in-person participants from a broad range of backgrounds. They included residents and informal civic actors, civil society organisations, young people and students, municipal and other public-sector representatives, academics and professionals, as well as environmental and human rights defenders, journalists and legal experts. The composition varied according to the issue addressed in each Lab, allowing different combinations of civic, institutional and professional experience to inform the discussions.

What they worked on. The issues covered three parts of local democratic practice. One was access to decisions, including how young people and other residents find opportunities to participate and how authorities handle comments. A second was implementation, from neighbourhood proposals and communal services to integration, protection from domestic violence, education staffing and support at home. A third was the ability to raise public concerns and hold institutions to account amid pollution, pressure on activists and limited independent reporting.

The breadth of the subjects reflected the different roles through which people encounter local government. Someone reporting a problem with a public space needs a service that can respond to a specific case. A young person asked to help design a policy needs enough information and time to weigh alternatives. A person relying on assistance at home experiences the policy through the continuity of that support. Each encounter gives residents a different basis for judging whether public decisions reflect their needs.

The mix of roles shaped the perspectives available in each Lab. This was particularly valuable where participants could compare different experiences of the same procedure or service. A resident could describe what a referral or institutional response looked like from outside the administration, while someone working in a municipality or public service could explain how responsibilities were organised internally. Civil society organisations, professionals and affected groups added knowledge drawn from advocacy, service delivery or direct experience. Bringing these perspectives together helped the Labs identify where communication, responsibility or implementation broke down and which actors would need to be involved in addressing the problem.

These accounts should be read as evidence of the problems raised and the priorities developed through the Labs. The examples of institutional practice show what participants experienced or discussed in the settings concerned. A pattern becomes relevant to the synthesis because related problems arose in different places, even where the available institutions and the experience of those taking part differed.

Key Findings Across Countries

An open invitation can still reach a narrow group. In Tirana and Strasbourg, organisers could reach young people who were already connected to a council or an association more readily than those without such contacts. In Podgorica, participants questioned whether notices posted on an institutional website could reach young people or residents outside urban centres. Mostar

showed how digital formats can leave out some older residents and people with visual impairments. Across these discussions, the barriers concerned both hearing about an opportunity and having the time, means and support to participate.

One consequence is that the composition of a discussion can shape the information on which an authority relies. People who already know when a consultation opens and have the means to attend can explain what they experience. If residents with different needs face barriers to using the same procedure, the resulting record may give a partial account of the issue. The outreach proposals matter for the quality of the evidence an institution receives as well as for the opportunity to participate.

Timing affects what people can influence. Tirana participants distinguished attendance from helping set priorities. In Strasbourg, the group distinguished an invitation to receive information, an invitation to offer advice and an invitation to help shape a decision. In Mostar, residents wanted time to examine proposed budgets, urban plans and changes to public services while there was scope to influence them. In Aerodrom, participants described being able to report a problem but seldom joining the discussion about how to solve it.

The point at which a contribution is sought also affects its substance. When residents are invited to identify needs, they can raise concerns that may never appear in a draft. When an authority has already prepared options, comments tend to address those options. Both kinds of input have a place. The accounts from the Labs show why a public body needs to be clear about which stage it has reached and which decisions a contribution can still inform.

Information has to explain what a person can do. In Mostar, a departmental contact list could exist while residents still struggled to identify the procedure for a request or complaint. In Podgorica, technical drafts and generic notices could leave the subject and purpose of a consultation unclear. The Sisak cases showed a related problem in service delivery. A person entitled to support could still lack a clear explanation of where to go, how to apply or who could help.

Responsibilities become unclear when more than one institution is involved. In the Skopje area, residents described being referred between municipalities, the City and public enterprises over issues such as maintaining public spaces. In Mostar, participants examined the relationship between neighbourhood communities, city areas and City institutions. They identified difficulties in knowing whom to approach at neighbourhood level. In Sisak, the integration discussion identified several organisations that could help, yet there was no local plan or designated body to connect their work. These accounts show how hard it is for a resident to follow a case or policy when each body sees only its part of the process.

There is an important distinction between a complicated allocation of powers and a complicated experience for the resident. Institutions may have valid reasons for dividing duties by service, territory or type of decision. Residents need that division translated into an understandable route for their case. The North Macedonian and Bosnian discussions put particular emphasis on the point where an authority refers a matter elsewhere. This is where an internal division of work becomes a barrier if the person who reported the problem has to establish responsibility on their own.

Silence after participation undermines trust. In Montenegro, contributors wanted to know how specific comments were considered, even when their proposal was declined. The Strasbourg discussions stressed keeping in contact with participants who could no longer attend in person. In Mostar and Aerodrom, people wanted to know who was dealing with a submission and what had resulted. Tirana participants linked their willingness to return to seeing what followed from earlier discussions.

The gaps in feedback take different forms. A participant who commented on a draft wants to understand the reasons for accepting or declining the proposal. A resident reporting a fault needs to know who is handling it and whether it has been resolved. A group that helped define a priority may need to see how it entered a programme or a budget. Comparing these needs helps explain why the Labs proposed both replies addressed to individuals and public records that can be consulted after an activity has ended.

Different barriers require different responses. There was broad agreement in Montenegro on reasoned feedback, while civil society participants gave greater weight to sanctions for non-compliance and local government representatives favoured help and capacity building. In Croatia, the continuity of approved services depended on available staff, premises and funding. In Serbia, participants described legal, physical and economic pressure and gaps in independent reporting. Those reports concern the conditions for delivering services and for speaking out, respectively.

The capacity to follow through. Some changes depend on the everyday work of an institution, such as compiling an intelligible reply or routing a submission to the correct service. Others require decisions on funding, staffing or the organisation of a service. The Sisak cases make this difference concrete. A person can receive a clear explanation of an approved programme, yet experience a break in support if the delivery model does not cover the time between funding periods.

The Serbian findings add a different consideration. Where people describe threats to their employment or safety, better access to a formal procedure addresses only part of what makes it possible to speak out. Independent organisations, lawyers and media can give people ways to seek support and sustain scrutiny when public engagement has personal costs. The presence of such concerns in one Lab should inform the interpretation of that case without being assumed for the other countries.

Shared Directions for Change

From public notice to a usable opportunity. The solutions from Tirana, Strasbourg, Mostar and Podgorica point towards participation that residents can prepare for. Their proposals combined clearer explanations of what was at stake with ways of reaching people outside established networks. The balance differed by place. In Tirana and Strasbourg, work with schools, youth organisations and community contacts was important. In Mostar, participants emphasised accessible public documents and offline sources of information, alongside practical guidance on participation procedures, an information point and opportunities to contact elected representatives directly.

Information and outreach can therefore address distinct problems. A notice explains what an authority is considering and gives people instructions for taking part. A school, community group or local organisation can bring that information to people who are unlikely to look for it on official channels. The usefulness of the second step depends on the first. Community partners are better able to answer questions when they can point to an official explanation that sets out the subject, procedure and timetable.

From submitting a proposal to knowing its outcome. Several Labs envisaged a continuous exchange. Montenegro paired an individual reply with a public record of proposals and responses. Strasbourg explored how clear updates could reach participants wherever they were. Mostar focused on people and offices responsible for routing and answering submissions. In Aerodrom, the direction was to let a person follow a case from reporting to resolution, including when several public bodies shared responsibility.

From adopting an initiative to carrying it out. Sisak traced the need for resources, coordination and monitoring when an initiative moves into delivery. Aerodrom connected neighbourhood priorities to municipal programmes and budgets. Tirana envisaged young people helping to define needs, develop initiatives and monitor them. In each case, participants sought a continuing role for the people who raised the issue and a way to see what had been delivered.

The proposals also show how institutional records can support continued involvement. A budget decision can indicate whether a neighbourhood priority has received resources. An implementation report can show whether the responsible organisation has carried out the work. These are different points in the life of a proposal, and they can lead to different conversations with residents. Participants in Sisak and Aerodrom wanted the opportunity to maintain that connection beyond the initial approval or request.

From isolated efforts to sustained cooperation. The proposals treated relationships as part of the work. Regular youth dialogue in Tirana, cooperation between neighbouring municipalities in North Macedonia and standing coordination in Sisak addressed different tasks. In eastern Serbia, the need was for links among local groups, lawyers and independent media that could sustain scrutiny and support people facing pressure.

The cooperation proposed in one place may serve a different purpose elsewhere. A regular forum among neighbouring municipalities can address issues for which several authorities hold powers. A youth council's relationship with schools and organisations can bring new concerns into a municipal discussion. Links between local civic groups and specialist organisations can provide expertise that is scarce locally. The common direction lies in establishing relationships capable of carrying work between institutions or groups over time.

Common and Overlapping Recommendations

Bring people into decisions while options are open. Mostar recommended public input at the stage of identifying needs and priorities, including for budgets and service changes. Tirana asked municipalities to involve young people in identifying needs through monitoring. Strasbourg proposed designing the purpose and rules of the process with intended participants. Montenegro

recommended involving relevant experts in preparing drafts. The overlap concerns the timing of input. The intended contributors and the decisions they would help shape vary by Lab.

The examples suggest that early involvement has to connect to a defined decision. In the Skopje area, the proposed annual planning cycle puts neighbourhood priorities before municipal departments and councils while they are preparing programmes and budgets. In Montenegro, early input from people with specialist knowledge would help shape the options that reach a draft. For both, the question is whether the timing gives participants a realistic part in the work that follows.

Explain the issue and how to act. The Tirana recommendations pair clear advance notice with instructions for contributing. Mostar calls for practical guidance on rights, submission procedures, offices and deadlines, as well as readable budgets. Montenegro recommends plain-language summaries of draft acts and consultation reports. Sisak applies the same need for understandable information to people accessing an approved right or service. Each example identifies what information the responsible body has to provide for people to use the opportunity.

Reach people through channels they use. Tirana proposed working with schools, universities, community organisations and informal youth groups. Strasbourg asked organisers to consider the resources, time and accessibility needs of intended participants when choosing methods. Mostar recommended accessible digital information alongside offline options, including clear and easy-to-understand public documents, local information channels and physically accessible opportunities to participate. Montenegro called for outreach tailored to the people affected, including young people and residents outside the capital. The recommendations combine wider outreach with practical arrangements that allow the people reached to contribute.

There is also a difference between expanding the audience and expanding the ways people can contribute. Personal outreach may reach people an online notice misses. Their participation may still depend on the venue, time, format or support available. Strasbourg's attention to mobility illustrates a further point. The methods used to bring someone into a discussion can differ from those that let them stay informed after their circumstances change.

Provide a response people can find and understand. Montenegro’s proposals pair direct, reasoned replies with a public register. Strasbourg asks organisers to explain how input was considered and to reach participants who have moved or stopped attending. Mostar recommends telling people which service is dealing with a submission and how it was resolved. North Macedonia links feedback to both complaint tracking and neighbourhood budget proposals. Sisak also asks institutions to explain the fate of contributions and report on implementation.

A reply and a record serve different purposes. The person who puts forward a proposal has a direct interest in how the institution handled it. A public record helps others see how the process works across cases and gives civic organisations a basis for following the issue over time. This is why the idea of a public register in Montenegro sits alongside the individual response. A short message can answer the contributor's immediate question, while the record preserves a wider account of the decision.

Name the body that will take the work forward. Mostar recommended clarifying the roles and responsibilities of neighbourhood communities and their relationship with the City's administrative areas and relevant City departments. It also called for clear arrangements for receiving, referring and following up on residents' concerns. North Macedonia proposed coordination among municipalities, the City and public enterprises where duties overlap. Sisak asked public authorities to name a lead and agree on responsibilities and monitoring arrangements when a policy or service is delivered jointly. The overlap is clearest when a resident’s proposal, a reported problem or an approved policy crosses institutional boundaries.

Keep civic actors involved in oversight. Tirana and Sisak recommended continued involvement through implementation and monitoring. In North Macedonia, publishing decisions and progress on neighbourhood proposals would give residents a basis for following delivery. Serbia’s recommendations emphasised independent scrutiny, joint action for institutional accountability and the role of independent media. The Serbian Lab placed particular weight on civic actors’ ability to maintain scrutiny outside formal participation channels.

Public oversight also changes with the stage of work. At the design stage, civic actors can contribute evidence about needs and likely barriers. During implementation, people using a service or following an initiative can say whether conditions are changing as intended. Independent reporting and scrutiny become especially important where participants question the willingness of authorities to act. The recommendations preserve a role for civic knowledge at those different stages without treating every role as part of a formal consultation.

Context-Specific Recommendations Worth Highlighting

A standing youth dialogue in Tirana. The Municipality of Tirana and the Local Youth Council should hold regular discussions with youth organisations, schools and community groups. Young residents should help set the topics and propose responses to local problems. A standing forum gives them a route to raise an issue before a formal consultation opens and return to it as the municipality considers what to do.

Mostar’s neighbourhood communities. The Lab highlighted the need to clarify how neighbourhood communities (mjesne zajednice) function in practice and how they relate to the City's administrative areas, branch offices and relevant City departments. Although the relevant law regulates the establishment, bodies and functions of local communities, participants identified practical gaps in knowing who represents each community, how residents can contact them and how neighbourhood concerns are conveyed to the City Administration. Publishing up-to-date addresses and contact details would be a first step, alongside clearer arrangements for referring issues to the responsible City bodies and informing residents about the follow-up.

Mostar's example illustrates why questions about the practical functioning of neighbourhood communities need to be understood in their local legal and institutional context. A neighbourhood community and an administrative city area are distinct structures with different roles. Improving the information available on the City's website is only one part of the solution. Residents also need to understand what their neighbourhood representative can do, how a concern is transmitted to the competent City body and how they can find out what action has followed.

Full operating costs in Sisak. The Croatian Lab asked funders and providers to account for the staff, buildings and technical support required to deliver a service continuously. A safe house, for example, needs to fund specialist assistance as well as heating, maintenance and support staff. This recommendation arises from the practical requirements of service provision and the effect an interruption has on the people who rely on it.

The Sisak proposal also indicates where service providers can contribute to policy design. They can explain the costs that fall outside an individual funded activity yet affect whether a facility can operate. People who rely on the service can show what an interruption means for them. Bringing those accounts into planning gives a funding body information about continuity that a description of the funded activity alone may miss.

A participation and follow-up canvas in Strasbourg. Organisers should design the process with residents, including young people, and agree how contributors will learn what happened to their proposals. NALAS proposed piloting a one-page canvas that identifies who is missing, what participants can influence, who will consider their input and how they will receive a response. This would help organisers plan follow-up for young people whose availability or place of residence changes.

A public register of consultation responses in Montenegro. The ministry responsible for e-government, municipalities and the Union of Municipalities should establish a public register that connects each proposal to the authority's reasoned response and any action that follows. The Podgorica Lab identified a gap between the publication of a consultation report and the ability to follow an individual proposal. A shared register would make the outcome traceable across institutions and over time.

A single route for complaints in the Skopje area. North Macedonia's Lab proposed that municipalities, City departments and public enterprises share a case-tracking system. Its specific design includes AI-assisted classification to suggest which service should handle a report, with staff verifying the assignment and coordinating the response. It addresses a division of responsibilities that can leave residents referring the same issue to several offices.

The Skopje proposal specifies a role for staff because a suggested assignment is only one part of handling a complaint. Someone still has to confirm which body can act and coordinate the transfer when more than one service is involved. The public value of the platform would depend on that work. The digital method would make it easier for residents to follow a case if the participating institutions can manage it as a shared responsibility.

Specialised legal support in eastern Serbia. The Lab asked civil society organisations to connect local environmental groups with lawyers and legal aid organisations. Participants described a need for help pursuing claims concerning environmental harm and dealing with proceedings or other pressure linked to civic work. The recommendation reflects the risks participants described and the limited access smaller groups had to specialist assistance.

The legal support recommended in eastern Serbia reflects two related uses. Residents and organisations may seek assistance identifying the obligations applicable to an environmental issue. Individuals facing legal pressure for public action may require advice about their own case.

Local groups know the circumstances in which both needs arise, while specialist organisations can bring expertise that is harder to maintain in smaller communities. The value of the proposal is in connecting those capacities.

Regional Policy Recommendations

1. Involve people before priorities and drafts are settled. Municipal councils, administrations and other bodies proposing decisions should publish the timetable early and invite affected residents, civic organisations and relevant experts to contribute while options remain open. Explain which choices they can influence.

2. Make participation information practical and readable. Municipalities, ministries and public service providers should explain what is proposed, how to comment or apply, which office handles the matter and what deadlines apply. Use plain-language summaries for technical drafts, budgets and decisions.

These first two recommendations concern the organisation of the decision as well as its communication. A timetable lets contributors see when the institutions will consider the issue. A readable description lets them assess which part of the decision matters to them. Together these measures allow people to prepare a contribution that addresses what the authority can actually decide at that stage.

3. Adapt outreach and participation to the people affected. Public bodies and facilitators should work with schools, civic organisations and neighbourhood groups to reach people outside usual networks. Offer accessible ways to take part through online and offline channels suited to the intended participants.

4. Give contributors a reasoned answer and show what follows. Authorities running consultations or receiving submissions should tell contributors how their input was handled and who is responsible for the next step. Publish accessible summaries or tracking information so people can follow commitments and results.

The third and fourth recommendations also apply at different points in a person's relationship with the process. Outreach is how someone learns of a credible opportunity. Feedback is the part of the experience that tells them whether their time and input had a discernible result. For a public body, the ability to contact participants again should therefore be considered when the routes for participating are chosen.

5. Assign responsibility where institutions share a task. Municipal administrations, public enterprises and relevant ministries should name the responsible body, agree how to refer cases and share work, and specify who reports progress. Residents should know where to ask for an update.

6. Involve affected people in implementation and monitoring. Municipal councils, service providers and other responsible authorities should give residents and civil society organisations opportunities to review implementation. Show how agreed priorities enter plans and budgets and report what has been delivered.

The fifth and sixth recommendations address the transition from a decision to work on the ground. Naming the body that has to act tells residents where responsibility sits. Involving them after adoption gives that body a way to learn whether implementation addresses the need they raised. Decisions about staff, finance and cooperation can then be discussed in relation to the result residents or service users are experiencing.

7. Match participation commitments with the capacity to implement them. Public authorities and service providers should plan the staff, skills, coordination arrangements and financial resources needed to turn decisions and commitments into sustained practice. Where participation leads to a new measure, service or responsibility, implementation planning should address continuity as well as initial delivery.

Using the recommendations in different settings. Municipalities can examine which aspects of the proposals concern procedures already within their authority. Where the problem crosses a municipal boundary or requires a common consultation rule, other public bodies have a role. Civil society organisations can support access and maintain independent scrutiny in either situation. The relevance of each recommendation depends on who holds the power to make the change and whether the people affected can see the result.

Conclusion

The seven Labs show that people judge local democracy by what happens along the whole route from raising an issue to seeing a decision carried out. Public institutions shape that experience when they explain their decisions, take responsibility for delivery and make room for people to follow what happens. The cases also show why the quality of participation and the quality of local administration are closely connected. Even a well-run discussion loses value if it leads to a decision nobody can carry through.

The relationship between participation and administration matters most when a contribution passes from one setting to another. A public meeting may yield an issue for a department to consider, or a neighbourhood proposal may need to reach the body preparing a budget. At these points, participants can lose sight of the discussion even though the institution is still working on it. Giving each handover a clear purpose and a responsible actor makes it possible to follow what the original participation has set in motion.

Residents, civil society organisations and institutions contribute different knowledge. Residents can explain where a procedure or service falls short in practice. Civil society can bring less-heard experiences into a discussion, sustain advocacy and scrutinise results independently. Public bodies can clarify their powers and use their authority to act. The Labs made these contributions visible by asking people to trace problems and develop responses together. Where participation exposed disagreement, it also showed which decisions still need discussion.

The limits of the comparison also matter for follow-up. A proposal about one city's neighbourhood structures cannot simply be transferred to a municipality with different institutions. An approach to explaining decisions or tracking a referral may have wider application even when the bodies involved differ. The most useful exchange is therefore likely to

connect a broad question with the specific conditions of the example. Partners can ask which features depend on local rules and which concern practices that another institution could adopt.

The recommendations provide ROOT WB partners with a basis for the Regional Community Dialogue Forums and subsequent follow-up with local and national actors. These forums can bring the findings from the Labs into a wider regional discussion, allowing participants to compare the conditions that make a proposal workable in different settings. They can also take forward practical questions raised by the Labs: how institutions can involve people whose concerns are unlikely to emerge through usual channels, and how residents and civil society organisations can follow what happens after a decision without having to reconstruct the institutional process themselves.

The recommendations ultimately make the quality of local democracy visible in ordinary public work. A young person can see whether there was still a choice to influence. A resident can find out where a complaint went. A participant who helped identify a priority can compare a decision with what was delivered. Those are different tests of accountability. Together, they point to a simple expectation: people should be able to see not only that their participation was invited, but also what happened because they took part.



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