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# Advancing Public Participation in the Macedonian Parliament

*Policy brief*



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*Note by the Author*

*The Macedonian language almost exclusively uses the masculine gender for expressions in third person singular (or plural) for an unknown subject "holder" of a function or profession. . Even though nouns and pronouns in the Macedonian language can be formulated as both male and female, to the best of my knowledge, the written and spoken language mostly formulates masculine gender or sometimes neutral gender expressions, or formulations with both gender nouns and pronouns. Thus, media, research and analyses refer to the "citizen", "minister", "president", "judge", "head" as subjects with masculine gender inflections instead of feminine gender distinction. Such practice and tradition involuntarily create an unconscious perception of male persons, instead of both males and females being equally perceived as holders of such or similar positions.*

*This subtle and unassuming gender discrimination with such expressions in the Macedonian language unconsciously imposes to the speaker a male view of the world. Subsequently, the male view of the world impacts the identification or lack thereof of the people of different gender with their role and function in the public sphere or in public positions.*

*This policy paper discontinues this gender tradition of the language and the unknown person by using only female gender inflections. This approach, also identified in the English language, has already been applied in the academic writing in English for many years now. I hope that this policy paper will incentivize a more frequent application of this approach in Macedonian writings.*

*Respectfully,*

*Ilina Mangova*



## RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE MACEDONIAN ASSEMBLY FOR ADVANCING PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN ITS WORK

The Macedonian Assembly offers channels by means of which the public can participate in the work of the Assembly. However, it is crucially important that the public participation in hearings, as well as, discussing changes to legislation and policies in the Assembly's working bodies to be done in an inclusive and open manner.

Taking in consideration the practices from some advanced parliaments in Europe, this policy brief recommends improvement of the current and introduction of new forms of public participation in the work of the Macedonian Assembly. This will increase the participation of the public in its work, it will contribute to better quality of legislation, and, consequently it will increase the democratic capacity and trust in the Parliament.

- 1. Prepare easily available guidelines and incentivize public participation in the work of the Assembly** – so citizens and other stakeholders can easily obtain instructions as how to participate in the Assembly's work as well as serve as an incentive for greater engagement by citizens;
- 2. MPs should increase the contact with the citizens and meet them in the Assembly, constituency offices and in other places in the electoral unit** – this will increase citizens' awareness about the identity of their MPs, the relations between the citizen and the respective MP will be strengthened, it will bear a positive influence on MPs responsiveness to citizens, the MP's understanding and representation of citizens' views. Finally, it will also contribute to increased trust level of trust in the Assembly, which will in turn increase the level of confidence in the governance of the country;
- 3. Issue an open call for evidence on committee sessions, public and oversight hearings and open them for the general public without an “invitations only” principle** – this provision will offer an open channel for research, evidence and analyses to be collected from external stakeholder by the Assembly and thus enhance the quality of legislation. Open calls for evidence providing comprehensive information about the specific hearings should be issued at least a week or two in advance, in order for any external interested party to be able to prepare and submit her contribution. Participation in committee sessions, public and oversight hearings should be open for anyone who can contribute and should not be restricted to an “invitations only” principle;
- 4. Introduce legal changes to provide for the possibility of public and e-petitions to be filed to the Macedonian Assembly** – this provision will offer the possibility for citizens to influence decision- making between two elections and allow for the citizens' voice to be heard in the Assembly;
- 5. Provide the possibility for citizens to attend and observe parliamentary sessions firsthand** – this provision will allow the citizens to have a first-hand experience of parliamentary debates, democratic decision- making and their MPs. The visits to the plenary can be easily administered for visitors to attend parliamentary sessions for a limited time period on a first-come first-served basis;

6. **Organize structured thematic sessions between MPs and civil society organizations following the model of the European Parliament Agora Sessions** – this provision will enable the Assembly to have greater access to civil society research and analyses, to be more informed about the work of civil society, to maintain a dialogue with civil society and thus contribute to democratization of the country;
7. **Increase information sharing about the Assembly’s work through its social media accounts** – this provision will offer the Assembly the advantages of the new media, it will increase outreach and citizens will become more informed about policy- making and decision-making;
8. **Post recorded plenary and committee sessions on the Assembly’s YouTube channel** – this provision will offer another possibility for citizens to become directly informed about the Assembly’s work and will simultaneously provide easy access to watch-dog and research activities;

## ADVANCING PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN THE MACEDONIAN ASSEMBLY

PUBLIC POLICY PAPER  
BY ILINA MANGOVA

The Assembly of Republic of Macedonia performs three key functions: it legislates, it oversees the work of the executive and it represents the citizens. In general elections, citizens elect the Members of Parliament (MPs) who, in turn represent them in deciding on issues of constitutional significance, in overseeing governmental institutions and adopting laws in the course of their term of office. However, the entitlement and the possibility for citizens to be represented, to participate and influence decision- making and the work of the Assembly does not end on Election Day. Democracy presupposes and offers citizens numerous ways to participate and influence law making, policy making and the work of their elected representatives in a period between two elections. **The formal and informal modes for citizens, in their individual capacity or through citizens’ associations, to demand MPs to act within their mandate, to hold them accountable, to influence and contribute to their work, can be defined as public participation in the work of the Parliament.**

This policy brief maps the current possibilities for public participation in the Macedonian Assembly and presents findings on implementation thereof. **The public shall refer to any citizen, civil society organization or other non- MP or Assembly employee stakeholder. The Assembly shall refer to the Members of the Assembly who act individually or as a collective body in plenary or in**

**working body sessions.** The policy brief further presents other successful modes for public participation which are exercised in parliaments across European countries, mostly the United Kingdom's House of Commons and the European Parliament. This policy brief recommends that such modes for public participation in the work of these parliaments should be introduced in Macedonia. This way the Macedonian Assembly would provide greater access to citizens in the decision-making process, it would increase its representative role and it would further democratize its work, policy and law making.

## I. CURRENT MODES AND PRACTICE OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN THE WORK OF THE MACEDONIAN ASSEMBLY

The following section presents the current modes and available data on current practices of public participation in the work of the Macedonian Assembly.

### I.1. Contacts between Citizens and MPs

Macedonian citizens have several options available in order to influence the work of the Assembly. **As part of her duty of an MP, MPs, inter alia, shall establish "contacts with citizens, contacts and consultations with non-governmental organizations, cooperation and consultations with the Union and with citizens' associations".**<sup>1</sup> Such exchange can be established and maintained within the Assembly or in the constituency office in her electoral unit, which should be

<sup>1</sup> Law on the Assembly of Republic of Macedonia <http://www.sobranie.mk/zakon-za-sobranieto-na-rm.nspix>

provided by the municipality. The website of the Macedonian Assembly contains a map of all constituency offices around the country, where citizens can locate their local, municipal constituency office, the MP of a particular political party accessible through that office, the business hours and phone number of the office.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, **Friday is the day assigned for an MP to interact with the citizens and voters of the respective electoral unit.** Apart from emergencies, in general, the Assembly and its working bodies do not hold sessions or other type of activities on the assigned day. The resources for this activity are provided for in the Assembly's budget.

The website of the Assembly also provides **email and telephone contacts for most of the parliamentary groups**, however these contact information is not available for all parliamentary groups nor for individual MPs.<sup>3</sup> The Assembly's website offers the possibility for MPs to be contacted through a contact form "Ask the MP"<sup>4</sup> which means that an interested party can write down a question and/or a message in the contact form on the website. During the 2011-2014 parliamentary term, email contacts were available for each MP, which is not the case with the MPs elected in 2014. Also, the Assembly has assigned a contact person for communication with citizens with communication disability.<sup>5</sup>

Conversely, a survey conducted by the International Republican Institute in June 2015 finds that only 6% of the citizens declare

<sup>2</sup> Citizens' contact offices, Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia <http://www.sobranie.mk/kancelarii-za-kontakt-sograganite-map.nspix>

<sup>3</sup> Contacts – parliamentary groups, Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia <http://www.sobranie.mk/pratenicki-grupi.nspix>

<sup>4</sup> Ask the MP, Assembly of Republic of Macedonia <http://www.sobranie.mk/prashaj-go-pratenikot.nspix>

<sup>5</sup> Assembly of Republic of Macedonia, Contact Persons: <http://www.sobranie.mk/kontakt-lica.nspix>

that they have been contacted by a Member of Parliament in the past 12 months.<sup>6</sup> A slightly higher number of citizens, 9%, declared that they had contacted an MP. Among those who had contacted an MP, 3% had established a contact through a personal friend at a neutral location, 2% by telephone, 2 % in the electoral district office, and only 1% at the Assembly's office, through the Assembly's office or a staff member from the constituency office.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, another survey conducted by the Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" – Skopje (IDSCS) in May-June 2015<sup>8</sup> finds that a third of the respondents (35%) perceive their MPs as being available to the citizens, and a higher percentage 49%, one half of the respondents consider that the Assembly lacks openness towards the public, while 41% considers the opposite to be true. Finally, the most significant way in which the citizens believe that MPs can increase their job performance is by communicating more often with citizens and nongovernmental organizations. This is the most prevailing answer (41%) among 6 offered with multiple choice on how MPs could do their jobs more effectively.<sup>9</sup>

**A citizen can propose adoption of a new law to the authorized proposers** – Member of Parliament, the Government and a minimum of 10.000 voters (o, 45% of

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6 International Republican Institute, Survey of Macedonian Public Opinion [http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/2015-07-13\\_survey\\_of\\_macedonian\\_public\\_opinion\\_june\\_6-15\\_2015.pdf](http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/2015-07-13_survey_of_macedonian_public_opinion_june_6-15_2015.pdf)

7 Ibid.

8 The Public Opinion on the Work of the Assembly, Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis"-Skopje <http://idscs.org.mk/en/news/659-parliament-watch-second-survey-on-the-work-of-the-parliament>

9 International Republican Institute, Survey of Macedonian Public Opinion [http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/2015-07-13\\_survey\\_of\\_macedonian\\_public\\_opinion\\_june\\_6-15\\_2015.pdf](http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/2015-07-13_survey_of_macedonian_public_opinion_june_6-15_2015.pdf)

the population of Macedonia).<sup>10</sup> A citizen can do this individually, in a group or through a citizens' association. If a citizen or a group of citizens manage to convince an MP or group of MPs to propose a law on their behalf, then further down the process a certain MP from that group will become a representative of the proposer.

However, despite this constitutional possibility, one of the aforementioned surveys has found that only a fourth of the population (26%)<sup>11</sup> state to hold the knowledge required to file an initiative for a draft or legal amendment to the authorized proposers, which means that the large majority is not informed on their rights and possibilities to influence the decision making process in this way.

## **I.2. Participation in Committee Sessions**

There are 21 committees in the Macedonian Assembly and they can engage the public in their regular committee meetings or in oversight and public hearings.

The working bodies of the Assembly can invite relevant stakeholders such as experts and representatives of scientific institutions, public entities, civil society, unions, local governments or other organization to state their opinions on issues discussed at the committee meetings. **A citizens' association is allowed to initiate a discussion in an Assembly's working body, while a**

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10 Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia <http://www.sobranie.mk/the-constitution-of-the-republic-of-macedonia.nsp>

11 The Public Opinion on the Work of the Assembly, Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis"-Skopje <http://idscs.org.mk/en/news/659-parliament-watch-second-survey-on-the-work-of-the-parliament>



**citizen is not.**<sup>12</sup> If a citizen would like to raise a certain issue to be discussed by a working body, it should be done so through certain citizens' association, which restricts citizens to participate in policy-making and be actively engaged in politics within their individual civic capacity.

While this type of public participation can take place in regular committee sessions, or in public and oversight hearings organized by the committees, there are no guidelines for citizens' associations as to how such a discussion should be initiated. Such circumstances leave room for uncertainty as to the treatment of such initiatives by the committees and encourages inconsistent approach to this type of initiatives by the committee chairs.

### **I.3. Public Debate (Public Discussion)**

Public debate is the most inclusive and open way for the public to take part in the work of the Assembly in preparation of legislation. "On a law proposal of broader public interest, the Assembly, following the general debate, may decide to carry out a public debate and determine a relevant working body to organize the public debate."<sup>13</sup> The working body should ensure that the draft-law is published and made available, inter alia, to citizens, citizens' associations and other interested parties. The text of the draft-law should be published in the daily printed media along with a call for submission of proposals and opinions. **Any citizen, civil society or other representative can take part in the public debate.** The working body shall gather and synthesize the proposal and opinions stated during the public debate

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<sup>12</sup> Rules of Procedure of the Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia <http://www.sobranie.mk/delovnik-na-sobranieto-na-republika-makedonija-precisten-tekst.nsp>

<sup>13</sup> Rules of Procedure <http://www.sobranie.mk/delovnik-na-sobranieto-na-republika-makedonija-precisten-tekst.nsp>

and shall prepare a report. The report should then be submitted to the Assembly in the second reading phase.

The Assembly's website provides information of accounted public debates on only 5 draft laws for the period between 2008 and 2015, while in the same period the Assembly has worked on 3398 laws.<sup>14</sup> This is a significantly low number and demonstrates a low level of inclusion of the broader public in the policy and decision-making.

### **I.4. Oversight Hearings**

The oversight hearings aim to provide the committee with information and expert opinion within its scope and with regard to the policy implementation by the Government or other administrative bodies. In addition to the Government representatives, the committee can also invite other persons to provide evidence on the issues and subjects of discussion. The oversight hearings are limited only to those who are invited. The Assembly informs about the oversight hearings through its website and the Assembly channel. Since 2008, within a period of 7 years, a total of 10 oversight hearings have been carried out. Five each were organized during the period from 2008 to 2011 and 2011-2014 respectively,

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<sup>14</sup> Public Debates, Assembly of Republic of Macedonia <http://www.sobranie.mk/javni-diskusii.nsp> ; Annual Report for the Work of the Assembly of Republic of Macedonia in the period 10.05/2014 – 31.10/2014 <http://www.sobranie.mk/content/izvestai/2011-2014/IZVESTAJ%202014%2010.05%20-%2031.12.2014.pdf> ; Report on the Work of the Seventh Parliamentary Composition of the Assembly of Republic of Macedonia in the period 25.06.2011 – 05.03.2014 <http://www.sobranie.mk/content/izvestai/2011-2014/Mandaten%20izvestaj%207%20sostav%202011-2014.pdf> ; Report on the Work of the Sixth Parliamentary Composition of the Assembly of Republic of Macedonia in the period 21.06.2008 – 14.05/2011 <http://www.sobranie.mk/WBStorage/Files/MANDATENIZVESTAJ081ukoregiran.pdf>

whereas none in 2014.<sup>15</sup>

## **I.5. Public Hearing**

Public hearing is a public committee meeting in which the committee gathers evidence, analyses and other type of information from external stakeholders and thus raises the relevance of a certain issues, advocates for new policy or improvement of a certain policy. However, despite being practiced by some committees a public hearing is not regulated by the Law on the Assembly or by the Rules of Procedure of the Assembly. In practice, the organization of public hearings depends on the good will of the committee chairs.

In the period between 2008 and 2014, a total of 55 public hearings were organized by 12 parliamentary committees in different parliamentary terms. While some committees had been very active in organizing public hearings, 8 committees have not organized any. Specifically, in 2014, 10 public hearings were organized by 5 committees.<sup>16</sup> In the 2011-2014 term, 31 public hearings were organized by 9 committees, out of which the Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men chaired by Liljana Popovska had organized 11 of them.<sup>17</sup> In the 2008 to 2011 term, 14 public hearings were organized

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Annual Report for the Work of the Assembly of Republic of Macedonia in the period 10.05/2014 – 31.10/2014 <http://www.sobranie.mk/content/izvestaj/2011-2014/IZVESTAJ%202014%2010.05%20-%2031.12.2014.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Report on the Work of the Seventh Parliamentary Composition of the Assembly of Republic of Macedonia in the period 25.06.2011 – 05.03.2014 <http://www.sobranie.mk/content/izvestaj/2011-2014/Mandaten%20izvestaj%207%20sostav%202011-2014.pdf>

by 7 committees.<sup>18</sup> In practice, most of the public hearings were limited to those invited to attend the sessions, therefore were not open to the public and inclusive. On the other hand, some committees, such as the Committee on Equal Opportunities for Men and Women, have publicly announced its public hearings and opened them to all citizens or stakeholders interested to partake.

The foregoing data indicates that most of the committee chairs have not recognized the need to organize public hearings as a means to expand their outreach and acquire knowledge and information from outside the Assembly as well as emphasize the relevance of the public in the decision-making process.

## **I.6. Passive Inclusion of the Public**

Sharing information about the Assembly is important for citizens to become familiar with its work, the Assembly's functions, debating and lawmaking. Informed citizens are the necessary precondition for democracy and any form of citizens' participations. Therefore, any public information about the Assembly's work, even if it fails to enable participation, is vital for setting the base for future participation in the decision - making. This section presents the modalities by the means of which the Macedonian public can be informed about the work of the Assembly.

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<sup>18</sup> Report on the Work of the Sixth Parliamentary Composition of the Assembly of Republic of Macedonia in the period 21.06.2008 – 14.05/2011 <http://www.sobranie.mk/WBStorage/Files/MANDATENIZVESTAJ08ukoregiran.pdf>

### I.6.1. Assembly's Television Channel

The public may follow each parliamentary plenary session, sessions of the committees, the councils or other parliamentary bodies live on the Assembly's Television Channel. The Assembly's Television Channel is defined in the Law on Assembly as a channel to "inform and educate citizens about the political life, through parliamentary, educational and citizens' programs".<sup>19</sup> It further proclaims that it should broadcast programs which contribute to the social and interethnic cohesion, fight against discrimination and one that should reflect the societal diversity. Similarly, it should ensure political equality and equitable language representation in all its programs. The Assembly's channel is funded by the Assembly and it is managed by an Assembly council in which MPs from both governing and opposition parties, participate.

### I.6.2. YouTube Channel

The Macedonian Assembly also has an official YouTube channel. Even though all plenary and committee sessions are recorded, they are not aired on the YouTube channel. Only seven videos relating to the Assembly are shared.<sup>20</sup>

### I.6.3. Attending a Parliamentary Session and Citizens' Open Day

Citizens can attend and observe the sessions of the Assembly and its

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<sup>19</sup> Law on the Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia <http://www.sobranie.mk/zakon-za-sobranieto-na-rm.nspk>

<sup>20</sup> The numbers is valid as till 10 October 2015. The Macedonian Assembly's Youtube link can be found on the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCD5qpVe9-yNv4Xu4b3EuKFw/videos>

working bodies from the galleries in the parliamentary amphitheater<sup>21</sup>. This is specified in the internal rules of procedures of the Parliament which are not disclosed as a public document. Out of the available information, no data exists as to citizens' attendance and observation of parliamentary sessions from the Assembly's premises.

In April 2015 the Macedonian Assembly reinstated the practice of Open Days for citizens which is now organized every last Friday of the month. This practice had been initially introduced by the Assembly's president Ljupco Jordanovski<sup>22</sup> in however they were later discontinued by the next Assembly president Ljubisha Georgievski.<sup>23</sup> The current Assembly president Trajko Veljanoski restarted the Open Days of the Assembly. In the period from April to October 2015, upon completed reconstruction works of the Assembly, 1 182 citizens visited the building. Through these visits, the citizens become acquainted with the Assembly's architecture, MP's place of work and passage of legislation, however they are unable to witness first-hand the plenary sessions.

### I.6.4. Social Media Communication with the Public – Facebook and Twitter

The Macedonian Assembly operates a Facebook and a Twitter account through which it announces and where it notifies about sessions. The Assembly's Twitter and Facebook accounts are not completely synchronized and the Twitter account [twitter.com/SobranieMK](https://twitter.com/SobranieMK) has 101 followers,<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Rules of Procedure <http://www.sobranie.mk/delovnik-na-sobranieto-na-republika-makedonija-precisten-tekst.nspk>

<sup>22</sup> Vest, Welcome to our house, 5.10.2005

<sup>23</sup> Utrinski Vesnik, Georgievski closed the Parliament for the citizens, 25.04.2007 <http://bit.ly/1P924RA>

<sup>24</sup> The numbers of followers for Facebook and Twitter are as of 10 October 2015.

and is more active. The Facebook account [www.facebook.com/SobranieRM](http://www.facebook.com/SobranieRM) has more followers, 2 534, however it has less posts than the twitter account. Both social media profiles provide basic information and do not share further information about the Assembly, its structure, MPs, speeches in the sessions, in-depth information about amendments, arguments raised during the discussions or other more detailed information.

### I.6.5. Assembly E-newspaper

Any person interested in the Assembly's agenda can subscribe to the Assembly's E-newspaper.<sup>25</sup> The Assembly's E-newspaper informs about the Assembly's agenda, about plenary or committee sessions, as well as about important activities of the Assembly and the MPs.

## II. OTHER MODES OF PARTICIPATION – PRACTICES FROM OTHER PARLIAMENTS IN EUROPE

### II.1. Contacting Members of Parliament

A number of Parliaments in Europe publicly announce on their websites e-mails addresses of the MPs thereby allowing the citizens to easily reach the MPs. This is common practice of the parliaments of Slovakia, UK, Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden and Spain, and others. British MPs also provide their office telephone numbers, while some MPs in Denmark give their mobile phone numbers. Some other parliaments, such as the German

<sup>25</sup> Subscription for the Assembly's E-newspaper can be available on the following link: <http://www.sobranie.mk/newsletter.nsp>

Bundestag provides contact with MPs through an online contact form.

### II.2. Public Petitions – House of Commons, United Kingdom

United Kingdom residents can submit a motion to the House of Commons in UK through a public (paper) petition.<sup>26</sup> There is a broad range of issues on which a petition can be filed. It is required for a petition to clearly state the issue of citizens' concern and for which they seek the House of Commons' reaction or request the petition for a Governments reaction. A public petition can be submitted by a single individual which is often the case in practice.<sup>27</sup>

Once submitted, a public petition can be presented to the House of Commons formally or informally only by MPs, even though the MPs are not obliged to do so. A formal presentation mean that the MP will present it in person, by stating the entities and number of petitioners, the subject-matter of the petition, following which the text of the petition is read. The formal procedure requires that the MP then brings the petition to the Table, after which the title of the petition is read by the Clerk and finally the MP places the petition into the petitions bag. In cases of informal presentation, an MP can just put a public petition into the petitions bag and by doing so, the public petition is considered filed. For an MP to present a public petition to the House of Commons it must fulfill several criteria. It should primarily be addressed to the House of Commons, clearly state the subject-matter or actions to be required of the Government by the House of Commons.

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/have-your-say/petitions/paper-petitions/>

<sup>27</sup> House of Commons Information Office, Public Petitions <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-information-office/Po7.pdf>

Each submitted petition is published in the Parliament's official reports and journals and then submitted to the Government's department responsible for handling of petitions and in charge of feedback within two months on average. The Petitions Committee can also recommend further action on specific petitions.

The UK House of Commons website provides detailed information on the preparation of the public petition. In addition, in cases when citizens need assistance in drafting a petition, a public petitions' clerk for whom contact information is also available on the website, is assigned to provide the necessary assistance.<sup>28</sup>

### II.3. E-Petitions – House of Commons, United Kingdom

*“The public already have many opportunities to make their voices heard in Parliament, and this new system of e-petitions could give them a megaphone.”*

*Sir George Young, MP, United Kingdom House of Commons*

**British citizens and UK residents can initiate an online petition to ask for a change of a law or a government policies.<sup>29</sup> If and when an online petition gathers 10,000 signatures (0,015% of the population of the UK) it will get a response from the Government, while if and when it gathers 100,000 signatures (0, 15% of the population of the UK) it will**

<sup>28</sup> The UK petition with largest public support of 4,5 million signature is the Ambulance Dispute petition with which the Union had demanded and achieved higher pay and better work conditions for the ambulance staff.

<sup>29</sup> United Kingdom, Government and Parliament Petitions: <https://petition.parliament.uk/>

**be considered eligible for a debate in the Parliament.** This is possible through an official website [petition.parliament.uk](http://petition.parliament.uk). After a petition is started it requires initial support by five people and if the petition fulfills the necessary standards, it will be published online, while the petitioner will be notified as to how to proceed. The Petitions Committee consists of 11 MPs from governmental and opposition parties and is responsible for reviewing and processing the submitted petitions, hence the petitions are considered and reviewed at a high political level.

**An online petition is open for signatures for a period of 6 months.** The Petitions Committee has also the authority to pressure action from the Government or Parliament based on issues raised in this manner. In the case that an issue which is petitioned has already been debated in Parliament in the recent period or is on schedule for debate, the petition will not be put forward for a debate as a separate issue. MPs also have the possibility to consider putting a petition for a debate before it gathers 100,000. **The Petitions Committee sometimes invites the petitioners to discuss with MPs or government ministers or to present evidence in favor of their petition to a select committee.** This committee can also extend the consultation to organizations or other individuals and ask for opinion on the issue raised by the petition.

Every started petition will not be launched online. In order for a petition to be published online, it has to fulfill a set of standards: it has to be clear on the subject-matter; it has to ask for something which is within the competence of the Government or the Parliament; it has to be about a public, and not a personal issue; it has to be about a non-confidential issue; to be respective, non-offensive, non-provocative, non-extremists and not misleading; not to advertise or joke about an issue; it cannot be about partisan politics, and it has to fulfill some other country specific criteria.

If a petition is rejected, the Petitions Committee will inform the petitioner about the grounds for rejection and it will advise on different venues to pursue. However, unless the rejected petitions are illegal, offensive or confidential, their texts are posted on the petitions' website.

All instructions regarding opening a petition are published on the Petitions website, but all interested individuals can inquire further details by email, phone or by a textphone for people with hearing disability. By 11 October 2015, 2 055 e-petitions were submitted to the official Petitions website. Out of these, to date 1 295 were still open, and none were closed, 760 were rejected, 30 received responses from the Government, 19 await a Government's response, 4 await debate in Parliament and 1 was debated in Parliament.

E-petitioning was first introduced by the Labour government in 2006, however the website was closed down prior to the 2010 parliamentary elections. The current e-petition website was launched in 2011 by the Conservative government as a fulfilment of their electoral program with the aim to make the Government more transparent and accessible to the citizens. On the occasion of its launching, the House of Commons' Leader, Conservative MP Sir George Young said that the website's launch "represents another step towards a more accessible and transparent Parliament."<sup>30</sup>

#### **II.4. Citizens' Agora: Linking the European Parliament and European Civil Society**

The Citizens' Agora<sup>31</sup> is a structured mechanism linking European civil society with the European Parliament (EP) on

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<sup>30</sup> BBC news, MPs set to debate public's petition demands, 29 July 2011 <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-14326218>

<sup>31</sup> European Parliament, Agora <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/atyourservice/en/20150201PVL00041/Agora>

the most relevant issues which are on the EP's agenda and which affect citizens. The Agora is a forum in which 500 representatives from European CSOs are invited to discuss specific issues. The 500 CSO representatives are selected by the parliamentary committees. Each Agora debate is led by two moderators, one from the Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) or from another EU institution, and one from the CSOs.

One CSO can have only one representative in the Agora. The Conference of Presidents (consisted of the President of the EP and the chairpersons of the political groups) sets the topics for discussion and their timing. The Agora, which lasts for two days, is preceded by preparation of draft working documents. Selected CSOs' representatives, two or three per workshop, are responsible for the preparation of a discussion document before the start of the meeting; however the other CSOs' representatives are also expected to provide their contributions through the Agora website. After the Agora, the reporters prepare a report therein presenting the options proposed during each of the workshop discussions.

The Agora sessions had been instituted in the European Parliament since November 2007 when the first Agora was held on the topic "The Future of Europe". With this mechanism, the EU went beyond the previous ad hoc consultations with the civil society and provided a combination of "direct" and "representative" democracy hence further contributing to the legitimacy of the elected representatives of the European citizens.

#### **II.5. Open Call for Evidence**

The UK Parliament publicly seeks evidence, particularly as assistance in exercising its control function in

scrutinizing the work of the Government.<sup>32</sup> A Parliament's select committee can issue a public request for interested parties to submit evidence on a specific issue, and it can also invite relevant stakeholders to provide evidence. In most cases, the submitted evidence are also published on the committee's website. The committee also takes oral evidence which takes place in public.

## **II.6. Visiting and Observing Parliament in Person**

Some Parliaments in Europe can be accessed every business day and citizens or other visitors can attend plenary sessions from the Parliaments' hall gallery. Such a practice is possible in the parliaments of Slovakia, United Kingdom, Netherlands, Spain, Germany, Slovenia, as well as in other countries. This allows for a great number of persons to visit the parliaments in the above stated countries. For instance, the German Bundestag notes visits by 39 million people since its relocation from Bonn to Berlin.<sup>33</sup>

## **III. CONCLUSIONS**

The Macedonian Assembly offers good channels by the means of which the public can participate in the work of the Assembly. The interested stakeholders can request to take part in a committee session, a public hearing or an oversight hearing, even though this is not clearly stated, publicized or encouraged. The data from the past 7 years shows that even though the frequency of public hearings has

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<sup>32</sup> House of Commons, United Kingdom, Committee Inquiries: Open calls for evidence <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/inquiries-a-z/current-open-calls-for-evidence/>

<sup>33</sup> Deutscher Bundestag, Visitors [http://www.bundestag.de/htdocs\\_e/visits](http://www.bundestag.de/htdocs_e/visits)

increased throughout the parliamentary terms since 2008, the majority of the MPs have not turned to the relevant public for contribution to the parliamentary discussions. Public participation in this way provides evidence, analyses, data and other information that can improve the quality of the laws and the performance of the MPs. It is therefore crucial that such public participation in hearings and discussions of legal and policy changes takes places in an inclusive and open manner through the parliamentary working bodies.

Similarly, even though MPs have sufficient resources, such as possibility to meet citizens in the Parliament's premises, in the constituency office and in the electoral unit on a designated day, research has found that only a small portion of citizens have established contact with an MP.

The general public can be directly informed about the Parliament's sessions through the Assembly's channel, the social media, and the E-newspaper. On the other hand, the Parliament does not take advantage of its YouTube channel where it can also post recordings of its sessions.

Some Parliaments in Europe have devised successful mechanisms to include the public in the work of the Parliament. Taking them in consideration, this policy brief recommends improvement of the current and introduction of new forms of public participation in the work of the Macedonian Assembly in order to increase the participation of the public in its work, to contribute to better quality of legislation and consequently to increase the democratic capacity and trust in the Parliament.

## IV. RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE MACEDONIAN ASSEMBLY FOR ADVANCING PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN ITS WORK

**IV.1. Prepare easily available guidelines and incentivize public participation in the work of the Assembly** – so citizens and other stakeholders can easily obtain instructions as how to participate in the Assembly's work as well as serve as an incentive for greater engagement by citizens;

**IV.2. MPs should increase the contact with the citizens and meet them in the Assembly, constituency offices and in other places in the electoral unit** – this will increase citizens' awareness about the identity of their MPs, the relations between the citizen and the respective MP will be strengthened, it will bear a positive influence on MPs responsiveness to citizens, the MP's understanding and representation of citizens' views. Finally, it will also contribute to increased trust level of trust in the Assembly, which will in turn increase the level of confidence in the governance of the country;

**IV.3. Issue an open call for evidence on committee sessions, public and oversight hearings and open them for the general public without an "invitations only" principle** – this provision will offer an open channel for research, evidence and analyses to be collected from external stakeholder by the Assembly and thus enhance the quality of legislation. Open calls for evidence providing comprehensive information about the specific hearings should be issued at least a week or two in advance, in order for any external interested party to be able to prepare and submit her contribution. Participation in committee sessions, public

and oversight hearings should be open for anyone who can contribute and should not be restricted to an "invitations only" principle;

**IV.4. Introduce legal changes to provide for the possibility of public and e-petitions to be filed to the Macedonian Assembly** – this provision will offer the possibility for citizens to influence decision- making between two elections and allow for the citizens' voice to be heard in the Assembly;

**IV.5. Provide the possibility for citizens to attend and observe parliamentary sessions firsthand** – this provision will allow the citizens to have a first-hand experience of parliamentary debates, democratic decision- making and their MPs. The visits to the plenary can be easily administered for visitors to attend parliamentary sessions for a limited time period on a first-come first-served basis;

**IV.6. Organize structured thematic sessions between MPs and civil society organizations following the model of the European Parliament Agora Sessions** – this provision will enable the Assembly to have greater access to civil society research and analyses, to be more informed about the work of civil society, to maintain a dialogue with civil society and thus contribute to democratization of the country;

**IV.7. Increase information sharing about the Assembly's work through its social media accounts** – this provision will offer the Assembly the advantages of the new media, it will increase outreach and citizens will become more informed about policy- making and decision- making;

**IV.8. Post recorded plenary and committee sessions on the Assembly's YouTube channel** – this provision will offer another possibility for citizens to become



directly informed about the Assembly's work and will simultaneously provide easy access to watch-dog and research activities.



# Parliament Watch

## Strengthening Political Debate and Deliberative Discourse

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