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Speech of Maia Bitadze, Deputy Mayor of Tbilisi, Georgia

Dear ministers, excellences, distinguished colleagues and participants,

It is truly my honor to participate today in this very important conference, which is being held under the auspices of the Georgia's Presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe and is dedicated to the one of the four priorities of Georgia's presidency, namely – civil participation in decision making.

I feel also very privileged to represent one of the organizers of this Conference – the City of Tbilisi and on behalf of our Municipality, I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to the permanent representation of Georgia to the Council of Europe and The Council of Europe for their continuous support in strengthening democracy and upholding rule of law and human rights in Georgia.

I am happy that I am given opportunity to speak on this panel and share some of my views with you on civil participation in Tbilisi – on our experience, ongoing projects and challenges that we face.

Notions such as - civil participation, civic engagement, and civil society - have become crucial in today's democratized world with advanced societies tackling local and global social, political, economic and environmental issues.

Unfortunately, due to Soviet occupation and then the almost three decades of the period of transitional democracy since the fall of the USSR, Tbilisi was not that active city in the sphere of civil participation in decision making. Generally, participatory democracy has been an issue in the whole country and most specifically in the capital.

It took a long time to re-activate citizens, to bring back the belief in individual capabilities in regards of advocating change, altering expectations. It has been a long process to build a civil society in Georgia with NGOs, active citizens, individual or collective initiatives, movements for change and people willing to participate in decision making process and what is important, the government willing to accept and embrace growing political impact of civic engagement.

The process of building civil society has not been as smooth as it may seem, it was full of confrontation and rivalry, frustration and apathy. Very often hopes were dashed and it seemed that the process was reversed but Georgia still managed to establish itself as a beacon of democracy in the region with active participation of citizens in local and state affairs.

Civil participation in decision-making process is important for:

1. Improving the quality of outcomes;
2. Sharing responsibility between the government and people;
3. Generating new ideas;
4. Strengthening national identities and building inclusive nation-states;
5. Inclusion into the local and state affairs of previously excluded groups of people;
6. Boosting self-esteem, positive self-identities and increasing overall levels of happiness;
7. Increasing satisfaction of citizens with the outcomes.

Aarhus Convention and EIA:

Georgia is a party to the many multilateral environmental treaties, which, among other issues, also obliges governments on central or local level to promote and support public participation in environmental decision making. Most importantly, the Aarhus Convention on “Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters Informed citizens, “ provides for:

“the right of everyone to receive environmental information that is held by public authorities (“access to environmental information”).

the right to participate in environmental decision-making. Arrangements are to be made by public authorities to enable the public affected and environmental non-governmental organizations to comment on, for example, proposals for projects affecting the environment, or plans and programs relating to the environment, these comments to be taken into due account in decision-making, and information to be provided on the final decisions and the reasons for it (“public participation in environmental decision-making”);

the right to review procedures to challenge public decisions that have been made without respecting the two aforementioned rights or environmental law in general (“access to justice”).”

Georgia’s international obligations were also transposed into national legislation, most primarily Georgia adopted Environmental Impact Assessment Code, which regulates participation of wider public in making decisions on large scale infrastructural projects, which potentially could affect natural environment and biodiversity. The legislation is adopted on a national level and is also applicable to the city of Tbilisi. Although, the City so far has never initiated project of that scope that could require EIA and thus would invoke mechanism of civil participation pursuant to the EIA code, but in the future if we launch large scale project, which potentially could affect very unique landscape and nature of Tbilisi, we would definitely activate mechanism for civil participation and would take decision only through the inclusive consultations with all stakeholders, including citizens and civil society organizations.

Besides the fact that we strictly follow the obligation taken under Aarhus convention, we also genuinely believe that informed citizens tend to be more actively engaged in decision-making process. This brings legitimacy to the actions taken by government.

Your Idea to the Mayor:

Democracy has a powerful tool of voting. But sometimes it is not enough to prevent alienation of citizens from a state and marginalization of groups, eventually leading to a conflict or other types of crisis. Tbilisi City Hall tries to actively engage NGOs and individual citizens in the process of decision-making. We are transparent about our environmental projects. Currently, we are actively working on development of numerous important recreational areas around the city and rehabilitation of the old ones. In both cases we have active communication with local stake-holders. For every big and numerous small projects we held meetings with local residents and actively discussed the projects ideas. In some cases, besides meetings, we also surveyed the local residents to better identify their needs.

Very often free interaction between people and government is the reason of brilliant ideas to be heard and accomplished. Every government should take measures to enable gifted people get their ideas realized. We think that power of generation of ideas is embodied in people and we are genuinely happy to have a web-platform “**Your idea for the City Mayor**”, which on the one hand enables citizens to bring publicity to their ideas and chances to accomplish and on another hand people can vote for their favorite ones. The ideas with the greater public support will be considered by the city hall of Tbilisi.

Citizen participation:

Cities worldwide attempt to inculcate various mechanisms for civil participation in decision making and to encourage ordinary citizens to be part of changes and to take decisions themselves. One of such widely applied mechanisms is the sortition on local self-governance level. The idea is that people in each place directly decide on for example, how to spend budget money, where they want new recreational spaces, how the public transport should operate etc. But they do it not through plebiscite. They will do it in a more effective way, through participation in the work of permanent committees, which are formed with the help of sortition and rotation mechanisms. The citizens will receive letters inviting them to take part in decision-making process. This is the first stage selection: people who are interested in the issues and are motivated will reply. The second selection stage is a compulsory intensive issue-oriented training, after which a citizen becomes eligible to participate in sortition. The committee members later are changed by rotation. The work of such a committee is organized as an open public debate/hearing with the participation of experts and concerned parties. The decisions are made by voting within the committee.

Gldani Lake:

Last year, The City of Tbilisi, with the partnership of the Council of Europe launched pilot project, which would ensure above mentioned type of participation in environmental decision making. One of the numerous infrastructural projects we are working on which aims to create a green recreational area in Tbilisi is at Gladni Lake. The goal is to develop a park in the suburban district of Tbilisi, Gldani. For a long time that area of Tbilisi was neglected despite the fact that it is one of the most densely populated parts of the city. And

for the purpose, a special platform was established to ensure a wider participation of people in decision-making. The platform was based on the principle of parity, whereas five members were nominated from the local authorities and five members were selected from local NGOs working on environmental issues. Primary objective of the Platform was to hold wide public consultations and ask the local residents and get their feedback on the potential development of the area around the lake.

Various clusters of residents were summoned to take part in public hearing starting from school kids finishing with the professional associations of retired persons, vulnerable groups and etc. During the productive meeting with the local residents, key ideas for the future park of Gldani Lake were identified and later integrated in the project design and currently the internal procedures to select studio, who would prepare detailed design of the park, is underway and we anticipate that very soon Tbilisi shall have its first ever park, which is fully designed based on citizen's ideas and their demands.

This pilot project already proved to be very successful and the City intends to embark on a more long-lasting process to establish standing platform or other mechanism, which would work based on rotation of citizens and NGOs and to use this mechanism for creation and revitalization of public spaces throughout Tbilisi.

Conclusions:

To my mind this kind of civil institutions will provide a real tool of direct democracy and participation in decision-making for people, who are concerned and are motivated to work for the benefits of their communities. Rotation mechanisms will ensure, that the platforms will be open to newcomers and at the same time will allow people to save the experience and expertise and transfer it to the new members. Very often particular groups of people are excluded from the decision-making process. It leads to their marginalization, while implications can be detrimental for the social and political stability. Our goal is to integrate previously marginalized groups of people and to increase their well-being.

This will be the best school of citizenship that might change the very texture of the society. It will raise the social capital and allow new idealistic leaders to appear and at the same time will ensure that the decision-making process will be effective and professional. the citizens will get better informed about complex social, political and economic issues and learn to take responsibility for the well-being of their communities.

People generally tend to like and respect the thing they have contributed to. It is no surprise that people have positive emotional connection with the projects, they were involved in and had influenced the outcomes. Thus, generally, citizens are more satisfied with the decisions and results they have influenced rather the ones where they had no say over.

Thank you for your attention!