



Research summary: Lithuanian Self-Government: The Path to a More Civil-Minded Community

Study reveals that Lithuania differs from the other countries in a few aspects. Not only it has very large municipalities, but it is also a unique unitary state in the European Union that has only one, sub-regional, level of self-government. Lithuania also stands behind in terms of de-centralisation of government and creation of self-governing society. Existing local self-government institutions (municipalities) are not self-governing enough, they do not represent local communities well enough and often very passively observe the economic and social development of their territory.

Lithuanian society is not satisfied with the current self-government system and would prefer some reforms strengthening self-government. Public polls revealed how weak self-government in Lithuania is. The majority of citizens (60%) believe that decisions made by municipalities have a very weak or no impact on their lives. Moreover, 82% of people believe that they have no influence on the decisions of municipalities. Similarly to the years under the Soviet rule, the gap between local government and citizens remains wide.

The authors of the study provide some specific recommendations with regards to public policy of Lithuania. To begin with, it is important to ensure that public policy is based on society's expectations, interests and long-term welfare rather than the mere pursuit of power of political parties. The necessity to ensure the independence of territorial communities is also stressed, because at the moment, paradoxically, self-government is seen as a business of local government rather than of local people. Therefore, it is suggested to make municipalities smaller and give more self-government rights to the elderships. It is important to ensure that the authorities of elderships are elected by people and accountable to them.

It is also necessary to increase economic independence of these local government bodies and provide them with more competencies and financial resources that they could easily use according to the specific needs of local communities. In addition to this, it is suggested to increase independence of the existing self-government institutions. The majority of population is in favour of transferring more powers from the central government to municipalities. Therefore, it is necessary to change the fiscal system and provide them with opportunities to collect more taxes by themselves as well as give more functions in the areas of land use, education, social security and health.

Study suggests strengthening public representation at the municipality councils, which would increase their legitimacy. This could be done by introducing a mixed electoral system.



PILIE TINĖS VISUOMENĖS INSTITUTAS

It is also suggested to strengthen the administrative capacity of municipality institutions. At the same time their institutional framework could be changed as well. A collegiate municipality would function much more democratically than a one-man institution (at the moment the executive power of municipalities belongs to the director of administration). Collegiate institution would also ensure a more efficient internal control.

With the help of laws and practises, it would be beneficial to increase the participation of local communities and citizens in the local self-government and expand their influence in the process of debating and making political decisions. At the same time it is essential to introduce self-government at the regional (county) level. Regional government should be elected or created according to the principle of representation rather than appointed by the state government. Counties should be able to use their own financial resources and actively participate in the distribution of the EU structural funds.

According to the experience of Western democracies, a variety of different institutional models of municipalities should be allowed. Based on the fact that our municipalities are all rather distinctive, an assumption could be made that a variety of instruments are needed for their management. A diversified institutional model of local self-government could be successfully applied in Lithuania.