

Op-ed by Principal Deputy High Representative Donald Hays on Direct Election of Mayors: “Giving the People a Direct Choice”

Everyone agrees that this country needs less bureaucracy and to find a way to reduce the layers of government, but a way also needs to be found to provide the citizens of this country with a greater voice in government. It is clear that one can have too much of the first, while not having enough of the second.

The essence of a democratic system is accountability of government to the people. It's no great mystery – leaders are appointed by the people to represent people's interest; if this process is to work, they must be seen to be representing people's interest.

That's one reason why the Federation House of Representatives made a significant step forward by proposing constitutional amendments in order to introduce direct elections of Mayors in FBiH. This initiative will give the citizens of the Federation a direct voice in the workings of the municipal government in which they live. (The citizens of the RS already have that ability beginning with this election.)

Municipalities deal with tangible every day services – such as garbage collection and street lighting and children's day care; they process the documents that define your lives – birth certificates and wedding certificates. They may be the lowest tier of government, but for most citizens it is this government that effects their basic interests not the Cantons

or Federation. So, allowing for the direct electing of mayors is a major step forward in the democratic process of this country.

This change will enhance the accountability of mayors to the residents of communities..

Significantly, the pressure to change the constitution and expand democracy to the municipalities has come about as a result of a groundswell of popular opinion. Part of that support originated from mayors themselves. I became aware of this as a result of my own travels around the country where I had a chance to speak and listen to mayors. *They* know that direct elections will provide them with a powerful tool, with a mandate that will increase their effectiveness.

It is the mayors, for example, who are working with their counterparts in the RS to seek cooperation in order to maximize the natural synergies and economies of scale in infrastructure and communications projects. They understand that if five municipalities pool their resources they'll be able to set up a more efficient and economical waste disposal system than if each municipality tries to go it alone. They understand that you can't clean up just one stretch of a river, you have to get the cooperation of all the communities along the river bank. Direct election will allow the people to put mayors in place who can get them the best deal – who can serve their interests by making it their interest – this is the primary criteria for reforms at the grassroots level. There are many mayors, who know exactly what they should be doing to make life better for their constituents. This constitutional amendment will *empower* those mayors.

Another source of support for this change has come from civic groups such as the Centre for Civil Initiatives. In June last year the CCI polled 3000 citizens in 30 municipalities. They asked: "Would you prefer to have your mayor elected directly?"

More than 82 percent of respondents said yes.

Dnevni Avaz conducted a similar survey. They found 72 percent of people in favour of direct election, and when Dnevni List conducted their poll they found 76 percent in favour.

It is clear that most of you understand where your own interest lies.

Members of the Parliament of FBiH now have to take the next step but they must act fast. The House of Representatives and House of Peoples have to adopt the bill in its second reading before 14 April – on 15 April the local elections will be announced and the law must be in place on that date.

Their actions next week will prove their commitment to enhancing democratic change in this country by adopting these laws. They have shown their acceptance of the people's will when they proposed those changes in March. But the election clock is ticking.

The people have made their views clear – parliament must now take decisive and timely action.