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**PRESS RELEASE**

**Pod lupom's Central Conference: 2021 should be year of electoral reforms**

The Coalition for Free and Fair Elections “Pod lupom” organized an online central conference “Electoral Reform 2021” that brought together representatives of the BiH Parliamentary Assembly, Council of Ministers, electoral administration, international community, representatives of partner civil society organizations involved in the domestic election monitoring, election observers, representatives of media and other organizations.

This central conference represents continued efforts to improve the electoral process and electoral legislation in BiH, with a goal to create high-quality conclusions and recommendations to be considered and accepted by government in BiH. The general conclusion of the conference is that 2021 should be the year of electoral reforms.

*The previous changes to the electoral law disregarded the interests of citizens. I must say that the changes were accomodating to political parties. If electoral legislation is to reflect democraticness of a country, the extent to which human or civil rights are respected, it must be arranged in a way that it primarily protects the electoral will of BiH citizens- voters – said* Vehid Šehić, President of the Coalition’s Strategic Board.

The introductory remarks at the conference were delivered by Johann Sattler, Head of the Delegation of European Union to BiH and the European Union Special Representatives in BiH, Eric Nelson, US Ambassador to BiH and Kathleen Kavalec, Head of the OSCE Mission to BiH.

*Both the constitutional and electoral reforms are part of the 14 key priorities established in the European Commission's Opinion on Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU membership application. These reforms are not abstractions; they are specific, common-sense changes. They are clearly mapped out, including the OSCE/ODIHR and Council of Europe GRECO recommendations. These reforms address deficiencies highlighted in recent general and local elections and they are necessary to ensure that citizens' votes do count. The priorities are clear. One argument that I frequently hear when I discuss the necessity of the electoral and constitutional reform in BiH is that is these reforms are “mission impossible.” I do not share such opinion. Not only that these reforms are possible, but they are of paramount importance for BiH's EU path and BiH citizens,* saidJohann Sattler, Head of the Delegation of European Union to BiH and the European Union Special Representatives in BiH.

Eric Nelson, US Ambassador to BiH has said that this non-election year is an opportunity that BiH must not miss to convince all citizens that they have an opportunity to be elected, to cast their votes and to have

better confidence that their votes count. US Ambassador underlined the important role of the BiH Parliamentary Assembly in the electoral reform.

*It is the Parliament that will have a key say for, firstly, limited but important constitutional reform for implementation of the rulings of the European Human Rights Court and elimination of discrimination in the electoral process, secondly, for the electoral reform in order to address the verdicts of the Constitutional Court and, thirdly, for all technical and legislative changes that are necessary for implementation of the ODIHR's key recommendations regarding election integrity,* said Eric Nelson, US Ambassador to BiH.

Reflecting on the 2020 local elections in BiH, the Head of the OSCE Mission to Bosnia, Kathleen Kavalec, emphasized deficiencies of the current electoral system and lack of accountability for the mistakes made.

*The current electoral system leaves too much room for mistakes, irregularities and abuses resulting in a widespread public distrust in many elements of the electoral process. This distrust cannot be restored without accountability of either political subjects or electoral administration and electoral officials. Accountability does not necessarily mean criminal investigation or the like, rather it implies a procedure that looks after and re-examines mistakes, allows for corrections and ensures that all those responsible are identified, and if and when needed, to face appropriate repercussions,* said Kathleen Kavalec, Head of the OSCE mission to BiH.

Reflections regarding the 2021 expected electoral reform were made by Borjana Krišto, Speaker of the House of Representatives of the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH, Nikola Špirić, Second Deputy Speaker of the House of People of the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH and Munib Jusufović, member of the House of People of the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH.

*Speaking of the electoral reforms in the context of implementing the verdicts of the Constitutional Court and other rulings of the international courts, we must be guided by respect for the principle of the constitutional structure of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as a state of three equal, constituent peoples and Others. The constitutionality and equality of all three peoples, Croats, Bosniaks and Serbs, are the fundamental and overarching principle of the Constitution of BiH, as is the prohibition of the privilege and dominance in the structure of government by any of the three constituent peoples, as confirmed in the Constitutional Court’s decision,* said Borjana Krišto, Speaker of the House of Representative of the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH.

The Second Deputy Speaker of the House of People of the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH, Nikola Špirić reflected on the formation of an Interdepartmental Working Group for Electoral Reform in BiH.

*Aware of the fact that the electoral reform is one of the 14 priorities of the European Commission, the Collegium of both Houses has formed Interdepartmental Working Group made up of three representatives of the House of People, three representatives of the House of Representatives and three representatives of the Council of Ministers. We defined a conclusion that opened the possibility for this Interdepartmental group to be able to seek services from NGO sector, academic community, national and international experts, and the CEC,* - said Nikola Špirić.

Nikola Špirić highlighted that the Interdepartmental Working Group should involve opposition parties with caucuses in the House of Representatives, which would make the electoral reform a success of all.

Munib Jusufović, member of the House of People of the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH in his address at the Central Conference emphasized two areas where reforms should take place.

*There are two groups of problems or different groups the changes of the electoral legislation should address. One group refers to political nature, primarily, agreeing on election of members of the Presidency of BiH and election of the House of People. The second group of includes technical matters, and some of these technical matters are also essential - the introduction of new technologies. If new technologies are not introduced, our elections will never be regular. –* concluded Munib Jusufović, member of the House of People of the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH.

The President of the Central Election of BiH (CEC) Željko Bakalar made a remark about the 2020 local elections in BiH. In addition to the challenges that the CEC faced in organizing the 2020 local elections in BiH, Željko Bakalar addressed the areas that the CEC recognized as priorities in improving the country's electoral process.

*Our view of where the focus of the legislative improvements should be is as follows: firstly, to change how polling station committee members are appointed, and it seems that there is a general consensus today among the participating panelists; secondly, to introduce new technologies in the voter identification process, voting, and ballot counting at the polling stations, to prevent misuse of the public resources for election purposes by regulating this area. Further, it is necessary to introduce additional security mechanisms to prevent the abuse of by-post vote and voter registration and there are different models including with changes to the Election law and without changes to the Election Law. Moreover, sanctioning the so called hateful language should be extended beyond the election campaign period, -* said Željko Bakalar, the President of the Central Election Commission of BiH.

The Pod lupom Coalition has also presented its Final report on the observation of the 2020 local elections in BiH, including the recommendations for improvement of the electoral process in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

*Irregularities registered by the Pod lupom Coalition indicate the urgent need for improvements in the electoral process through implementation of the verdicts of the European Human Rights Court and BiH Constitutional Court, changes to the Election Law and CEC's implementing acts. It is crucial that all participants of the Central Conference agree on the necessity to improve the electoral process and that this 2021 non-election year should be used to make those necessary changes –* concluded Dario Jovanović, Pod Lupom's Project Manager.