

Reflecting About the Last Territorial and Administrative Reform in the Republic of Albania

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All political parties recognized the need for the territorial and administrative reform that was drafted between 2013 and 2015, and there have generally been no reservations about it. In order to provide Albania, the chance to perform to its full potential in this aspect, such atmosphere galvanized high expectations from the public opinion and garnered a significant lot of support from donors.

The opposition at the time decided to withdraw for recognized reasons and did not participate in the process. In these circumstances, territorial consolidation and the number of municipalities dominated the public and political discourse, while the governance structure and the division of powers at the central-local level received little attention.

These reforms proceed through iterative cycles until a social and political balance is achieved, as evidenced by experiences from other nations/countries. The current outcome of this reform in Albania after six years of implementation enables us to evaluate what has been accomplished thus far. What action is necessary now?

In my opinion, the Reform is not "black and white." Of course, there have been some successes; any changes should not seek to undo or start over, but rather to rectify and improve in accordance with the needs of the nation, economy, and communities.

Without getting into specificities of data and numbers, I just want to stress that all of the evaluations to date — both

donor-funded and independent — have demonstrated that the reform has "lights and shadows" and has not yet achieved the goals for which it was intended. In essence, it results in a considerable rise in both the cost of services and the number of people in the administration. Currently, it appears that there exist four key issues regarding the implemented reform that all decision- and policy-makers must consider to address:

The Issue of Representation

While the reform was being conceptualized, experts worked to come up with a "set of criteria" that would be used to implement the territorial reform. These factors were not taken into account as much as they ought to have been since there was not a political balance (also because of the fact previously mentioned that the opposition did not participate in this debate). Instead, the desire for political representation in terms of electoral interests dominated.

The marginalized communities before the reform appear to be even more in worse conditions now, since the territorial consolidation happened, which was required at the time as a good argument. Indeed, it has skewed the representation of communities inside the major territorial-municipalities. For instance, some municipal councils do not represent at all rural or very remote communities, by having solely members from urban areas. Today, local councilors no lon-

ger even visit certain communities and regions on the field.

Such paradigm has strengthened urban centers that have already been consolidating, but it has depopulated small and secondary cities, rural areas, and particularly hinterlands. It takes hours to access basic amenities at the closest location, and services in these locations are almost "dead." It is no coincidence that it was impossible to keep track even of the number of deaths during Covid-19 pandemic in these locations.

Therefore, any decision-makers should really visit at least some of these regions and see, speak live with the locals there, before making any adjustments or decisions. The north, northeast, and southeast of the country are currently deserted. People still live in extreme poverty conditions reminiscent of the "Middle Ages", in some of the most isolated parts of the country. Emigration has grown significantly in popularity. Reports say that over 750,000 Albanians have left the country for the EU, North America and other developed countries, since the reform's inception up to the present times.

The reform almost wiped these areas off the map, but the resources and economic potential remain there. Countries similar to ours have not made such mistake. They have either drafted positive "discriminatory" policies, or applied the principles of "asymmetric" decentralization.

In short, correcting representation is a pressing issue that, in theory, must guarantee local self-government for every village and outlying areas, as well as the provision of basic infrastructure, services in the sectors of agriculture, health, and education, as well as the encouragement and retention of young people and businesses there.

The Issue with Increasing Decentralization

While territorial consolidation dominated discussions of the reform, other, even more significant issues were formally addressed in the new Local Government Organization Law. These issues included the range of competences, functions, and services that the local government should have in the territory.

But in practice, centralization of power in decision-making still exists. An urgent restoration of decentralization is required in this situation. It was accomplished in Albania in the years of 2000s, as a result of a cooperative political-parliamentary atmosphere/process, which regrettably still stands as an isolated case of comprehensive changes with strong political willingness up to date.

Without rushing, this approach might be used right away to resolve the situation beyond a timeline of three months (the present timeline duration of the agenda of the respective Parliamentary Commission). This would ensure the reform's applicability and durability, as well as its potential to generate consensus and consolidate local governance.

In particular, I don't believe we should create something from scratch. At least four in-depth studies have been conducted by local and international expert groups, and according to three of them, Albania could be divided into 80 to 90 municipal units (including the new 'asymmetric' municipalities), while still recognizing the value of functional regions and the need to implement asymmetric decentralization principles.

Regional Developmental Inequality

According to what has been observed thus far, urban regions and the nearby rural suburbs that performed better before the reform continue to do so after it. Even though the urban-rural areas with historical development issues, they are now substantially under worse circumstances.

This demonstrates that the idea of changing borders should not be the sole focus of any future discussions of the reform. Today, it is evident that we are dealing with systemic developmental issues, as the aforementioned examples, which cannot be resolved until the governance structure and local and regional representation are changed first.

In these circumstances, it is advised that the leitmotif of the reform should place more emphasis on the need to examine the governance model, the representation model, and the country's democracy, than it should in the case of changing the country's borders and electoral map for more electoral purposes.

Investments in territorial and regional development

In the conditions of regional inequality that exists in the territory, it is necessary to reevaluate the entire process of drafting development policies at the local and regional level, in order for development priorities and investment benefits to be determined by the interests of the communities and not to be imposed from "above", as it currently happens.

Even the Regional Development Fund must be completely reformed precisely on this principle. In the meantime, I believe that the Law on the Development of Regions should be further detailed upon and implemented in a practical and significant manner. Partnership and subsidiarity are two concepts that shouldn't just exist on paper.

There is no need to invent the wheel in this situation either. Two of the four recommendations made by domestic and foreign experts that address this issue, not occasionally concur that the country should be divided into 4-6 regions. The "County/District" idea as an administrative-territorial entity, appears to be at an end.

At this point for the sake of country's development, in my opinion, the country could be reorganized into 80-90 municipalities and 4-6 regions with direct elections. This would better position the nation for real democratization, as well as the rapprochement of communities and regions with the expected EU developmental objectives/funding in the coming years of accession.

I would also suggest a reorganization into 4-6 smaller municipalities, comparable in size to other municipalities in the country, in the case of the existing "Tirana Municipality – the capital", which is disproportionately large in terms of population and economic potential compared to the average of other current municipalities. This would be coordinated with a regional coordinating authority for Greater Tirana (Tirana, Kamëz, Krujë, Vorë), that could be one of the 6 new regions with direct elections.

Finally, a few thoughts on the phases and fundamental ideas of a thorough parliamentary/political procedure to plan and implement the evaluation of the model of governance and representation.

Some of the potential steps and core concepts for a thorough planning and implementation process for the evaluation of the model of governance and representation are:

Maintain the cooperation with the Strategic Actors from the International Community, especially those who have backed the reform. Decision-making cannot be conducted as if everything is new because donors have been involved in this process for a long time. In addition, the international partners operate as a sort of de facto "guarantor/intermediator" between the political parties in the country, handling changes that go beyond the purely formal and biased electoral perspectives.

To expand the conversation beyond the existing "Bi-Partisan Commission" for Reform. It is important to acknowledge that all political forces in the parliament are not fully and comprehensively represented by this Commission. Numerous justifications are possible, but none of them are helpful. If there is political will, this issue can and should be remedied right away, through a consensual spirit. Additionally, any truly inclusive commission can and should seek for inputs from all parties who have contributed to this subject thus far, compiling a list and matrix of concepts, successes/failures, and issues.

A comprehensive definition of the reform's mandate must be provided by the "All-Inclusive Bi-Partisan Commission" after the appropriate consultations have been held.

The government, or specific political forces, can resolve this issue on their own and without the assistance of other actors if the political elements determine that the primary issue is just the feature of political representation. Of course, by keeping also the obligations brought forth by unilateral decision-making.

However, this formula would only address the following electoral issue; and it would not ensure national stability, vision, or development goals.

If the modification of the governance and representation model would actually be the main objective, I advise that the "Bi-Partisan Commission" establish as soon as possible an "expert team" that would be affiliated with this Commission, and that was already proposed by all the parliamentary parties.

In the instance of the decentralization reform, the team would develop a specific proposal for the reform based on clear principles regarding the goal and anticipated outcomes of the reform. This would be done using the political consensus model that was developed in the 2000s during decentralization era. Of course, taking such a route, calls for a work schedule that extends beyond the present 3-month projection of the parliament and majority.

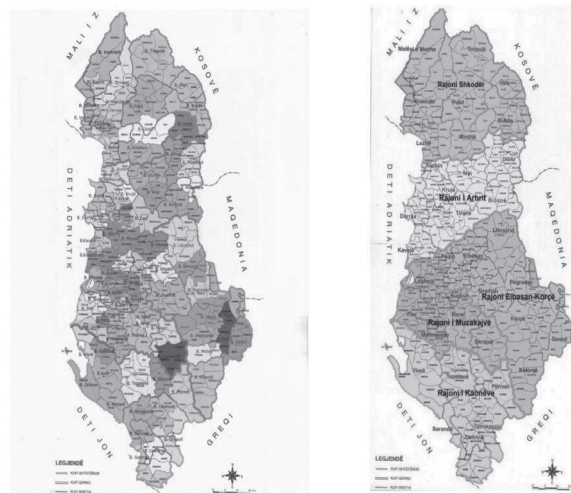


Figure 1. Map of Reorganization of municipalities (local governments)



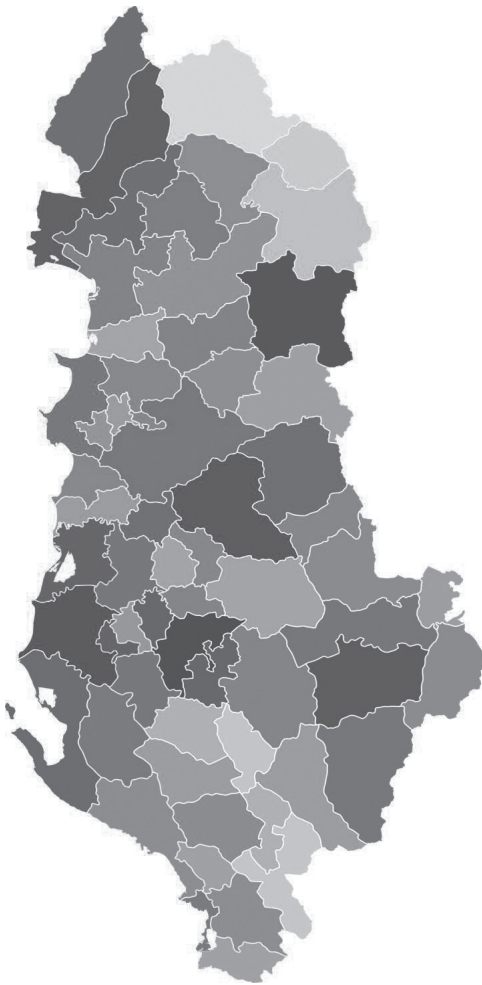
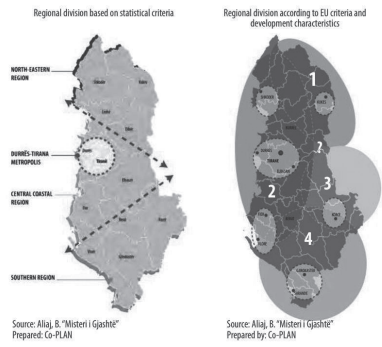
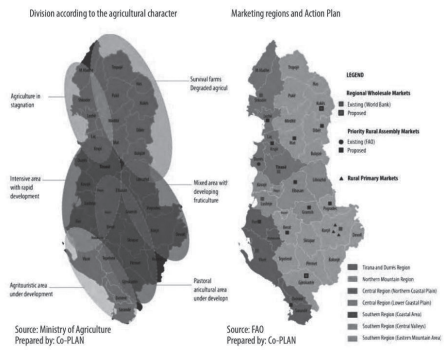
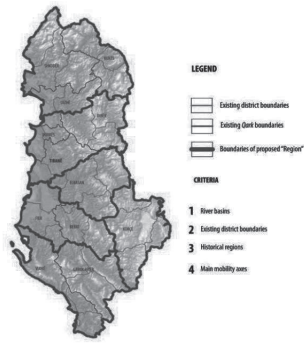
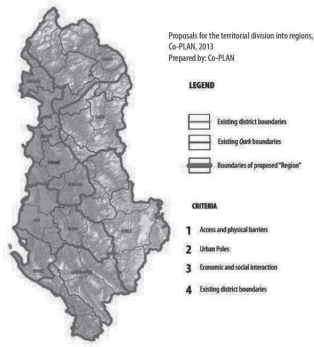


Figure S1: Version 2. Territorial division into 6 regions



Figure 2. Map of Reorganization of Regions