



# BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS

**INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE**  
**13<sup>th</sup> - 14<sup>th</sup> October 2023**

ISSUES OF HOUSING,  
PLANNING, AND  
RESILIENT DEVELOPMENT OF  
THE TERRITORY

**Towards Euro-Mediterranean  
Perspectives**

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# **Issues of Housing, Planning, and Resilient Development of the Territory Towards Euro-Mediterranean Perspectives**

## **Conference Theme and Rationale**

Albania, along with other Western Balkan countries, has undergone significant economic, social, and political changes in recent years. As a result, housing, planning, and the resilient management of territorial development have emerged as critical issues. This is because these regions face significant challenges in providing affordable housing, addressing the impact of urbanization on the environment, fostering evidence-based decision-making on the territory, and bringing forth the commitments towards climate neutrality.

The organizers use the term “multi-modality” to define complex situations (in matters of territorial planning, management, architecture, housing, public space, technology, etc.) that have historically encompassed Western Balkans and Mediterranean cities in a logic of coexistence and value co-creation. A combination of knowledge and heritage that throughout time and history have given life to civilization in this region of Europe. The active involvement of Albania in the existing network of the Mediterranean Basin and the EU, through a joint action plan with UN / UNECE, and the Albanian and regional authorities, including reputable scientific bodies such as the Academy of Sciences of Albania, makes this conference even more intriguing to explore fascinating areas of research. The conclusions, to be considered as a stage for open innovation, will include recommendations for further scientific and applied research, projects, and events.

The geographical focus of the conference covers three dimensions: i) Albania; ii) the Western Balkans; iii) Euro-Mediterranean countries. POLIS University aims to focus on the above-mentioned research areas that are of common interest to both Western Balkans and Mediterranean cities, including, but not limited to: housing policies, urban history and architecture typology, innovation and digitalization in urbanism, energy efficiency, resilience and environmental sustainability, governance and smart technologies for city management, education and gender aspects in urban planning research.

In this regard the main aim of this international conference is to bring together scholars, policy-makers, and practitioners to examine the pressing issues of housing, planning, and land development in these regions, in a context of transition fatigue, climate challenges and post-pandemic realities.

# **Issues of Housing, Planning, and Resilient Development of the Territory Towards Euro-Mediterranean Perspectives**

## **Conference Aim**

The main aim of this international conference is to bring together researchers, policy makers and practitioners to examine the urgent issues of housing, planning and land development in these regions, in a context of transition, climate challenges and post-pandemic realities.

## **Objective**

- Consolidation of the cooperation network between Albanian and non-Albanian researchers, lecturers, managers, with the aim of participating in joint research projects at the regional and international level;
- Support of local authorities with contemporary data, on the state of housing issues, planning and sustainable urban and environmental management, as well as representatives of public and private institutions operating in this field.

The conference is organized by POLIS University (U\_POLIS) in cooperation with the Academy of Science of Albania, and supported by other local and international partners.

In the framework of resilience, the main conference theme is devoted to Issues of Housing, Planning, and Resilient Development of the Territory from a Euro-Mediterranean Perspective, including Albania, Western Balkans and the Mediterranean Basin. This event aims to bring together academics, policymakers, researchers, experts, practitioners, and stakeholders from diverse backgrounds to discuss and address critical challenges related to housing, urban planning, and the development of resilient territories.

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**Issues of the Territorial-Administrative Reform in Albania.  
A comparative analysis on the progress of reform with other formerly-centralized economies: Estonia and Moldova, and the need for a more ample and innovative approach.**

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**Abstract**

Albania has gone through different reforms of decentralization and territorial administrative since the 1990s. Especially after 2013, these reforms have reshaped the layout of the local territorial administration in Albania. The outcomes of these reforms nevertheless remain questionable. Additionally, considering the EU integration process, the regionalization reform and the regional development reform are still in a critical juncture. This paper analyses the main events during the territorial administrative reform and the regionalization process in Albania. Its analysis tries to highlight the main issues and some recommendations for future action to deepen decentralization and improve local governance in Albania. This is done by comprehensive analysis of the reform based on research and contribution of POLIS University 1 and Co-PLAN Institute for Habitat Development 2 as key local stakeholders. In addition, the Albanian case (Western Balkan Countries) is compared to 2 other case studies of formerly centralized economies (Eastern-Europe) with relatively similar historic stability problematics, economic background, and country/population size, but with geographic location differences (South, North, East) and other differences, such as with regard European integration progress. This includes Estonia (Baltic Countries) and Moldova (Eastern Partnership Countries). Then the comparison is done via i) Local administrative reform; ii) Regionalization and regional development; iii) Analysis of the reform and its challenges; iv) and a matrix-based qualitative conclusion. Albanian case includes desk and field work, while Estonian and Moldavian cases are based on desk research.

Keywords: decentralization, local governance, regionalization, territorial administrative reform, comparison, Albania, Estonia, Moldova,



## Introduction

The main objective of a territorial administrative reform is to establish better and more capable local governance, that in return can improve all aspects of social-economic life via good governance instruments, so that people and communities can live well and fair. From a political perspective, territorial-administrative reform is a political process designed to adjust the relationships between certain bureaucracy with other elements of a society, or within the bureaucracy itself, in each a certain time or historic moment. Some countries might do it in a crucial moment of imposed reorganizations (such as independence from a bigger federal units – British or Ottoman Empire, Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, etc. (Brusis., 2001); or joining new and bigger federal entities like EU, or simply for improving the efficiency of their economy, demographic trends or regional balance, developmental aspects (Mehta, Vinod 2000) (Baldersheim et al., 1996).

However, such reforms go beyond economic dimensions, by targeting objectives that concern the improvement of public life, fighting corruption, nepotism, and patronage, fostering participation of citizens and communities in governance and increasing their representativeness, thus enhancing accountability, transparency of the local democracy. According to United Nations' Economic and Social Council (2005), a successful territorial-administrative reform must be a conscious and well-considered change (transformation) that is carried out by responsible institutions and organizations of the public administration and/or other systems, whose main objective is indeed to improve its own structure, operations, and labor force. It's about the efficiency of the state apparatus, especially at local and regional level. That is why such reform requires strong leadership and management at the central level of governance and policymaking, clear division of responsibilities and effective coordination and cooperation among government institutions, opposition, and other internal external stakeholders interested on such reforms.

According to Bresser-Pereira the main principles of territorial-administrative reform are: i) transparency and accountability; ii) participation and pluralism; iii) subsidiarity; iv) efficiency and effectiveness; v) equity and access to services (Bresser-Pereira, Luiz Carlos; 2005). Meantime the usual goals of a territorial-administrative reforms are summarized under these themes: a) relevance; b) values; c) social equity; d) change; e) client focus.

**Albania** - has gone through various reforms in public administration with the aim of decentralizing power and increasing the competences of local governance. It is a country of a bit more than 2 million people (official statistics show more, but the country lost great percentage of population cause of emigration over the last decade), and it constitutes around 28,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Almost 85% of the population support EU integration. The territorial administrative and local governance reforms started from the early 1990s with the political decentralization, as for the first time, in 1991, local elections were conducted, and mayors were established as leaders of local authorities (Aliaj et al. 2009). Albania was organized in 372 local units, composed of Municipalities (the urban areas) and Communes (the more rural part). This reform was further deepened by the end of the 1990s, following experiences gained over a decade (ibid). In 2000, a new law was drafted on local governance. This law brought about a new territorial organization, such as "Qarks", ideated to be as second tier local governance. Their role was more of a coordinative nature while most of the powers continued to rely with municipalities and communes (Aliaj, 2008). During this time there was a strong discussion on creating regional authorities. However, they were considered as premature for the state of development of the country. Hence, "Qarks" were somewhat designed as an

intermediary and temporary solutions to give time to Albanian authorities to understand better territorial, social and economic dynamics before delving into a further reform (Toto R., 2010). In 2013, a territorial and administrative reform was initiated with the aim of consolidating territorial administration and at the same time further decentralization (PM, 2013). This reform was finalized in 2015, with the main outcome being the consolidation of local governance from 372 units to 61 municipalities. While before there was a clear division between urban and rural areas, the 61 municipalities represented a more comprehensive territorial and social features, bringing together a highly diverse space (Toska & Bejko, 2018). At the time, there was again a discussion regarding regional governance. Although different proposals came to the table, in the end it was decided that still the time was not right to continue with this reform. Some argued that this was a missed opportunity considering that Albania was advancing quickly in joining the EU. At the same time considering the state of development of Albania, with a highly monocentric structure and hyper concentration in Tirana, regional development guided by regional authorities would be a sensible step to counterpart this aspect of development.

**Estonia** – a former centralized economy/country, after the independence from URSS entered a total transformation. Nowadays a member of EU, embarked on a territorial-administrative reform during 2017. It is a Baltic region country of less than 1.5 million inhabitants and a territory of around 45,300 km<sup>2</sup>. The administrative reform resulted in new administrative units, where most of the old units agreed voluntarily to join the new and bigger units. Also, here a consolidation process happened, as a total of 79 units were established as an outcome (15 out of them of urban character, and 64 with rural features) instead of 213 units before 2017. In total 185 municipalities agree to be reorganized, while municipalities did not merge (Haldusreform.fin.ee - in Estonian).

**Moldova** – a former centralized economy/country, after the independence from URSS entered a volatile transition, and nowadays faces the turbulences of being close by a war region among Russia and Ukraine. Not to forget its mutual historic affiliation with neighboring Romania a member country of EU, and almost 20% of Russian and other community living there. All in total the country remains highly divided with 52% of people supporting EU integration. It comprises a territory of around 33,800 km<sup>2</sup> and 2.5 million inhabitants. It has joined the Eastern Partnership Countries agreement with EU.

This paper, brings together an analysis of the Albanian development vis-à-vis the different territorial administrative reforms and the aims of decentralization. The paper will focus on two main issues such as the recent territorial administrative reforms in the respective countries and the discussions on regional development. In the end a series of recommendations are given to overcome the challenges of decentralization and sustainable development of Albania, based on the results of the analysis and the case studies from Estonia and Moldova. These reforms proceed through iterative cycles until a social and political balance is achieved, as evidenced by experiences from other nations. The current outcome of this reform in Albania after several years of implementation enables us to evaluate what has been accomplished thus far as well as action is necessary now.

## **Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

Decentralization, deconcentration and devolution are important concepts associated with good governance. Especially for countries such as Albania, which come from highly centralized systems, these have been to the forefront of administrative reforms in order to bring governance and decision-making closer to the citizens. There can be various political, administrative and fiscal

motives for decentralisation reforms. In some countries, decentralisation can be seen as a counter-reaction to previous strong centralisation and even authoritarianism (Hooghe et al., 2016). In these countries, decentralisation has been, at least partly, a way to ensure that the democratisation development will not be reversed.

Some definitions of decentralization include:

- “Decentralization is a mixture of administrative, fiscal and political functions and relationships. In the design of decentralization systems all three must be included” (UNDP,1998, p1)
- “Decentralization, or decentralizing governance, refers to the restructuring or reorganization of authority so that there is a system of co-responsibility between institutions of governance at the central, regional and local levels according to the principle of subsidiarity, thus increasing the overall quality and effectiveness of the system of governance, while increasing the authority and capacities of sub-national levels” (UNDP 1997, p.4)
- “Decentralization stimulates the search for program and policy innovation, first of all because it is, per se, an innovative practice of governance. Second, because through its implementation, local governments are required to assume new and broader responsibilities in order to provide public services for all. The assumption of new responsibilities through decentralization often requires improved planning, budgeting and management techniques and practices; the adoption of new tools; and the development of improved human resources to operate the decentralized programmes” (United Nations 1996, p26)
- ... “decentralisation as measures that transfer a range of powers, responsibilities and resources from central government to subnational governments, defined as legal entities elected by universal suffrage and having some degree of autonomy” (OECD, 2019, p.1)

On the other hand, “Deconcentration” is often considered to be the weakest form of decentralization and is used most frequently in unitary states-- redistributes decision making authority and financial and management responsibilities among different levels of the central government. It can merely shift responsibilities from central government officials in the capital city to those working in regions, provinces or districts, or it can create strong field administration or local administrative capacity under the supervision of central government ministries. Meanwhile “Devolution” is a third type of administrative decentralization is devolution. When governments devolve functions, they transfer authority for decision-making, finance, and management to quasi-autonomous units of local government with corporate status. Devolution usually transfers responsibilities for services to municipalities that elect their own mayors and councils, raise their own revenues, and have independent authority to make investment decisions. In a devolved system, local governments have clear and legally recognized geographical boundaries over which they exercise authority and within which they perform public functions. It is this type of administrative decentralization that underlies most political decentralization.

As it can be seen from the above definitions, Decentralization encompasses a highly complex process composed of different elements, including deconcentration and devolution. Additionally, forms of decentralization include:

- Administrative Decentralization
- Fiscal or Financial Management Decentralization
- Political or Democratic Decentralization
- Services Delivery Decentralization
- Decentralization of Participatory Mechanisms and Citizen Feed-Back Systems

Hence, from the above, it is the combination of the above that can guarantee the success of decentralization reforms as well as their depth and breadth.

Based on these definitions, the paper aims to analyze the decentralization process in Albania vis-à-vis the different forms of decentralization in order to understand whether the attempts of policy reform have met their target or not. In order to better understand the success of these stories, a comparison is made with countries in similar situations such as Albania, being Estonia and Moldova. Post-socialist countries show similar trends when it comes to decentralization, often regarded as a counter measure to the decentralized state. It is very often this type of conceptualization of decentralization that leads to the failure of reforms and the reason why the comparative perspective becomes important to understand the pitfalls and success of the reforms in Albania.

From a methodological perspective, the paper is mainly based on content analysis and review of different documents, especially for the comparison of Albania, Moldova and Estonia. Meanwhile, for the analysis of the Albanian case, this is based on expert opinion through semi-structured interviews as well as the first hand experience of the authors in the decentralization reforms.

### **Local Administrative Reform in Estonia and Moldova**

Estonia – According to the Ministry of Finance of Estonia the administrative reform in Estonia started since 2015 with several political preparations, as most of the Reform Party created a new government and had enough votes in parliament. The preparation process was completed by mid-2017, and the government approved immediately all local government mergers that it had initiated.

As the new government imposed the establishment or joining of the existing services, new regional public transport centers were imposed on all municipalities, with few exceptions. Also, obligation for local authorities to develop the joint business environment was introduced, but not imposed. Between 2016-2017, other political changes happened with Centre Party now leading the reform (Sulev Valner, 2018). This means that the preparatory period of more than two years may be considered optimal for a normal participation process. There is still some criticism: that not enough time was spent on preparation, and not all stakeholders were involved and the analysis phase. However, one must keep in mind that the longer the preparation period, the more likely the risk of changing political circumstances and coalitions could freeze or block such sensitive and politicized process. In addition, ambiguous statements by central politics and government helped meantime several heads of local government to develop a strategy that their municipalities would not be merged after all. So, the concept of voluntary merging was successfully introduced in the case of Estonia, to cool down potential social and political disagreement. Still, the main obstacles to the reform process remained the periodical changes in the central government, as well as the fact that the Supreme Court did not reach a decision on the Administrative Reform Act. Indeed, the Act was contested at least by 26 municipalities by mid-2016, and before the end of the “voluntary merging phase” of the reform. Without such circumstances the share of self-initiated mergers would have been much higher (Pesti, Cerlin; Randma-Liiv, Tiina (2018).

Some of the critical points to highlight in the Estonian process of the territorial-administrative reform are:

- Contrary to one of the most common criticisms, the reform process and its outcome were not really impacted by insufficient analysis of the existing situation. The Reform was also in line with EU recommendations and guidelines for governance improvements, and therefore had good political support.
- Another typical criticism on policymaking has been that there was lack of stakeholder

engagement during the reform design and approval. While the preparations for the 2017 reform placed a great effort on engagement, it often emerged that the information disseminated at meetings with heads of local government, had not reached all local authorities and officials. But if engaged too early, the stakeholders could often end up dissatisfied because the message in this initial phase is vague, and with no firm decisions. On the other side, if engaged too late, after the decisions are already made, their feedback could not be used to (re-)formulate the decisions.

- Although the administrative reform concept document was ready and presented to the government by end of 2015, it still lacked sufficient support in 2017 during approval, as the government had not approved it, nor did it offer ready-made solutions for all the components of the reform. There existed also lack of information, or criticisms, about the transfer of responsibilities or changes especially in the financial arrangement's terms, which were not yet politically decided. Meantime, the general principles and plans also did not provide enough certainty to support the reform.

- Another crucial factor remained the considerable distrust that exists between the central government and local authorities, while plans that have been prepared but not approved by the government were seen with high skepticism and therefore not accepted after the reform.

**Moldova** – The Territorial-Administrative Reform in Moldova shows strong correlation between the territorial-administrative fragmentation, and the problems of everyday life facing local authorities and communities. According to UNDP (Adrian Ionescu, Sasa Drezgic, Iulian Rusu 2015), some of the critical issues for the Moldavian case remain: i) economic inefficiency, ii) low fiscal capacity, iii) high administrative expenses, iv) vertical fiscal imbalances, iv) lack of basic local service provision, etc. The rural areas where a majority (of around 66 %) of the country's population lives, are the most desperate ones for change. There exists an absence of institutional structures and capacities to ensure service provision and access. The inability of local and regional governments to facilitate economic development is evident, while local government and democracy are meaningful only if they fulfil the functions and responsibilities that are entrusted to them. To overcome the above-mentioned problems, and to stimulate the necessary conditions for incremental growth of basic services to all citizens, authorities have drafted and analyzed: A) 3 alternatives for the first level of local territorial administrative units; B) and 9 alternatives for the second level. The alternatives aim at high-efficiency mandatory consolidation of the first level government, accompanied by the restructuring of the second level government in 3 regional governments. Such consolidation requires amalgamation of small communities into larger municipalities, from the inherited 898 units to 111 units. In this case the average population per unit will be around 23,800 (excluding capital/main cities). It calls for abolishing the current regions/raions, and strengthening municipalities by providing a broader number of public services. The economic simulations based on consolidation show 70-80% reduction of administrative costs. The model requires a transition period for maintenance (CUATM (2019)).

The reform also involves a regional level of government: with 3 "regions" (Nord, Centru, Sud). They have the highest potential for regional integration, balanced development, operational feasibility, administrative costs, regional offices, EU funding and economic benefits, while meeting the best EU criteria for NUTS regions. Consolidation in Moldova is seen as the only way to achieve important savings by reducing the administrative expenses and reallocating the resources freed in this process in favor of service delivery. The responsibility to provide local services belongs now to local authorities, which already have the administrative and institutional capacity to deliver such services or will be able to strengthen those capacities by attracting skilled and knowledgeable staff.

In this case local authorities will be able to expand the delivery of existing functional communal services (like waste management) towards neighboring rural communities and implement projects to build the necessary infrastructure for the provision of services. However, among new local authorities, only 30-40 towns already have the institutional structures and capacities to provide the full range of services required by the law.

The remaining 70-80 local authorities were trained via capacity building programs to allow them to become effective and efficient services providers in mid-terms. The average number of staff per municipality will increase to 40 staff out of the current average 6 staff. But the restructuring risks diminishing inclusive democratic representation and participation in local decision making. The elected councils leading the new local governments not always have representatives from all participating communities/localities. Meantime, consolidation seems not to result in reducing the total number of jobs at local government. The nature of jobs changed, resulting in forced functional specialization. Therefore, a program for (re-)training gradual reassignment of staff towards consolidated units and regions' administrations is desperately needed. Some of the region's staff had to be reassigned to the emerging de-concentrated offices of the state (example: Finances and Treasury offices, etc.). The resulting larger local territorial and regional administrative units have sufficient territorial coverage and more resources to plan and facilitate economic development (Autoritati Publice Locale (2010)).

Some of the newly created local government finance systems made a big step by providing better predictable, stable and transparent streams of revenues to local governments and increasing local autonomy and accountability. The territorial-administrative reform, through consolidation mechanisms, took a second big step by increasing funds for communal services from economies achieved through reduction of administrative expenses, and giving responsibility for service provision to a manageable number of stronger local authorities, or those whose institutional capacity can be truly strengthen. The new territorial-administrative units also improved conditions for the provision of the most important local services. Communal services, like water, sewerage, and waste management, require larger areas to be economically provided, in line with the regionalization concepts and decentralization strategies. While environmental protection needs certain scale, which is better provided by the larger territorial administrative units. Culture is managed from the center of the units, as the culture institutions are located physically already within the territory. Education and social services, previously the responsibility of the region, is brought closer to the citizens, while allows the necessary scale for optimization of the services or catchment areas (Adrian Ermurachi 2022).

However, the reform in Moldova requires several affirmative actions, steps and programs to be undertaken to ensure successful implementation and transition:

- As the reform is still lagging, a more pragmatic, strategic, and comprehensive communications campaign is needed to better explain the objectives and benefits of the reform. The general population, local government staff and elected officials must be targeted with clearer and earmarked messages.
- A possible update of the electoral system to ensure representation of all localities in the new local councils is desperately needed in the country. A plan and methodology for the consolidation process is also needed (business/corporate like attitude). A political and legal agreement for the allocation of responsibilities and possible adjustment of local finance system is also needed urgently. It must be associated with a program for institutional and organizational development of the reformed units, including technical assistance and consultancy for general administration, local financial management, as well as service provision.

- A plan for (re-)assigning staff and departments from the inherited local authorities to the new ones, is still missing although there exists training. It calls for the establishment of a redundancy fund/program with regard to human resource development and capacity building. In addition, availability of supplementary funds for tangible transformation calls for the establishment of a “National Transformation Fund”. It also needs planning and funding for restructuring the de-concentrated state services.
- As regarding “asymmetric decentralization” it does not respond to the main principles laid out in the national decentralization strategy and will require radical changes in the local government finance system. It risks consecrating most local authorities to a limited set of simple responsibilities and requires strengthening of the regions. Meantime, inter-municipal cooperation is not yet a model for administrative-territorial re-organization, rather a short-term instrument. It seems such cooperation cannot yield significant, nation-wide, positive results within a certain political mandate.

### **Local Administrative Reform in Albania**

Albania - 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. To provide Albania, the chance to perform to its full potential in this area, this atmosphere galvanized high expectations from the public opinion and garnered a significant lot of support from donors.

The reform, besides the territorial division of Local Governance, aimed to offer solutions for a series of highly important issues related to decentralization and local development (GoA 2016):

- High fragmentation of local governments, as 75% of LGUs have less than 5000 inhabitants
- Low human capacities at the local level, especially in smaller communes or rural municipalities
- Further administrative and fiscal decentralization
- The unclear role of “Qarks” in local governance
- The necessity for a need to regional development according to EU needs.

The undertaking and implementation of RAT and other decentralizing reforms was preceded and based on relevant empirical findings. The great demographic changes that characterized the history of the two post-communist decades, the fragmentation of local government in the provision of local public services and the democratic representation of voters, the poor efficiency in the provision of public services, the inability to promote and support local economic development and the inequalities created among local units, were the basic arguments that led territorial consolidation into 61 new municipalities in 2014 (Toska & Bejko, 2018). Although intentions were good, soon the reform started to shift from its initial aims. Thus, 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.

Hence, there were several discussions regarding the division, purely focusing on population and borders, rather than the functioning of the municipalities. Additionally, the discussion regarding the competences and further decentralization had less focus. The administrative reform resulted that the distribution of the population according to the 61 municipalities in the country presents marked differences from a minimum population level of about 5,165 inhabitants in Pustec municipality to about 763,297 inhabitants in Tirana municipality, with most municipalities below the

national average of about 71,467 inhabitants. More than 50% of the municipalities in Albania have hilly and mountainous surface and territory, which means that access to infrastructure, access to communication for the very nature that Albania has is very limited. All these create a vacuum or a low level of local democracy in the country. Hence, the issue of fragmentation was not actually solved, but in fact created a further division between “super” municipalities and weaker municipalities. The deepening of inequalities between municipalities in terms of fiscal capacities (their ability to generate income from their own local resources):

-This is also dictated by the depopulation (in residents and businesses) of the territories, which mathematically makes it impossible to create income - here it is enough to look at the INSTAT data on the stock of active enterprises by municipalities and the population data by districts.

-These inequalities translate into the inability of the municipalities to provide a list of local public services that number more than 43 according to law no. 139/2015 “on local self-government” to be provided by the 61 municipalities.

-The pronounced differences in the distribution of the population in the territory carry important implications in terms of costs and the provision of local public services, which in theory should all be provided with the same standard regardless of the size of the municipality or its territorial extent.

Additionally, although in nominal terms municipal incomes have increased, the disparities between municipalities continue to be present. Most of the smaller municipalities are highly dependent on national transfers and are unable to provide the basic services to their inhabitants. The financial dependence of municipalities on funds transferred from the central government is high and does not represent a significant improvement from the RAT post, despite the fact that it is one of the objectives of the reform. The indicator of income from local own resources to total financial resources in 2015 was 26% - in 2021 it is 29%, with a difference of only 3 percentage points while:

-An increase of almost all local taxes and fees was applied in all municipalities for the period under consideration. It is enough to mention only the tax on the impact on the infrastructure from new constructions and the property tax (building), which experienced the greatest increase.

-This increase is dedicated only to developments in Tirana municipality: if we were to exclude the income of Tirana municipality, the indicator of income from its own local resources to total financial resources in 2015 was 16% - in 2021 it is 12%, decreasing with 4 percentage points.

Additionally, they can't cover the investments needed to boost local economic development. The continuous migration, from peripheries towards Tirana, or abroad, means that the human capacities continue to remain low. Their ability to attract investments is low. Hence, instead of further fiscal decentralization, the reform is producing further centralization and dependency from central government.

## **Regionalization and Regional Development in Albania**

The quest for regionalization in Albania has been long standing. It emerged as a discussion in the end of the 1990s, however, at the time it was considered pre-mature for the stage of development of the country and postponed for a later stage (Aliaj, 2008); (Shutina et al., 2012). With discussions on territorial administrative emerging post 2013 the debate for regionalization came to the forefront again. Different studies were conducted, highlighting different aspects regarding potential regional divisions in Albania and the potential role that regions could play as an administrative unit and for achieving sustainable development of the country (Aliaj et al 2014). One of the most notable studies conducted by Co-PLAN highlighted different elements that could be used to



achieve regional division such as:

- Based on Agricultural character of the area (considering that agriculture is one of the key economic sectors)
- Marketing of regions
- Regional Division based on natural resources (especially on river basins)
- Regional division based on statistical criteria.
- Regional division according to EU criteria and development characteristics

To support these types of regional divisions, besides the above-mentioned criteria, a series of other factors were used such as historic networks, existing administrative boundaries, economic and social interactions as well as infrastructural development in terms of access (transport) and access to services (Co-PLAN, 2014). The below diagrams show the different potential administrative divisions that could work as regions:

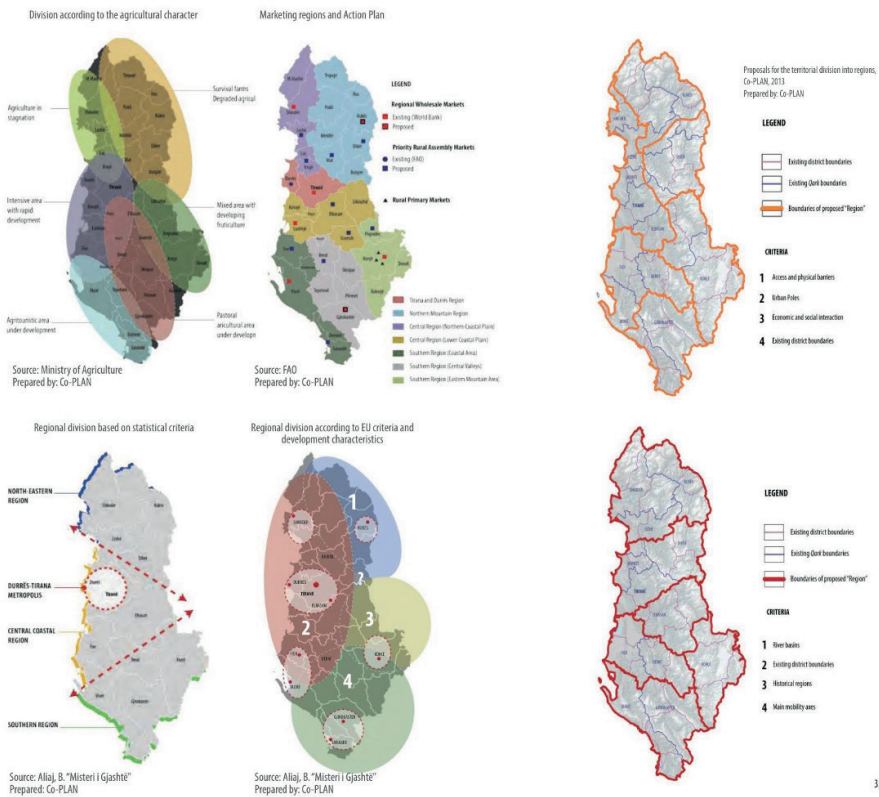


Figure 1- (Left) Alternatives for Regional Division in Albania (Co-PLAN, 2014)

Figure 2- (Right) Proposals for regional division according to different criteria (Co-PLAN, 2014)

In the end, two main divisions were proposed to the Albanian Government and Parliament because of this comprehensive study. A division of 6 regions and a division of 4 regions. The division of the regional reform was also supported with a comprehensive set of recommendations in terms of the role of the regional authorities in territorial governance of the country.

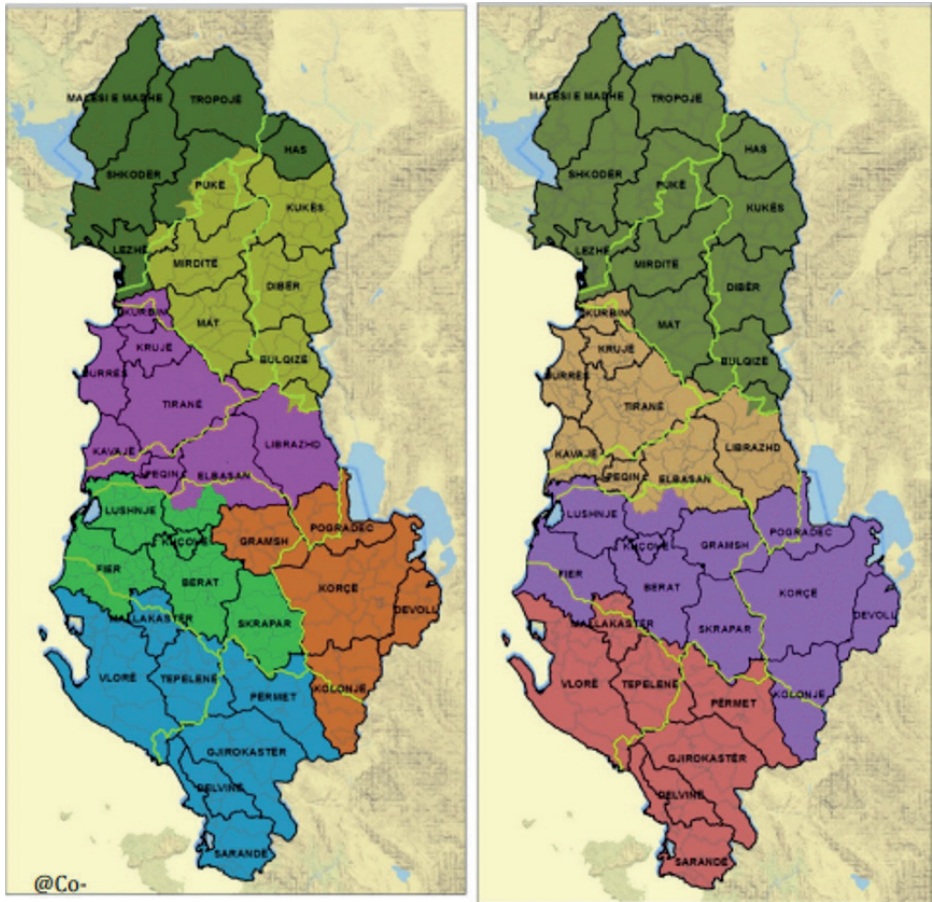


Figure 3- Final Proposals for regional division in Albania (Co-PLAN, 2014)

Although there was a lot of momentum for fostering the regional reform as part of the overall territorial and administrative reform, in the end, due to a shift of attention for reasons mentioned above, the regional reform too was postponed. Instead, it was continued only with the local administrative reform (Shutina, 2019). On the other hand, in 2014, the Albanian Government undertook a reform to further push the Regional Development and developed a Regional Management Mechanism, by aimed at promoting common economic development. In 2015, were determined Regional Development Zones (without powers administrative). Moreover, in December 2015 it was approved by Decision of the Council of Ministers regional development institution. As

a result, it was created the National Agency for Regional Development, Agency Regional Economic Development and 4 Agencies Regional Development.

However, in June 2018, the Albanian Government abolished DCM no. 961/2015, "On the establishment of Regional Development Agencies and Regional Development Zones", through DCM no. 438/2018 "On the transfer of the functions of the National Agency for Regional Development (NADHR), the Regional Economic Development Agency (RDA) and regional development agencies (RDA) to the Albanian Development Fund (ADF)" which provides for the transfer of the functions of regional development at the Albanian Development Fund. The situation remains unclear regarding regional development areas or Regional Development Agencies, the latter legally defined only in the now abolished legal framework. Additionally, a law on Regional Development was also approved. As it can be seen, between 2014-2018, regional development although has had some progress, remains unclear regarding its execution (Imami, et al., 2018). From the changes, there seems to be a struggle between centralization (or treating regional development as a central government policy) rather than deconcentrating and decentralization. Interestingly, the proposal by Co-PLAN for the 4 regions has been used as a basis for the "Regional Agencies".

### **Analysis of the reforms and challenges in Albania**

Currently, it appears that there are four key challenges with the reform that all decision- and policymakers must address that are discussed below.

#### **5.1 The Issue of Representation**

While the reform was being written, experts labored to come up with a "set of criteria" that would be used to implement the territorial reform. These factors were not considered as much as they ought to have been since there was not a political balance (also because the opposition did not participate in this debate). Instead, the desire for political representation in terms of elections won out.

The marginalized communities before the reform appear to be even more disenfranchised now since the territorial consolidation, which was required at the time, has skewed the representation of communities inside the major territorial municipalities. For instance, some municipal councils do not represent rural or very remote communities by having members solely from urban areas. Today, local councilors no longer visit certain communities and regions.

The centralization of the provision of services in the municipality center has increased the distance between the citizens, that is, the municipality has moved away from the citizen. Based on the objective of the RAT to reduce the fragmentation of local self-government units (which happened with the consolidation from 373 municipalities and municipalities to 61 municipalities), and to increase comparability, today we find ourselves in a situation where the municipality is further away from the citizen than ever (Allkja, 2020). In this way, he is unable to understand his real needs and address them. The municipality focuses on the urban area close to the center and passes the rural and more remote areas on a secondary level. All this is completely contrary to the theory in favor of decentralization and the benefits it brings to the citizen.

This 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 all but "dead." It is no coincidence that it was impossible to keep track of the number of deaths during Covid-19 in these locations.

The north, northeast, and southeast of the nation are currently deserted. People still live in condi-

tions reminiscent of the Middle Ages in some of the most isolated parts of the nation. Emigration has grown significantly in popularity. Over 750,000 Albanians have left the country for the EU and other nations since the reform's inception up to the present.

The reform wiped these areas off the map, but the resources and economic potential remain there. Countries like ours have not made this mistake. They have either drafted positive “discriminatory” policies or apply 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 area, as well as the provision of basic infrastructure, services in the areas of agriculture, health, and education, and the encouragement and retention of young people and businesses.

### **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.

RAT is aimed at increasing the efficiency of municipalities in the use of available financial resources and reducing personnel expenses.

-In 2021, the 61 municipalities count around 34,804 employees, in progressive growth in the last three years (data from the Ministry of Finance and Economy, the report of the Association of Municipalities and the Status Report of Local Finances). So, not only do we not have a decrease in the number of employees, but it is growing progressively. However, to remove the effect of the transfer of new functions (which was accompanied by new staff) the indicator of the number of employees per 10,000 inhabitants shows that in more than 10 municipalities we are in the presence of overemployment situations (using Census data of 2011).

-Personnel costs have increased: from 31% of total expenses incurred in 2015 to 46% of total expenses incurred in 2021 (from 10 billion ALL in 2015 to 21 billion ALL in 2021). The increase in personnel costs could be to some extent “rational” if the citizens had been served and served better by the municipalities, that is, there would have been an improvement in service coverage and an increase in their quality. Studies in this direction show that citizens are dissatisfied with the provision of public services for all services provided by municipalities (Overview: Citizen perception on local taxation and public services). Also, in the perception of citizens, the money is not used for the provision of public services, the money is wasted, and the local administration is perceived as incapable of performing the duties and functions assigned by the law.

-Investments with the municipalities' own funds are fluctuating and at low levels: in 2015, the municipalities allocated about 38% of the budget for investments, in the following period this percentage has gradually decreased in favor of current expenses and in 2021 the expenses for investments were 21% of total expenses relative to the domestic product.

In practice, centralization of power in decision-making still exists (Allkja, 2020). An urgent restoration of decentralization is required in this situation. It was accomplished in Albania in the 2000s because of a cooperative politico-parliamentary process, which regrettably still stands as an isolated example of comprehensive changes with strong political will today.

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 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 still have them, they are now substantially worse.

This demonstrates that the topic of shifting borders should not be the sole focus of any future discussions of reform. Today, it is evident that we are dealing with systemic issues in the 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 on changing the country's borders and electoral map.

## **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, 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, the Law on the Development of Regions should be expanded 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 concur that the nation should be divided into 4-6 regions. The country's history appears to be at an end.

At this point in the country's development, the country should be reorganized into 80-90 municipalities and 4-6 regions with direct elections. This would better position the nation for democratization and rapprochement with communities and regions on the one hand, and for EU funding on the other.

A reorganization into 4-6 smaller municipalities, comparable in size to other municipalities in the country, in the case of the current Tirana Municipality, 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), which could be one of the 6 new regions with direct elections.

## **Conclusions**

**Albania** – Though widely discussed across the political spectrum, the TAR and other decentralization reforms converge on the main goal of strengthening local government by creating conditions for increasing local capacities in delivering quality services and increasing efficiency in managing available resources. 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 specifics or numbers, it is important to stress that all 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.

A few final remarks on the steps and core concepts of a thorough planning and implementation

process for the evaluation of the model of governance and representation:

-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” between the political parties in the nation, handling changes that go beyond the purely formal and biased electoral perspectives.

-To expand the conversation beyond the “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 input from all parties who have contributed to this subject thus far, compiling a list and matrix of concepts, successes, 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; it would not ensure national stability, vision, or development goals.

-If the modification of the governance and representation model would 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 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. Of course, taking this route calls for a work schedule that extends beyond the politician’s present 3-month projection. The outcomes of these reforms nevertheless still remain questionable and need more ample and innovative correction measures.

**Estonia** – As a final conclusion on the Estonian reform, it could be said that although there existed a relatively good process of participation, one can notice that the engagement process might have been much more effective, if the government initiated a public and political debate earlier in the preparation stage, and if they formally approved ahead the guidelines for the remaining issues addressed in the administrative reform document, since 2015. This could have avoided the disputes over the responsibilities and financing during the legislative process for both: the Administrative Reform Act, and the specific detailed legislation after. Furthermore, debates over the financing and the transfer of responsibilities to local authorities could have been more in-depth and more thoroughly prepared if the government had included this in its agenda before 2016. However, this could have allowed for less flexibility in decision-making process, for the specific changes during the approval of Reform So the preparations of the Estonian reform can be evaluated nowadays, as adequate, or good. The approval has been relatively discussable, but politically supported. The way in which the changes were prepared and implemented during the reform, and how they affected the organization of local government, as well as the people’s everyday lives, is a separate discussion that deserves more analysis in the future (Rivo Noorkõiv, 2021)

**Moldova** – As conclusion on the Moldavian case study, it seems that the “voluntary consolidation” and “partial amalgamation” strategy on territorial administrative units (especially those that

do not meet legal criteria for viability), will achieve minor savings of administrative costs, and will not create sufficient conditions for the improvement of local public services in most of local governments in Moldova. So, the restructuring remains still not comprehensive. There is a high risk that soon the population might become unhappy with the results of reform, and resistance for another wave of restructuring will build up. The strongest barrier for the consolidation process of first level territorial-administrative units, is not driven from the legal, administrative, or functional push-factors, rather than from political consequences of the diminishing the numbers of locally elected officials. The inherited 898 local councils provided so far political positions and leading community roles to 12,000 representatives, mostly elected on party/political connections. Meantime a rational consolidation because of the reform might result in approximately 3,000 elected positions – a drastic reduction of political jobs and positions of influence offered to local party elites, that silently seem to oppose the reform (Adrian Ermurachi 2022). Scenarios for the future remain still not clear. Since the political feasibility of the optimal territorial administrative restructuring is still to be decided, below are few alternative scenarios for the fate of the territorial-administrative reform process in Moldova:

- The actual proposed scenario involves mandatory consolidation of the first level of the local government, and creation of a regional level of government instead of the inherited “regions/raions”. Short term risks involve the political changes in government and parliament, as it needs at least a year to put the pieces together, and then work on capacity building again.
- Another scenario of the territorial administrative reform is its blocking or sabotage both by internal or external factors (including the regional/neighboring instability). In case nothing is done to progress on the territorial administrative reform, the pragmatic solution will be to temporarily use the inter-municipal cooperation instruments. After the elections this might create new room for re-initiating the consolidation process. Such scenario has the minimal political cost, and the most marginal impact.
- As far as there is no yet guarantee that the parliament and government will have territorial-administrative reform as a priority, limited consolidation and reforming steps will happen.

As a final conclusion (see also Annex):

- Estonia seems to be much better and progressed with regard the reform design and implementation. Local governments are empowered. Positive results could be also justified by the political commitment and by the fact the reform is happening in a country that is member of EU, benefiting from European reforms in general.
- Albania and Moldova are still lagging behind, and more work is needed to push ahead substantial reform, or correct negative effects created so far.
- Albania has a relative progress with the reform. It was about time. But it faces problems with 3 principles indicators and 4 goals indicators. The reform for some reasons happened without the participation of opposition and further one seems politicized. Independent sources show indicators with issues to be dealt for further improvements.
- Moldova seems to have more problems with the reform, although the issue is in the table now. It has problems with 4 principles and 5 goals, and political consensus is needed to pus further reform in a country facing serious instability on the region.

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**Annex - A matrix-based conclusion:** Usually strategies for the analysis of qualitative data, and a particular qualitative analysis method, goes without the numerical precision logic of the quantitative analysis methods (Gordon, W., & Langmaid, R. (1988)). Having said this, the research uses such principle while carrying out a qualitative analysis. In this case, in the absence of time and resources, our analysis is guided by the logic, consistency, and coherence, and such analysis are also qualified as truly scientific as such (Groenland, E. A. G. (2014)). Consequently, the outcomes of study, and their ensuing recommendations, are understood to be a reference in the midterm of reform, while encompassing tremendous directional potency for authorities, stakeholders and community at large (Groenland, Edward.; (2014)). More concretely we asked a balanced number of professionals, researchers, academics and public administrators in three countries to evaluate (1-5) the relation of each principle with each goal of the reform, and the outcomes are summarized in the table below.

<i>Indicator on Principles (right) &amp; Goals (below)</i>	<i>Transparency and accountability</i>	<i>Participation and pluralism</i>	<i>Subsidiarity</i>	<i>Efficiency and effectiveness</i>	<i>Equity and access to services</i>	<i>TOTAL Each Goal indicator on Principles</i>
<b>Relevance</b>	A5 E5 M3	A1 E4 M3	A5 E5 M5	A5 E5 M5	A4 E5 M3	<b><u>A20/25</u></b> E24/25 M19/25 <b>Av. 21.2/25</b>
<b>Values</b>	A3 E4 M4	A2 E5 M3	A4 E5 M3	A3 E4 M3	A3 E3 M3	<b><u>A15/25</u></b> E21/25 M16/25 <b>Av. 17.3/25</b>
<b>Social equity</b>	A4 E4 M3	A3 E4 M3	A3 E3 M2	A3 E3 M3	A2 E4 M2	<b><u>A15/25</u></b> E18/25 M13/25 <b>Av. 15.3/25</b>
<b>Change</b>	A5 E5 M1	A1 E3 M1	A1 E4 M2	A3 E2 M2	A2 E3 M1	<b><u>A12/25</u></b> E17/25 M7/25 <b>Av. 12/25</b>
<b>Client focus</b>	A1 E3 M2	A1 E3 M2	A1 E3 M1	A1 E3 M1	A1 E2 M2	<b><u>A5/25</u></b> E14/25 M8/28 <b>Av. 9/25</b>
<b>TOTAL Each Principle indicator on Goals</b>	<b><u>A18/25</u></b> E21/25 M13/25 <b>Av. 17.3/25</b>	<b><u>A8/25</u></b> E19/25 M12/25 <b>Av. 13/27</b>	<b><u>A14/25</u></b> E21/25 M13/25 <b>Av. 16/27</b>	<b><u>A15/25</u></b> E17/25 M14/25 <b>Av. 14.7/25</b>	<b><u>A13/25</u></b> E17/25 M18/25 <b>A.16/25</b>	

Table 1: Comparative analysis of the impact of administrative territorial reform implementation in Albania (A), Estonia (E) and Moldova (M) – Evaluation from 1-5 (poor, well, good, very good, successful)



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