



Preface

Right after the local elections of 2015 in Albania, I (Besnik Aliqj) was invited in a meeting and training event with the newly elected municipal councilors and administrators of the Region of Gjirokastra, Albania, organized by the German foundation Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. During the meeting I was drawn by the remarks of Mr. Mihal Mano, the recently appointed deputy mayor of the Municipality of Dropull, a newly established municipal entity and a direct result of the latest administrative-territorial reform in Albania at that time. Mano stated that the new "municipality" (the larger territorial entity) was established through the unification of three smaller entities (of rural character), locally known here as 'communes'.

The deputy mayor of Dropull was genuinely concerned about the new municipality's lack of territorial data and infrastructural visions for the future. The central government was not so forthcoming in addressing such concerns, that had emerged as a result of the territorial reform that the government itself had initiated. As a result Dropull's minority community was feeling neglected and marginalized. Historically, Dropull is one of the areas where the Greek minority in Albania is concentrated the most. This is indeed a cross-border area where Albanians and Greeks have lived and co-existed together, with strong roots in the ancient Epirus and throughout the Ottoman Empire' times. Nowadays this is a relaxed border-area between EU and an aspiring member country like Albania. There are still, however, huge challenges of urban and rural development as result of the differences in policies applied over the territory in both countries.

Mr. Mano directly asked me, as the Rector of Polis University, whether POLIS could assist local authorities in the framework of the social responsibility, given the specificity of the circumstances, and the fact that it was the only municipality not yet supported financially for this purpose. I couldn't say no to such sincere call and public appeal. I promised to come back with a team of colleagues and students to assist in starting a bottom up process of municipal envisioning and territorial planning. This initiative triggered a unique professional and intellectual experience, and a learning process of and for the local people and communities. It fueled a creative process of grassroots planning and an innovative way of making the process sustainable and feasible. It was all about the people and social responsibility.

Today we can say that this is a plan made with and for people! We are proud of the work of our colleagues and the team at Polis University, which included: Dr. Sotir Dhamo and Dr.



Source/ Dropull Municipality

Dritan Shutina (co-leaders of the initiative), Dr. Eranda Janku (responsible for the planning component), Prof. Sherif Lushaj (responsible for the environmental component), Dr. Godiva Rembeci (statistics expert), Dr. Amanda Terpo (GIS expert), and Dr. Ledian Bregasi, among many other Polis staff and students involved. We thank the municipal staff and community representatives of Dropull municipality, and the regional/ neighboring authorities of Gjirokastra for their generous assistance. From us 'champions' of this planning initiative we kindly acknowledge POLIS University, Co-Plan Institute and Dropull Municipality. We thank Mr. Spiro Ksera - a former MP and Minister of social affairs in Albania, 2009-2013, and former Prefect of Gjirokastra Region and resident of this community, who gently asked and convinced U-Polis and Co-Plan to help the Municipality of Dropull with their local and territorial needs and visions. Special thanks go to Mrs. Adelina Greca, Director of the National Territorial Planning Agency, for understanding and supporting this creative planning initiative; Mr. Arqile Decka, the Mayor of Dropull at that time, for his hospitality and his work that continues now by the actual mayor Mr. Dhimitraq Toli; and the Prefect of Ioannina Region, Greece, Mr. Alexandros Kachrimanis and his team, for coordinating their own regional vision with our vision, according to the EU, Greek and Albanian legal requirements. The plan is now confirmed by the local, regional and central authorities.

In addition to this challenging and inspiring project that was developed over a span of 3 years, a joint research team of Polis University and Ferrara University in Italy, led by Prof. Besnik Aliaj, Dr. Loris Rossi, Dr. Laura Pedata, Dr. Sotir Dhamo and Dr. Lllazar Kumaraku, worked for another additional year to produce this conclusive publication, under the framework of the Joint International PhD Program in Architecture and City Planning. The publication is distributed locally and internationally and documented by the Library of Congress in the United States. This will hopefully further help the local and international dissemination of an experience that reshapes the planning traditions in a country that "hates" planning because of a past of harsh dictatorship and extreme centralized economy.

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Rector of POLIS University, Tirana

Mr. Mihal Mano
Deputy Mayor of Dropull, Albania, 2015-2019