Between Efficiency and Accountability: A Survey-Based Analysis of Albania's Territorial Reform Outcomes

Dr. Zhaklina DHAMO
(ORCID ID 009-0004-8243-065X)
Finance and Banking Department, Economic Faculty, Luarasi University, Tirana, Albania
Corresponding author: zhaklina.dhamo@luarasi-univ.edu.al

Dokt. Roland BEJKO
European University of Tirana, Tirana, Albania

Abstract

This study evaluates the outcomes of Albania's 2015 Administrative and Territorial Reform (ATR), which aimed to improve public service delivery, enhance local autonomy, and align local governance with European standards. The reform reduced the number of local government units from 373 to 61 municipalities, expanding their responsibilities and territorial coverage. However, nearly a decade later, concerns persist regarding the effectiveness and equity of service provision.

Using a structured questionnaire distributed to 248 citizens across five counties—Tirana, Shkodra, Vlora, Elbasan, and Gjirokastra—the study assesses perceptions of municipal service delivery in infrastructure, social services, education and culture, economic development, and security. Results indicate widespread dissatisfaction: 89% of respondents preferred the quality of services before the reform. Key issues include poor infrastructure maintenance, limited access to public transport, inadequate social services, and weak municipal support for local economic activity. In rural areas, 15% of citizens report receiving no infrastructure services at all.

The study also highlights persistent gaps in fiscal decentralization, with municipal budgets remaining stagnant at around 1% of GDP, constraining local capacity to implement new functions effectively. Citizens also exhibit low awareness of administrative roles, reflecting a disconnection between local institutions and communities.

These findings suggest that the ATR has fallen short of its intended goals, weakening institutional proximity and reducing accountability. The study calls for a reassessment of Albania's decentralization strategy and territorial organization to better reflect citizen needs and institutional capabilities.

Keywords: *Territorial reform, Local Governance, Albania, Citizen Perception, Decentralization*

Theoretical background

The 2015 Administrative and Territorial Reform (ATR) represents one of the most significant transformations of Albania's local governance framework since the country's democratic transition in the early 1990s. Prior to the reform, Albania was characterized by a highly fragmented administrative structure consisting of 373 local government units, many of which lacked the institutional, fiscal, and human capacities to provide even basic public services. This fragmentation hindered development planning, deepened urban–rural disparities, and limited access to quality services in peripheral areas. The ATR, legislated through Law No. 115/2014 and subsequently operationalized by Law No. 139/2015 "On Local Self-Government", reduced the number of municipalities to 61 with the aim of promoting economies of scale, improving service delivery, and strengthening local democracy. The reform was designed in alignment with broader decentralization and EU integration objectives, as outlined in the National Cross-Cutting Strategy for Decentralization and Local Governance (2015–2020). It sought to establish municipalities as primary governance units with increased responsibilities over infrastructure, education, health, economic development, and social protection. International development partners such as the European Union, UNDP, and the Swiss Cooperation supported the reform process, emphasizing its strategic role in achieving subsidiarity, increasing citizen participation, and reducing regional inequalities. As such, the ATR marked a shift from formal decentralization toward functional and fiscal empowerment of local governments, positioning municipalities as central actors in Albania's democratic consolidation and public administration modernization efforts.

The 2015 Administrative and Territorial Reform (ATR) in Albania marked a critical juncture in the country's effort to modernize its local governance system.

By reducing the number of local government units from 373 to 61 municipalities, the reform aimed to achieve economies of scale, improve the efficiency and quality of public services, and reinforce fiscal and administrative decentralization. Enshrined in Law No. 139/2015 "On Local Self-Government" and guided by the National Cross-Sector Strategy for Decentralization and Local Governance 2015–2020, the reform aimed to modernize Albania's local governance model by aligning municipal responsibilities with European principles of good governance, subsidiarity, and fiscal transparency. Law No. 139/2015 redefined the legal and functional framework for municipalities, granting them a broader mandate in key public service domains such as local infrastructure, education, social protection, environmental management, and local economic development. The law emphasizes citizen-centered governance by mandating inclusive decision-making processes, participatory budgeting, and institutional accountability at the local level.

The accompanying strategy—developed with support from international partners—outlined a comprehensive roadmap to strengthen local administrative and fiscal capacity, reduce vertical and horizontal fragmentation, and promote balanced regional development. It explicitly linked Albania's decentralization efforts to the requirements of the European Charter of Local Self-Government and the broader EU accession framework, which prioritizes effective multi-level governance, citizen participation, and subsidiarity. The strategy also identified measurable objectives related to public service delivery standards, intergovernmental coordination, fiscal autonomy, and civic engagement. Together, the legal and strategic foundations of the ATR signaled a shift from a highly centralized and fragmented governance system toward a more integrated, capable, and accountable model of local administration—intended not only to address internal inefficiencies but also to harmonize Albania's governance architecture with European norms and best practices.

From a theoretical perspective, decentralization is expected to enhance public sector performance by bringing decision-making closer to citizens, fostering greater accountability, and improving resource allocation through local knowledge (Tiebout, 1956; Oates, 1972). The literature distinguishes between administrative, political, and fiscal decentralization, with each dimension contributing differently to outcomes such as service delivery, citizen participation, and development equity (Rondinelli, 1981; Smoke, 2003). However, in transitional and post-authoritarian settings, decentralization processes often encounter challenges such as institutional fragmentation, weak capacity at the local level, and a lack of genuine fiscal autonomy (Shah & Thompson, 2004; Faguet, 2014).

Empirical research in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans shows that reforms aimed at decentralization frequently struggle with implementation gaps. While legal frameworks may provide for expanded local competences,

municipalities often lack the financial resources, human capital, and administrative tools to perform their functions effectively (Kopecký et al., 2008; Keuffer & Ladner, 2018).

Recent studies have reinforced these findings in the Albanian and Balkan context. Ciro, Toska, and Gjiknuri (2021) noted that although Albania's municipal budgets increased from 1.8% of GDP in 2015 to 3.1% in 2019, municipalities remain financially dependent and struggle to fulfill their expanded mandates. The Institute for Democracy and Mediation (2022) emphasized persistent gaps in legal clarity, weak intergovernmental coordination, and regional disparities in service delivery. Moreover, NALAS (2024) highlighted that Albania still lags behind its regional peers in subnational revenue mobilization and local fiscal autonomy. Comparative assessments by UNDP (2021) and the European Commission echo similar concerns about the limited effectiveness of functional decentralization and the need to match legal reforms with implementation capabilities.

Together, these studies underscore systemic gaps: continued dependency on central funding, weak local capacities, coordination bottlenecks, and persistent urban–rural divides. For example, NALAS (2024) shows that while the average share of subnational revenues as a percentage of GDP in the EU is around 10%, Albania and several Western Balkan countries remain below 3%, highlighting a considerable fiscal autonomy deficit. Moreover, in countries like North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, similar decentralization efforts have faced setbacks due to political instability and fragmented intergovernmental relations, demonstrating that Albania's challenges are not isolated but reflect broader regional trends. These findings corroborate observations in this study regarding limited fiscal decentralization, weak institutional proximity, and citizen dissatisfaction post-ATR—reinforcing the urgency of reforms aimed at strengthening local autonomy and accountability. continued dependency on central funding, weak local capacities, coordination bottlenecks, and persistent urban–rural divides. They corroborate observations in this study regarding limited fiscal decentralization, weak institutional proximity, and citizen dissatisfaction post-ATR—reinforcing the urgency of reforms aimed at strengthening local autonomy and accountability.

This study investigates the extent to which the objectives of the ATR have translated into tangible improvements in municipal service delivery from the perspective of citizens. Using a structured survey instrument administered to 248 respondents across five representative counties—Tirana, Shkodra, Vlora, Elbasan, and Gjirokastra—the study evaluates satisfaction levels across four macro-areas of municipal responsibility: infrastructure, social services, education and culture, and economic development and security. The design of the survey instrument is grounded in the legal mandate for municipal functions, as defined in Law 139/2015. Each section of the questionnaire was directly mapped to specific categories of municipal responsibility outlined in the law, such as infrastructure services (e.g.,

roads, waste management), social care, education and cultural programming, and local economic development. This structure ensured that each function was translated into at least one question, allowing the research to assess how well municipalities are fulfilling their statutory duties from the citizen's perspective.

By combining empirical data with policy analysis, the study examines whether the consolidation of municipalities has enhanced local service provision or whether it has exacerbated gaps—particularly between urban and rural areas. It also explores the relationship between perceived service quality and administrative proximity, testing the hypothesis that territorial enlargement has weakened the visibility and responsiveness of local governments in peripheral areas.

The findings offer both a diagnostic and a normative contribution. First, they provide a snapshot of service delivery challenges nearly a decade after the ATR's implementation. Second, they contribute to the scholarly debate on the effectiveness of territorial consolidation reforms in improving governance outcomes in emerging democracies. Ultimately, the research aims to inform ongoing discussions on decentralization, subsidiarity, and the redesign of Albania's administrative map by drawing on theoretical frameworks that emphasize the importance of aligning local governance structures with citizen proximity, fiscal autonomy, and service responsiveness. These frameworks, rooted in public choice and fiscal federalism theories, highlight the need for decentralization processes to be accompanied by adequate institutional and financial capacity at the local level to ensure meaningful improvements in governance outcomes. in light of citizen preferences and institutional capacity.

Methodology

In order to measure the perception of the citizens for the services that must be provided by the municipalities, according to law no. 139/2015, was design a questionnaire with 22 questions. About 21 of them are related to the 42 municipal services that the local government should offer and the last question refers to the personal assessment of citizens for the quality of services provided before and after the Administrative and Territorial reform of 2015. From the number of questionnaires distributed, 248 of them were collected with answers.

The questions set in the questionnaire were compiled taking into account the competences and services that the municipalities must offer to the community by law.

The designed questionnaire is divided into five parts. The first part refers to the tasks of maintaining and building infrastructure in the territory. The second part is related to the social services that municipalities must provide to citizens. In the third part, are highlighted the competences that the local government has in the

education field and culture and the fourth part reveals what the local government can do to improve the economic and security situation of its own territory. The fifth and last part aims to get the opinion of the citizens about their current situation (if they receive better services and feel the local government closer to them now) or were they more satisfied with the Administrative and Territorial division before 2015 Reform.

The questionnaire consisted of 23 items, organized into five thematic sections: (1) Infrastructure; (2) Social Services; (3) Education and Culture; (4) Economic Development; and (5) Public Safety. These areas directly reflect the functional responsibilities assigned to municipalities under Law No. 139/2015 "On Local Self-Government," ensuring a tight alignment between statutory obligations and empirical assessment. Each function was operationalized into one or more survey questions, enabling the study to evaluate whether municipal service delivery meets legal expectations from the perspective of end-users.

The survey design employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating three types of questions:

Likert-scale items to assess satisfaction levels (ranging from "Very Unsatisfied" to "Very Satisfied"), Binary (Yes/No) items to evaluate the existence or absence of specific public services in the respondent's locality, Open-ended prompts to collect qualitative feedback and provide contextual nuance.

This structure was chosen to balance quantitative comparability with qualitative insight. The Likert-scale items enabled the aggregation of satisfaction trends across regions, while binary questions identified service delivery gaps. The open-ended responses offered additional interpretive depth, revealing patterns of administrative visibility, trust, and perceived institutional effectiveness. The selection of items also drew upon prior empirical studies on local governance in the Western Balkans. Reports from NALAS (2024) and UNDP (2021) emphasized the importance of evaluating citizen trust and perception of service delivery as reliable proxies for local government performance. By echoing this approach, the current study contributes to a broader regional literature while maintaining specificity to Albania's institutional and legal framework. The design of the questionnaire was strategically aligned with the legal responsibilities conferred to municipalities by Law No. 139/2015. Each of the four macro-areas—infrastructure, social services, education and culture, and economic development and safety—reflects a set of concrete functions for which local governments are directly responsible. These categories were not arbitrarily chosen; rather, they are grounded in the national legislative framework, ensuring that the study assesses local government performance precisely where their mandates are clearest and most enforceable.

For instance, the infrastructure section includes items related to road maintenance, street lighting, and flood protection—functions explicitly outlined in Article 22 of Law 139/2015. Similarly, social services and economic development

are addressed in Articles 24 and 26, which assign to municipalities the responsibility for local welfare programs, business support, and territorial development. Each question in the survey corresponds to one or more of these legal functions, allowing the research to systematically assess whether municipalities are meeting their legal obligations from the citizen's perspective.

Furthermore, embedding the questions in statutory categories allowed the study to explore more than satisfaction alone—it provided insights into compliance gaps, implementation barriers, and policy misalignments. This framing ensures that the analysis is not merely descriptive but can inform legal and policy reforms by identifying where institutional responsibilities fail to translate into practice.

In light of public choice theory and fiscal federalism, this operational structure is especially relevant. Both theories emphasize the necessity of local institutions being both visible and responsive to citizens. By empirically testing whether enlarged municipalities have preserved that visibility and accountability, the study situates itself within a growing literature on the limits of top-down decentralization in transition economies and provides evidence-based suggestions for recalibrating Albania's decentralization trajectory.

To ensure a representative and meaningful evaluation of citizen perceptions regarding municipal service delivery post-ATR, the questionnaire process was conducted in five counties of Albania: Shkodra, Vlora, Tirana, Elbasan, and Gjirokastra. These counties were strategically selected based on several key criteria to capture the diversity of territorial, demographic, and socioeconomic characteristics present across the country. First, population density was considered to include both densely populated urban areas, such as Tirana, and more sparsely populated rural regions, such as Gjirokastra. This allows the study to examine how the reform has impacted service delivery in areas with differing population pressures and infrastructural demands. Second, the selection aimed to achieve balanced representation between urban and rural municipalities, as this distinction is critical in understanding the equity of service provision—a core objective of the 2015 reform. For instance, Elbasan and Shkodra encompass both urban centers and large peripheral rural zones, making them ideal for assessing disparities in access and responsiveness. Third, the geographic distribution of the selected counties—spanning northern (Shkodra), central (Tirana, Elbasan), southern (Vlora), and southeastern (Gjirokastra) Albania—ensures national territorial coverage and enhances the generalizability of the findings. This geographic spread also allows for an exploration of how administrative distance from the central government may influence perceptions of service quality and institutional proximity. Lastly, the selected counties reflect a range of economic profiles and governance capacities, from the capital city of Tirana, with its higher fiscal and administrative resources, to smaller municipalities that face persistent budgetary and staffing constraints. This diversity offers a robust basis for comparison and helps identify structural

and contextual factors that may shape reform outcomes differently across regions.

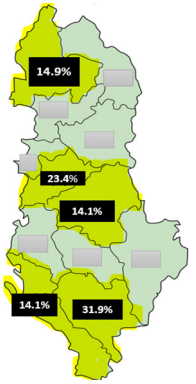
To enrich the qualitative depth of the data and ensure a pluralistic perspective on municipal service delivery, a series of structured and semi-structured meetings were organized with individuals from a broad cross-section of society. These included representatives of local government institutions, who provided insight into administrative challenges and resource constraints, as well as members of non-profit and civil society organizations, whose community-level engagement offered a valuable perspective on grassroots needs and institutional responsiveness. To capture the diversity of citizen experiences, efforts were made to include individuals with varied political preferences, ensuring that feedback was not limited by partisan alignment and could reflect a broader consensus—or divergence—on reform outcomes.

Additionally, the meetings brought together entrepreneurs and business owners, whose input was essential in assessing municipal support for local economic development, an area explicitly covered by the reform mandate. Retired individuals contributed valuable longitudinal perspectives, comparing pre- and post-reform service delivery, while youth participants highlighted generational expectations for local governance, digital accessibility, and future-oriented services. Women's participation was emphasized to explore potential gendered disparities in access to social services and civic engagement opportunities. Finally, individuals from a range of professions—including educators, healthcare workers, farmers, and artisans—provided sector-specific feedback on how well municipalities were meeting their statutory obligations across different service domains.

This inclusive and diversified approach to participant selection not only strengthened the validity of the qualitative data but also aligned with the reform's objective of fostering participatory governance and citizen-centered public administration.

The following map shows the distribution of questionnaires in these counties, as a percentage of the total, for which answers were received.

FIGURE 1 Distribution of questionnaires in 5 districts (by the author)



Data analysis

The empirical foundation of this study is a structured survey instrument administered to 248 respondents across five representative counties—Tirana, Shkodra, Vlora, Elbasan, and Gjirokastra. The goal of the data collection was to assess citizens' perceptions of municipal service delivery nearly a decade after the implementation of the Administrative and Territorial Reform (ATR) in Albania. The selected regions were chosen to ensure geographic, demographic, and economic diversity, capturing both urban and rural perspectives.

Preliminary descriptive statistics were used to quantify general trends in service coverage and satisfaction. For instance, 89% of respondents indicated a preference for the pre-reform system, citing improved institutional proximity and timeliness. Meanwhile, 15% reported receiving no infrastructure services at all, and 56.5% noted the absence of public transport—particularly acute in rural municipalities.

To deepen interpretation, results were examined in light of decentralization frameworks. The observed dissatisfaction and uneven service provision align with regional trends noted in recent literature (Ciro et al., 2021; IDM, 2022; NALAS, 2024), which emphasize that in the absence of adequate fiscal autonomy and institutional capacity, territorial consolidation alone cannot ensure improved governance outcomes. Moreover, findings are consistent with fiscal federalism theory, which asserts that functional decentralization must be accompanied by financial resources and administrative proximity to enhance responsiveness and efficiency (Oates, 1972; Shah & Thompson, 2004).

Overall, the data analysis confirms a persistent disconnect between legal mandates and implementation realities in post-ATR Albania. The structured and legally grounded design of the survey instrument enhances the reliability of these insights, supporting the need for policy adjustments that recalibrate responsibilities, resources, and representational structures in local governance.

The following table shows in percentages the average evaluations that 248 citizens have given in relation to the services that the Local Government should offer. In the five large centers, the respondents assessed that in the macro field of infrastructure services that the municipalities must provide, the qualitative and quantitative level of these is quite low.

TABLE 1 Aggregated results of citizens' impressions in %

No.	Question	Very good	Relatively good	Bad	Very bad	Not offered
	INFRASTRUCTURE	4,4	30,2	34,4	13,1	15,0
1	How do you rate the supply with drinking water	13.7	44.8	34.3	2.8	2.8
2	How do you rate the drains	0.0	18.1	39.9	9.3	30.6
3	How do you rate floods protection infrastructures	5.6	22.2	13.7	5.2	51.2
4	How do you rate the maintenance of roads, public signage, and lighting.	2.8	31.0	45.6	16.9	2.0
5	How do you evaluate public transport	0.8	14.9	20.6	4.8	56.5
6	How do you rate cemetery maintenance	2.0	22.2	39.5	30.6	3.2
7	How do you rate the maintenance of parks, gardens, and public spaces	4.0	27.0	38.3	16.1	12.1
8	How do you rate the waste management service	6.5	36.7	38.7	10.9	1.2
9	How do you rate the maintenance of schools and nurseries	3.6	39.5	37.5	12.9	0.0
10	How do you rate maintenance of the infrastructure of primary health centers	8.1	55.2	23.0	10.5	0.8
11	How do you rate the work of the municipal police	0.8	20.6	47.6	24.2	4.8
	SOCIAL SERVICES	1,0	13.3	42,7	16,5	17,1
12	How do you rate the social aid	0.0	16.9	46.4	19.4	1.2
13	How do you rate the maintenance of community centers and social housing availability	2.0	9.7	39.1	13.7	33.1
	CULTURE & ENVIRONMENT	1,6	15,3	27,8	32,1	21,2
14	How do you rate the cultural heritage buildings maintenance	0.8	17.7	21.8	50.0	7.7
15	How do you rate the care for sports centers and libraries	2.4	12.9	33.9	14.1	34.7
16	What kind of contamination do you feel	Air	Water	Land	Noise	Radio-activity
		8.5	14.1	0.0	1.6	23.8
	ECONOMY & SECURITY	2,4	19,1	24,0	16,6	29,0
17	How do you rate agricultural infrastructure for sewerage, drainage, and irrigation.	2.8	12.5	44.8	32.3	5.6
18	How do you rate municipal markets to sell local products	5.2	16.5	26.6	18.1	31.5
19	Do you have any tax reduction or incentives	0.0	4.0	0.0	0.0	55.6
20	How do you rate fire service	1.6	42.7	25.4	16.9	11.3
21	How do you evaluate the role of municipal administrators in conflict prevention	2.4	19.8	23.0	15.7	41.1
	SUMMARIZE QUESTION					
22	Do you prefer the actual quality of service or the one before the Administrative Reform (2015)	After	11%	Before	89%	

Particularly, less than 35% of respondents were satisfied with these services, while 50% of the total were dissatisfied and 15% stated that they do not receive infrastructure services at all.

Moving on to specifics, we can say that the supply of drinking water has been satisfactory for more than 58% of the respondents, with the condition that we talked about the supply of water while avoiding the possibility of drinking it. Meanwhile, less than 20% of citizens estimated that they had adequate plants for the removal of dirty water. This means that in a large part of the country, the construction of a new infrastructure is needed for the treatment and disposal of polluted water, and although Albania is a country full of lakes and rivers. More than 70% of citizens are completely dissatisfied with the maintenance of flood protection infrastructures.

Even though large sums have been spent on the construction and reconstruction of roads, signage, and public lighting, only one-third of the citizens are satisfied with their quality and level of maintenance. The situation with the provision of the local public transport service is quite negative because more than half of the citizens declare that there is no such service in the places where they live. While only 15% of the total is satisfied with the presence and quality of this service.

The maintenance of public cemeteries was reported to be at unsatisfactory levels across all surveyed administrative units, reflecting a broader pattern of neglect in the management of essential but often overlooked public services. Respondents frequently described cemeteries as overgrown, poorly organized, and lacking basic infrastructure such as lighting, signage, or access paths. In some rural areas, families reported being responsible for the upkeep of burial grounds themselves, in the absence of any municipal intervention. This lack of attention not only raises concerns about public health and safety, but also indicates a failure to uphold cultural and community values associated with respect for the deceased—an issue that holds particular social importance in Albanian tradition.

Similarly, the maintenance of parks, gardens, and public recreational spaces was identified as highly problematic, with widespread dissatisfaction regarding the condition and availability of these amenities. Participants highlighted issues such as broken benches, damaged playgrounds, lack of greenery, insufficient lighting, poor sanitation, and lack of security, making many of these spaces either inaccessible or unsafe—particularly for children, the elderly, and people with disabilities. In several cases, formerly well-maintained community parks have deteriorated significantly since the reform, a trend that many residents attributed to budgetary constraints, limited local staff, and lack of clear administrative accountability.

These findings suggest that while territorial consolidation may have achieved formal administrative efficiency, it has also contributed to a loss of direct oversight and responsiveness in managing local public spaces. The poor state of cemeteries

and green areas reinforces the perception that municipalities have deprioritized smaller-scale services that are nonetheless vital to community well-being and local identity. It underscores the need for better resource allocation, routine maintenance planning, and community participation mechanisms to ensure that public spaces are preserved and improved in line with citizens' expectations and needs.

At the national level, the maintenance of primary health care infrastructure is generally perceived to be at relatively good levels, especially when compared to other municipal services. In most surveyed areas, citizens acknowledged the structural stability and basic functionality of health centers, noting that facilities were operational, accessible, and adequately equipped for routine health services. However, while physical infrastructure was generally considered acceptable, some participants raised concerns regarding limited staffing, short working hours, and a lack of specialized medical services, particularly in remote and rural communities. These limitations suggest that although the buildings themselves are in usable condition, the overall quality and continuity of healthcare provision may still fall short of citizen needs. In contrast, the maintenance of schools and nurseries was rated at moderately acceptable levels, with notable differences observed between urban and rural municipalities. In urban areas, many educational institutions were found to be functional and adequately maintained, although issues such as outdated heating systems, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient learning materials were occasionally mentioned. In rural areas, however, school facilities were often described as in need of renovation, with some respondents reporting degraded infrastructure, lack of internet connectivity, and poorly maintained outdoor spaces.

These findings reflect uneven municipal performance in managing social infrastructure, influenced by factors such as local budget constraints, geographic disparities, and differing administrative capacities. While the overall condition of health centers, schools, and nurseries may be seen as relatively positive in comparison to services like public transport or waste management, the expectations for service quality and accessibility remain unmet in many localities. The results highlight the importance of pairing physical infrastructure maintenance with investments in staffing, equipment, and service quality, particularly in underserved areas. In a practically unanimous way, citizens reported being aware of the presence of the municipal police in their area; however, their perceptions of its role and effectiveness were overwhelmingly negative. While visibility was not an issue—respondents consistently acknowledged the physical presence of municipal police units in public spaces—nearly 80% of participants stated that they derived no tangible benefit from their presence. Citizens expressed frustration with what they described as a passive or symbolic role played by municipal police officers, noting that they often appeared to serve ceremonial or administrative functions rather

than actively contributing to public order, community safety, or the enforcement of local regulations.

Considering the social services, municipalities must offer them, from a legal point of view, throughout the country, but only 14% of citizens rate these as very good or good, while almost 90% of citizens express an assessment of the maintenance of community centers and the availability of social housing.

It is also clear from the interviewees that the local government has not shown even a priority and has not invested significantly in the maintenance of libraries, sports facilities, and cultural heritage facilities, on the contrary, more than 20% of citizens say that they are not maintained at all. Unfortunately, there are numerous examples in recent years where buildings of special historical, cultural, or environmental importance have been demolished or significantly altered with the explicit consent—or passive approval—of local institutions. These cases are often linked to weak enforcement of heritage protection laws, conflicts of interest, or a lack of coordination between municipal authorities and national oversight bodies. In some instances, protected buildings have been removed to make way for commercial developments, such as shopping centers or residential complexes, under the justification of promoting local economic growth. However, these decisions frequently disregard community sentiment, cultural preservation priorities, and legal safeguards, raising concerns about the integrity and accountability of local governance structures.

This phenomenon reflects a broader governance issue within the post-reform landscape: although municipalities were granted greater authority over spatial planning and land use under Law No. 139/2015, this delegation of power has not always been accompanied by stronger regulatory oversight or transparent decision-making mechanisms. As a result, local institutions have occasionally exercised their expanded powers in ways that prioritize short-term gains over long-term sustainability or cultural heritage preservation. Such actions not only erode public trust but also contribute to a perception that local government is influenced by private interests rather than public value, particularly in urban areas undergoing rapid development.

In the range of municipal services that should serve to the economic activities, some appreciation is expressed only for the fire service, while all the interviewees denounce the total lack of economic policies on the part of the local government to help new businesses or to facilitate productive activities. In this case, the issue of mismanagement or the lack of municipal markets to sell local products can be highlighted and is evident that the local government's neglect of the agricultural infrastructure for sewerage, drainage, and irrigation.

A recurring theme across the interviews and survey responses was the limited awareness and understanding among residents regarding the role and responsibilities of the heads of Administrative Units. Despite these officials serving

as the primary liaison between citizens and the broader municipal structure—especially in rural and peripheral areas—many respondents reported not knowing who their local unit head was, let alone what functions they perform. This lack of recognition is not simply a matter of public disinterest; rather, it reflects deep-rooted communication gaps, insufficient outreach efforts, and a lack of institutional visibility at the sub-municipal level. Under the 2015 Administrative and Territorial Reform, administrative units were designed to preserve a degree of local presence within the larger, consolidated municipalities. Heads of these units were expected to coordinate service delivery, facilitate local participation, and channel citizen concerns to the central municipal administration. However, in practice, these roles appear to have been underutilized or poorly communicated, resulting in a disconnection between local residents and the decentralized governance structures intended to represent them. The absence of clearly defined and actively visible leadership at the administrative unit level also contributes to broader feelings of marginalization, particularly in former communes that now feel overshadowed by urban municipal centers. This weakens the intended goals of the reform, which included enhancing citizen engagement, accountability, and responsiveness through proximity-based governance. Addressing this issue will require not only clearer institutional mandates but also capacity-building, community outreach, and stronger accountability mechanisms to ensure that administrative unit heads are both visible and effective in the eyes of the communities they serve.

About 90% of those asked, beyond their political preferences, settlements in the north or south, villages or cities, are in favor of a review of the Administrative and Territorial reform. In some cases, due to a better clarification of powers between different institutions, or in other cases to change administrative boundaries or to add new municipalities.

In addition to completing the structured questionnaire, citizens were also encouraged to share their individual views on the administrative boundaries of their municipalities and to identify the most pressing problems affecting their local areas. These discussions served as a valuable qualitative complement to the survey data, offering deeper insight into how the 2015 Administrative and Territorial Reform has been experienced at the community level. Many participants expressed concerns about the territorial enlargement of municipalities, noting that the integration of multiple former communes into larger administrative units has often led to a sense of detachment from local institutions.

In several cases, citizens from peripheral villages or rural areas reported feeling "forgotten" or marginalized, as they perceived that the newly consolidated municipal governments prioritized the urban centers while neglecting outlying areas. Participants also voiced a wide range of localized problems, including deteriorating infrastructure, lack of public transportation, poor access to health and social services, limited economic opportunities, and insufficient public

lighting and sanitation services. These issues varied in intensity depending on the region, but common themes emerged around the decline in service quality and the reduced visibility of municipal authorities since the reform. In several municipalities, citizens suggested that the redrawing of boundaries did not sufficiently consider existing economic, cultural, or geographic linkages, which in turn weakened community identity and made coordination across territories more difficult. These open-ended contributions underscore the importance of local knowledge and lived experience in evaluating territorial governance reforms. They also reinforce one of the study's core findings: that administrative efficiency gains must be balanced with citizen proximity and responsiveness to ensure equitable and effective local governance.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a significant mismatch between the objectives of Albania's Administrative and Territorial Reform (ATR) and the perceived outcomes among citizens nearly a decade after its implementation. Despite the formal reconfiguration of municipalities and the expansion of their statutory responsibilities, the reform has yet to produce substantial improvements in the quality, accessibility, or equity of local public services. The majority of respondents (89%) report a preference for the pre-2015 administrative structure, citing a stronger presence of institutions, more timely service delivery, and greater responsiveness under the smaller municipal units.

This widespread dissatisfaction is particularly acute in rural and remote areas, where respondents consistently highlight service gaps in essential infrastructure, such as road maintenance, flood protection, and sewage systems. In many cases, citizens report the non-existence of basic services that are theoretically mandated by law, with 15% stating they receive no infrastructure services at all, and up to 56.5% indicating the absence of public transport. These findings suggest that the territorial enlargement of municipalities has diluted institutional proximity and weakened service delivery in peripheral zones, reinforcing concerns raised in the literature about the negative externalities of consolidation without corresponding capacity increases (Faguet, 2014).

In urban centers, while there is modest recognition of improvements in areas such as water supply, waste collection, and primary healthcare infrastructure, these gains are uneven and fail to offset the broader institutional shortcomings. Notably, 80% of respondents viewed the municipal police as ineffective or unhelpful, and less than 15% rated the delivery of social services positively—despite social welfare being one of the key functions transferred to local governments under Law 139/2015. This signals not only issues of capacity but also a disconnect

between legal responsibilities and practical implementation, echoing concerns from progress reports by the EU and Albanian municipal associations.

Another prominent theme emerging from the data is the lack of fiscal decentralization. The reform has not resulted in a substantial increase in local government budgets—remaining around 1% of GDP, the lowest in the region. This limitation has constrained municipalities' ability to invest in infrastructure, maintain public assets, and develop tailored economic or cultural policies. The study also found minimal evidence of fiscal incentives, such as tax reductions for local businesses or support for agricultural productivity, highlighting missed opportunities to foster local economic development through decentralized governance.

Moreover, citizen understanding and awareness of local governance roles remain limited. Many respondents indicated they do not know their local administrators or do not understand the difference between the new administrative leaders and the former local governance figures. This suggests a gap in civic communication and participatory governance, undermining the reform's goal of increasing citizen engagement and accountability.

Overall, the findings support critiques that Albania's ATR, while structurally ambitious, has fallen short in execution—particularly in delivering public services equitably and effectively across diverse territories. These outcomes align with broader patterns observed in decentralization reforms in other post-communist contexts, where legal reforms often outpace administrative and fiscal capacity (Kopecký et al., 2008; Keuffer & Ladner, 2018). The empirical evidence collected through this study underscores the urgency of revisiting Albania's territorial configuration, strengthening local administrative capacity, and ensuring that fiscal decentralization accompanies functional delegation.

Limitations of the Study

While this study offers valuable insights into the perceived effectiveness of municipal service delivery following Albania's 2015 Administrative and Territorial Reform, several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the geographic scope of the survey was limited to five counties—Tirana, Shkodra, Vlora, Elbasan, and Gjirokastra—which, although selected to represent urban–rural diversity and regional variation, may not fully capture the heterogeneity of experiences across all 61 municipalities. The findings, therefore, cannot be generalized to the entire country without caution. Second, the sample size of 248 respondents, while adequate for exploratory analysis, may constrain the statistical power of disaggregated comparisons by demographic group, municipality size, or administrative unit. The lack of probability sampling techniques also limits the

ability to estimate margins of error or confidently generalize results beyond the surveyed population. Third, this study relies primarily on self-reported perceptions of service delivery, which may be influenced by subjective biases, political attitudes, or limited awareness of institutional mandates. Although the survey was designed to mirror legal responsibilities under Law No. 139/2015, respondents' assessments may not always correspond to objective performance metrics. Fourth, temporal limitations must be considered. The survey reflects perceptions at a single point in time (2023), nearly a decade after the reform. It does not capture dynamic changes in service delivery or institutional performance that may have occurred before or after data collection.

Finally, the study focuses primarily on the demand side—citizen experience and perception—without incorporating perspectives from municipal officials, service providers, or central government actors. Future mixed-stakeholder studies would provide a more holistic view of the reform's implementation and bottlenecks.

Despite these limitations, the study provides an important citizen-centered snapshot of local governance performance under Albania's decentralization framework and serves as a foundation for further empirical investigation.

Conclusions

The Administrative-Territorial Reform has not met its objectives, as the new legislation is not fully implemented and the process of absorbing new functions and increasing the quality of services has not been successfully implemented. This is also evident from the responses of the citizens, as 20% of them stated that they do not receive services that in theory should be offered to them. In most municipalities, there is also a low level of effectiveness in the collection of their own revenues and in the use of available funds. The new legislation has not brought an increase in the municipal budget (thus the essence of decentralization). The level of budget is the same as before the territorial-administrative reform, that is, no less than 1% of GDP is allocated from the central budget. This level is the lowest in the region, preventing municipalities from increasing the quality of services and exercising their powers in full discretion.

About 65% of the respondents express themselves negatively in relation to the quality of municipal services and demand a wider and more distributed presence of institutions that provide services to citizens. However, based on the questionnaires, it turns out that citizens positively evaluate the gradual improvement of infrastructure, especially in urban centers, starting with water supply, the maintenance of public buildings and the primary health service.

Complaints and criticisms expand, especially in rural territories in cases where the presence of the local government is not visible and where the minimum infrastructural elements for living are missing.

The fields for which the citizens expressed themselves completely negatively were those related to the social assistance and services that the local government should offer to vulnerable social groups. Specifically, less than 15% of citizens positively evaluate the provision of social assistance, the distribution of social housing or the presence of community centers.

Over 80% of citizens note that the maintenance of cultural objects such as libraries, forts, old religious objects, sports centers, etc., are not well maintained or are maintained in an unprofessional manner. Also, only 22% of the citizens believe that the municipalities play a positive role in the economic development of the territory and in increasing the feeling of security towards the citizens.

Recommendations for Further Studies

While this study provides valuable insights into citizen perceptions of municipal service delivery in post-reform Albania, it also opens several avenues for future research. First, future studies should consider expanding the geographic scope to include all 61 municipalities, enabling a more representative and statistically robust understanding of national-level trends. Such an expansion would allow for comparisons between municipalities of different sizes, fiscal capacities, and levels of urbanization, deepening our understanding of how context-specific variables mediate the effects of territorial reform.

Second, studies would provide important insights into whether the patterns identified here are persistent, cyclical, or evolving. By tracking the same municipalities over time, researchers could analyze whether ongoing capacity-building efforts, changes in intergovernmental finance, or new policy interventions lead to measurable improvements in local service delivery and citizen satisfaction.

Third, future research should explore the perspectives of local officials, administrators, and service providers, offering a supply-side view of the challenges faced in implementing decentralized mandates. Combining citizen perceptions with institutional diagnostics would provide a more comprehensive evaluation of reform outcomes and implementation bottlenecks.

Additionally, comparative studies with neighboring Western Balkan countries—such as North Macedonia, Montenegro, or Serbia—could help situate Albania's reform trajectory within a broader regional context. Identifying shared challenges and divergent outcomes could inform more effective, context-sensitive decentralization strategies.

Finally, there is room for methodological innovation. Incorporating spatial data, service coverage mapping, or digital participation metrics could enhance the empirical grounding of future evaluations. Such approaches would also support real-time monitoring tools for policymakers tasked with designing and adjusting territorial and fiscal decentralization frameworks.

References

Ciro, A., Toska, E., & Gjiknuri, D. (2021). Decentralization in Albania: Achievements, challenges, and perspectives. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/361506455

European Commission. (2021). Albania 2021 Progress Report. Brussels: Directorate-General for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations. Retrieved from https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu

Faguet, J. P. (2014). Decentralization and governance. World Development, 53, 2–13. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2013.01.002

Institute for Democracy and Mediation. (2022). Local governance in Albania: Challenges and ways forward. Tirana: IDM. Retrieved from https://wbc-rti.info/object/document/24300

Keuffer, N., & Ladner, A. (2018). Local autonomy for local democracy? International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 42(5), 783–801. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12626

Kopecký, P., Mair, P., & Spirova, M. (Eds.). (2008). Party patronage and party government in European democracies. Oxford University Press.

Ministry of Interior, Republic of Albania. (2015). National Crosscutting Strategy for Decentralization and Local Governance 2015–2020. Tirana: Ministry of Interior. Retrieved from https://www.drejtesia.gov.al

NALAS. (2024). Fiscal decentralization indicators for South-East Europe: 2023 comparative report. Skopje: Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South-East Europe. Retrieved from https://decentralization.net/2024/09/fiscal-decentralization-indicators-for-south-east-europe

Oates, W. E. (1972). Fiscal federalism. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Parliament of Albania. (2015). Law No. 139/2015 on Local Self-Government. Official Gazette of the Republic of Albania. Retrieved from https://qbz.gov.al

Rondinelli, D. A. (1981). Government decentralization in comparative perspective: Theory and practice in developing countries. International Review of Administrative Sciences, 47(2), 133–145. https://doi.org/10.1177/002085238104700204

Shah, A., & Thompson, T. (2004). Implementing decentralized local governance: A treacherous road with potholes, detours and road closures. World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 3353. https://doi.org/10.1596/1813-9450-3353

Smoke, P. (2003). Decentralization in Africa: Goals, dimensions, myths and challenges. Public Administration and Development, 23(1), 7–16. https://doi.org/10.1002/pad.255

Tiebout, C. M. (1956). A pure theory of local expenditures. Journal of Political Economy, 64(5), 416–424. https://doi.org/10.1086/257839

UNDP Albania & Swiss Cooperation. (2021). Functionality of municipalities in Albania: Stocktaking report 2021. Tirana: UNDP. Retrieved from https://www.undp.org/albania/publications/functionality-municipalities-albania