

Citizen participation in local governance in Albania: A legal and institutional analysis

Ilir BARJABA

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-2430-9496>

UNIVERSITY OF TIRANA - FACULTY OF LAW

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC LAW

Abstract

Citizen participation is a central element of democratic governance, particularly at the local level. In Albania, the legal framework governing local self-government provides for a range of participatory mechanisms, including local elections, public consultations, referenda, civic initiatives, and access to information. However, the effectiveness of these mechanisms remains disputed. This article examines the extent to which the Albanian legal framework enables effective citizen participation through electoral and non-electoral mechanisms. It employs doctrinal legal analysis, comparative analysis with European standards, and qualitative institutional assessment, focusing on the Constitution of Albania, Law No. 139/2015 On Local Self-Government, Law No. 146/2014 On Notification and Public Consultation, the Electoral Code, the European Charter of Local Self-Government, and selected European legal practices. The analysis finds that Albania has largely aligned its legal framework with European standards, but implementation remains uneven. The closed-list proportional electoral system for municipal councils weakens electoral accountability, while public consultations and local referenda have limited practical influence on municipal decision-making. Although gender quotas have substantially increased women's representation in municipal councils, women remain underrepresented in mayoral office. The article provides an integrated legal assessment of citizen participation in local self-government and proposes reforms

to strengthen electoral accountability, enhance the effectiveness of participatory mechanisms, improve the implementation of gender equality provisions, and further align Albanian law with European standards of local self-government.

Keywords: *Citizen participation, local self-government, electoral law, administrative law, public consultation, Albania.*

Introduction

Citizen engagement is acknowledged as a central principle of constitutional democracy, exemplifying the principle that administrative authority originates from the people and is exercised on their behalf (Hendriks & Michels, 2021). Consequently, the constitutional legitimacy of a democratic government relies not solely on representative institutions but also on the effective realization of citizens' political rights. This article investigates the degree to which the Albanian constitutional and legal framework ensures substantial citizen participation within the local self-government system via both electoral and non-electoral avenues. In a constitutional democracy, scholars emphasize that citizens are not merely passive recipients of governmental actions; rather, they are holders of political rights who possess a constitutional entitlement to influence, examine, and hold public authorities accountable (Hendriks & Michels, 2021).

While representative democracy is primarily enacted through elections, the constitutional right to engage in public affairs encompasses far more than just the electoral process. Municipal authorities in Albania, as stipulated by domestic legislation, are responsible for making decisions related to infrastructure, education, local taxation, urban planning, environmental protection, housing, public transport, social services, and community development. This responsibility significantly influences the daily interactions between citizens and public institutions. As a result, local government in Albania serves as the institutional framework where constitutional principles such as democracy, accountability, transparency, subsidiarity, and citizen participation are most directly manifested.

In pursuit of these constitutional objectives, Albania has progressively developed a constitutional and legislative framework governing local self-government. The current legal framework guarantees local autonomy, democratic local elections, public consultation, civic initiatives, access to information, transparency obligations, and multiple forms of citizen participation in municipal decision-making. These developments reflect Albania's continuing constitutional evolution and its efforts to align domestic legislation with European standards of local democracy, particularly the principles embodied in the European Charter of Local Self-Government and the country's European Union accession process (European Commission, 2024; OECD, 2025).

A significant stage in local autonomy was the territorial-administrative reform adopted in 2015, which reduced the number of local government units and reorganized the municipal structure. The reform improved administrative efficiency, strengthened institutional capacity, enhanced financial sustainability, and ensured more effective delivery of local public services. In principle, larger and better-resourced municipalities tend to strengthen local administration and facilitate more coherent territorial development policies (European Commission, 2024; OECD, 2025).

Despite these institutional reforms, important constitutional questions remain regarding the effective realization of participatory rights. By enlarging municipalities and reducing the number of local government units, the territorial reform also increased the risk of widening the physical, institutional, and political distance between citizens and municipal authorities. This concern is particularly evident in rural and peripheral areas, where greater distance may reduce citizens' access to local institutions, limit opportunities for direct participation, and diminish their practical influence over municipal decision-making (European Commission, 2024; OECD, 2025).

The principal issue examined in this article concerns the relationship between the formal constitutional recognition of participatory rights and their effective exercise within Albania's system of local self-government. Although the Albanian constitutional and legislative framework incorporates a broad range of guarantees consistent with European standards of local democracy, including local self-government, transparency, representative local elections, public consultation, gender quotas, and access to information, the formal recognition of these guarantees does not, in itself, ensure the effective exercise of participatory rights or meaningful citizen influence over local decision-making. In practice, the exercise of participatory rights frequently remains fragmented, inconsistent, and dependent upon political will, institutional capacity, and civic engagement.

This implementation gap is evident in both electoral and non-electoral mechanisms of participation. The electoral framework governing municipal councils raises constitutional concerns regarding representative accountability because the closed-list electoral system restricts voters' ability to choose individual candidates and weakens the direct political accountability of elected councilors to the electorate. Consequently, political parties in Albania retain substantial control over candidate selection and local political representation.

Comparable limitations are also apparent beyond the electoral sphere. Although public consultations, civic initiatives, petitions, local referenda, and, increasingly, participatory budgeting are recognized within Albania's legal and institutional framework, these mechanisms frequently remain underutilized or are implemented in a predominantly formalistic manner, thereby limiting their practical influence on municipal decision-making (OECD, 2025).

Consultation procedures are often initiated at a late stage of the decision-making process, may provide limited feedback to participants, and frequently fail to ensure the effective inclusion of marginalized groups, rural communities, women, young people, persons with disabilities, and citizens with limited digital access (European Commission, 2024; OECD, 2025). Similarly, local referenda and civic initiatives remain only rarely used as instruments of direct democracy, indicating that the constitutional framework has yet to foster a participatory culture in which citizens consistently influence municipal governance beyond periodic elections.

The central thesis of this article argues that, although Albania has established a comprehensive constitutional and legislative framework governing citizen participation in local self-government that is broadly aligned with European democratic standards, the practical effectiveness of this framework remains constrained by significant implementation deficiencies. Consequently, the constitutional recognition of participatory rights cannot, by itself, secure democratic legitimacy unless accompanied by effective institutional safeguards, transparent administrative procedures, and genuine opportunities for citizens to influence municipal decision-making. These structural shortcomings reveal a broader constitutional tension between the formal recognition of participatory rights and their effective realization in practice.

To evaluate this thesis, the article employs a doctrinal constitutional analysis supplemented by comparative public law and supported by empirical evidence. It systematically examines the Albanian constitutional and legislative framework against relevant international and European legal standards, jurisprudence, and comparative practice, while analyzing official reports, municipal practice, and available empirical evidence concerning the implementation of participatory mechanisms.

The analysis demonstrates that this implementation gap is reflected in three interrelated dimensions: first, limited electoral accountability resulting from party-controlled candidate selection in local elections; second, the ineffective operation of consultative and direct-democracy mechanisms; and third, the limited capacity of gender quotas and other formal inclusion measures to translate into substantive political influence within municipal decision-making.

On this basis, the article conceptualizes local democracy as a constitutional order in which representative institutions and participatory rights operate as mutually reinforcing guarantees of democratic legitimacy. Within this framework, local elections, public consultations, local referenda, access to information, and inclusive political representation constitute complementary constitutional safeguards of local self-government.

Accordingly, the quality of local democracy in Albania depends not merely on the formal legal recognition of participatory rights, but on their effective

accessibility, procedural integrity, inclusiveness, and capacity to enable citizens to exercise genuine influence over municipal decision-making.

Literature review: Theoretical and legal framework of participatory local governance in Albania

This article contributes to the existing scientific literature by integrating legislation of local self-government, electoral legislation, and participatory democracy principles into a single analytical framework. This integrated approach is necessary because citizen participation cannot be understood only through consultation procedures, electoral turnout, or formal legal rights in isolation. At the local level, participation depends on the combined operation of electoral design, municipal institutional capacity, transparency rules, gender equality measures, administrative openness, civic culture, and citizens' trust in institutions.

The conventional literature on participatory democracy is founded on the belief that citizens ought to be active contributors in the development, execution, and assessment of public policy, rather than mere passive recipients of governmental decisions. Arnstein's (1969) renowned "ladder of citizen participation" serves as a crucial reference point as it differentiates between symbolic participation and genuine citizen empowerment. At the lower stages of the hierarchy, participation may manifest as information sharing, consultation, or placation, whereas the upper rungs encompass partnership, delegated authority, and citizen control. This differentiation holds particular significance for Albania. Studies on local governance in Albania have consistently highlighted that formal decentralization and legal acknowledgment of participation do not inherently lead to effective local democracy unless citizens can influence decision-making processes in a transparent and accountable way (Ndreu, 2015; Dharmo & Bejko, 2025).

Deliberative democratic theory introduces a significant aspect by emphasizing not just the allowance of citizen participation, but also the capacity of public reasoning. Habermas (1996) posits that the legitimacy of lawmaking is contingent upon communicative processes that enable citizens to engage in public discourse. When applied to local governance in Albania, this implies that municipalities ought to regard consultation not merely as a procedural formality, but as a dynamic process wherein citizens are provided with timely information, comprehend policy options, contribute substantial feedback, and are made aware of how their contributions have influenced the final outcomes.

In the context of Albania, this holds particular significance due to the frequent operation of municipalities within an environment characterized by limited administrative capacity, diminished civic trust, and pronounced party influence. The territorial-administrative reform of 2015 expanded municipalities with the

intention of enhancing efficiency; however, it also raised concerns regarding the accessibility of local institutions for rural and peripheral communities (Ndreu, 2015; Dhamo & Bejko, 2025).

A second body of literature connects participation with democratic legitimacy. Easton (1965) posits that political systems necessitate citizen support to maintain stability and legitimacy. Norris (2011) subsequently expands on the notion of “critical citizens,” contending that dissatisfaction with democracy tends to rise when institutions fail to fulfill public expectations. In transitional democracies, insufficient participation may thus signal more profound issues related to trust, accountability, and institutional efficacy. Albania exemplifies this trend.

The literature on decentralization indicates that local governance can enhance democratic accountability by positioning decision-making nearer to the populace. Faguet (2014) contends that decentralization can lead to greater responsiveness when local authorities are endowed with significant powers, adequate financial resources, administrative capabilities, and mechanisms for accountability. Nevertheless, Smoke (2015) cautions that decentralization does not inherently guarantee increased participation or accountability. In instances where local governments lack fiscal independence, professional management, and transparent processes, decentralization may merely shift responsibilities without truly empowering citizens. This caution is particularly relevant to Albania.

The territorial-administrative reform of 2015 aimed to rationalize Albania’s fragmented local government system, resulting in the establishment of 61 municipalities. However, subsequent assessments have still highlighted remaining issues regarding fiscal autonomy, disparities in service delivery, and the gap between municipal centers and remote communities (World Bank, 2021; Dhamo & Bejko, 2025). Albanian scholars focusing on local governance also highlights the conflict between efficiency and democratic accessibility.

Ndreu (2015) suggests that the recent territorial-administrative reform was designed to strengthen local government capabilities and align Albania with European standards of local self-governance; however, its success depended on municipalities’ capacity to exercise true autonomy and deliver services effectively. Recent empirical studies conducted by Dhamo and Bejko (2025) also indicate that, almost ten years post-reform, issues persist concerning equity, service quality, and the public’s perception of local accountability. These results demonstrate that while territorial consolidation may improve administrative efficiency, it could simultaneously diminish participatory proximity, particularly if residents in former communes or rural regions feel increasingly alienated from municipal decision-making.

The literature on electoral systems is also important for understanding local governance. Carey and Shugart (1995) illustrate how electoral regulations shape candidates’ incentives to pursue personal votes. In systems that utilize closed-

list proportional representation, like Albania, candidates heavily depend on party leadership for their placement on the list, which can reduce their direct accountability to voters. This phenomenon is evident in Albanian municipal councils, where voters select party lists instead of individual council candidates. In contrast, mayors are elected directly, fostering a more personalized accountability dynamic between voters and the municipality's executive leader. Thus, Albanian local democracy functions through a dual representation model: party-focused council representation and candidate-focused mayoral representation. This duality may lead to institutional imbalances, particularly in situations where councils are politically dominated by the same party as the mayor or where there is weak opposition representation.

Within the broader framework of citizen participation in local governance, the representation of women constitutes an essential dimension of democratic inclusion. The body of research concerning gender quotas indicates that legal reforms can enhance descriptive representation, although they do not automatically ensure substantive influence. Dahlerup (2006) and Krook (2009) contend that quotas serve as vital corrective measures against systemic exclusion; however, their success is contingent upon factors such as party conduct, placement mandates, campaign funding, political culture, and enforcement mechanisms. Albania's local electoral system exemplifies this distinction.

Gender quotas have markedly boosted the representation of women in municipal councils, yet women continue to be underrepresented in the roles of mayors and in positions of executive political leadership. This observation aligns with the broader comparative conclusion that quotas tend to be more effective in list-based electoral bodies compared to single-person executive offices, where party nomination practices and political resources frequently remain dominated by men.

The broader legal framework governing local democracy is further reinforced by international and European standards, which advocate a comprehensive approach to democratic local governance. In particular, the Council of Europe's standards on local self-government emphasize that decentralization should not be understood merely as a territorial reorganization, but also as a means of strengthening democratic local institutions, promoting citizen participation, and enhancing local accountability.

In Albania, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) has consistently monitored the implementation of local governance reforms and the conduct of local elections, with particular attention to the involvement of local authorities in the decentralization process and the integrity of the 2023 local elections (Council of Europe, 2015, 2023). These European standards are of particular relevance to Albania, where local governance reforms constitute an integral component of the EU accession process and are closely linked to rule of

law conditionality, democratic governance, and the development of a transparent, accountable, and citizen-oriented public administration.

The existing literature reveals a significant gap in providing an integrated legal analysis that connects citizen participation, local electoral law, gender representation, decentralization, and European standards within the Albanian context. While research on local governance has primarily focused on territorial reform, fiscal decentralization, and service delivery, studies of electoral law have largely concentrated on parliamentary elections. Consequently, the legal and institutional relationship between local democratic participation, electoral regulation, and broader European standards remains insufficiently examined.

This article seeks to bridge these strands of scholarship by arguing that the effectiveness of local democracy depends on the interaction between the legal framework governing citizen participation and the institutional mechanisms of electoral accountability. In the Albanian context, the assessment of local democracy cannot be confined to the formal existence of municipalities, the periodic conduct of local elections, or the statutory recognition of participatory mechanisms.

Rather, it requires an examination of whether the legal framework enables citizens to exercise effective influence over local decision-making, whether municipal councils are equipped to perform meaningful oversight of executive authorities, whether mayors remain legally and politically accountable between elections, whether the legal framework ensures the effective representation of women and other underrepresented groups, and whether domestic law and institutional practice comply with European standards of local self-government, transparency, pluralism, and democratic participation.

Methodology

Research Design and Scope of Analysis

This article adopts a qualitative legal and institutional research design in order to examine the legal and institutional conditions that shape citizen participation in local governance in Albania. The study combines doctrinal legal analysis, comparative legal analysis, and qualitative institutional assessment to evaluate both the normative framework regulating participation and the practical effectiveness of participatory mechanisms within local democratic governance. The legal dimension of the research is particularly important because the effectiveness of citizen participation depends not only on the existence of formal legal guarantees, but also on the institutional, administrative, and political conditions under which those guarantees operate in practice.

The analysis primarily focuses on the post-2015 decentralization period following the territorial-administrative reform implemented through Law No. 115/2014 “On the Administrative-Territorial Division of Local Government Units in the Republic of Albania.” However, where necessary, the article also incorporates legal and institutional developments since the democratic transition after 1991 in order to provide historical and constitutional context regarding the evolution of local democracy and participatory governance in Albania.

The study is additionally informed by theories of participatory democracy, decentralization, democratic legitimacy, and institutional governance. The theoretical framework draws particularly from scholarship concerning participatory governance, local accountability, decentralization efficiency, and democratic inclusion. These theoretical perspectives provide the conceptual basis for evaluating whether legal mechanisms formally guaranteeing participation generate meaningful opportunities for citizen influence within local governance processes.

Doctrinal Legal Analysis

The primary methodological approach utilized in this article is doctrinal legal analysis. Doctrinal analysis examines the content, structure, interpretation, coherence, and practical implications of legal norms regulating local governance and citizen participation. The doctrinal component focuses on the Constitution of the Republic of Albania, Law No. 139/2015 “On Local Self-Government,” Law No. 146/2014 “On Notification and Public Consultation,” Law No. 10019/2008 “The Electoral Code of the Republic of Albania,” as amended, and related legislation concerning transparency, administrative procedures, access to information, gender equality, and local democratic accountability.

The purpose of doctrinal analysis is to identify the legal mechanisms through which citizens may participate in local governance and to evaluate whether these mechanisms create enforceable participatory rights or remain primarily declarative in character. Particular attention is devoted to constitutional principles concerning popular sovereignty, decentralization, representative democracy, equality before the law, local autonomy, and public participation in decision-making. The article additionally evaluates the interaction between constitutional guarantees and implementing legislation in order to determine the extent to which the Albanian legal framework creates coherent and operational participatory structures at the municipal level.

Doctrinal legal analysis is especially relevant in transitional democracies because democratic participation frequently depends upon the institutionalization of legal guarantees through detailed procedural legislation. Consequently, the article does not limit itself to the identification of formal rights but also considers issues of

legal certainty, enforceability, procedural clarity, and institutional accountability within the legal framework governing local participation.

Comparative Legal Analysis

The second methodological component employed in this study is comparative legal analysis. Albania is evaluated in relation to European standards concerning local democracy, decentralization, electoral governance, and citizen participation. The principal comparative framework is derived from the European Charter of Local Self-Government, recommendations of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, Venice Commission opinions, European Commission progress reports, and reports of the OSCE/ODIHR concerning elections and democratic governance in Albania.

The comparative analysis does not seek to argue that there is a single uniform European model of participatory local governance. Instead, it identifies recurring institutional characteristics associated with stronger participatory systems across European democracies. These include institutionalized public consultation procedures, participatory budgeting, local referenda, transparency obligations, digital participation mechanisms, gender parity measures, preferential or open electoral systems, and stronger municipal administrative capacity.

The comparative dimension is particularly important within the context of Albania's decentralization reforms, especially the 2015 territorial-administrative reform, which substantially altered the structure and territorial organization of local government. The reform sought to strengthen municipal administrative capacity, improve service delivery, and increase fiscal sustainability by reducing the number of municipalities and enlarging local administrative units. However, the reform also generated concerns regarding democratic accessibility, citizen proximity to institutions, and the practical capacity of residents to participate in local decision-making processes.

Drawing on decentralization theory, the article examines the tension between administrative efficiency and participatory accessibility, a dilemma extensively discussed in governance literature (Faguet, 2014, pp. 5–7; Smoke, 2015, pp. 102–104). The comparative approach therefore serves not only to evaluate Albania's compliance with European legal standards but also to identify structural and institutional limitations affecting democratic participation at the local level.

Institutional Effectiveness and Participatory Governance Assessment

The third methodological component consists of qualitative institutional assessment. This aspect of the methodology evaluates whether legal mechanisms regulating participation are capable of functioning effectively under actual

institutional and political conditions. Rather than assuming that formal legal guarantees automatically produce meaningful participation, the institutional assessment examines the practical environment within which participatory mechanisms operate.

The analysis considers factors including administrative capacity, implementation practices, institutional transparency, political party influence over candidate selection, local electoral competitiveness, voter turnout, women's representation, public trust in institutions, and the practical relevance or frequency of participatory mechanisms such as public consultations, citizen initiatives, and local referenda. Particular attention is devoted to the relationship between formal legal obligations and the practical capacity of municipalities to implement participatory procedures effectively.

The article relies on qualitative interpretation of publicly available institutional and electoral data. Sources include reports produced by the OSCE/ODIHR, the European Commission, the Venice Commission, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, the Central Election Commission of Albania, and academic studies concerning decentralization, democratic participation, electoral governance, and local institutional reform. Institutional reports and comparative assessments were selected based on their methodological credibility, relevance to democratic governance, and recurring use within European governance and electoral monitoring literature.

Where statistical information concerning participation is incomplete, inconsistent, or methodologically fragmented, the article treats numerical indicators cautiously and presents them as indicative evidence rather than as definitive measurements. This approach is particularly necessary in the Albanian context, where data concerning non-electoral participation mechanisms, including public consultations, citizen initiatives, and local referenda, is not systematically collected or publicly available in a uniform format across municipalities.

Sources, Analytical Reliability, and Methodological Validity

The study utilizes a combination of primary legal materials and secondary institutional and academic sources. Primary sources include constitutional provisions, legislation, electoral regulations, and official institutional documents. Secondary sources include scholarly literature concerning participatory democracy, decentralization, democratic legitimacy, local governance, and electoral systems, as well as reports and assessments prepared by international organizations and monitoring institutions.

To strengthen analytical reliability and validity, the article triangulates doctrinal legal analysis with comparative institutional reports, electoral and governance statistics, and secondary academic literature. Cross-referencing

multiple institutional and scholarly sources reduces the risk of relying upon isolated legal interpretation or incomplete institutional data. This methodological triangulation is particularly important because democratic participation cannot be fully understood through legal analysis alone; instead, it requires examination of the interaction between legal design, institutional implementation, and political practice.

The study further recognizes that evaluating participatory effectiveness necessarily involves qualitative institutional interpretation rather than purely objective numerical measurement. Consequently, the article adopts an interpretive institutional perspective that considers both normative legal guarantees and their practical operation within Albania's evolving democratic framework.

The article does not employ advanced quantitative statistical modeling because its principal objective is not to establish direct statistical causality between individual institutional variables. Instead, the purpose of the research is to evaluate the normative, legal, and institutional effectiveness of participatory mechanisms within the broader framework of Albanian local governance and democratic development.

Methodological Limitations

Despite its strengths, the methodology contains several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the study relies primarily on doctrinal analysis and secondary institutional data and does not incorporate primary empirical research methods such as interviews, surveys, focus groups, or field observation across municipalities. As a result, the article may not fully capture local-level variation in participatory experiences, institutional practices, or citizen perceptions across different regions of Albania.

Second, data concerning non-electoral participation remains fragmented and inconsistently collected. Information relating to public consultations, citizen initiatives, participatory budgeting, and local referenda is often incomplete, inaccessible, or methodologically inconsistent across municipalities, limiting the possibility of systematic comparative measurement and comprehensive quantitative assessment.

Third, the comparative analysis employed in this article is selective and illustrative rather than exhaustive. The study focuses on representative European standards and comparative practices most relevant to Albania's decentralization and democratic governance context rather than constructing a comprehensive cross-national dataset. The objective of the comparative component is therefore analytical and normative rather than statistical.

Nevertheless, these limitations do not undermine the central objective of the article, which is to evaluate the legal and institutional conditions necessary

for effective citizen participation in local governance in Albania. Rather, the limitations reflect broader structural and methodological challenges associated with researching democratic participation, decentralization, and institutional effectiveness in transitional and consolidating democracies.

Results

The findings indicate that Albania possesses a relatively broad legal framework for citizen participation in local governance, but the effectiveness of these mechanisms remains uneven. The strongest and most consistently functioning form of participation is electoral participation. Citizens participate in local governance primarily through the election of mayors and municipal councils, while non-electoral mechanisms such as public consultation, local initiatives, and referenda remain less developed in practice. This creates a gap between the formal legal recognition of participation and its practical impact on municipal decision-making (Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, 2016; European Commission, 2023).

Empirical electoral data demonstrates that participation through elections remains substantially stronger than participation through consultative mechanisms. According to the Central Election Commission (CEC), voter turnout in local elections has fluctuated significantly during the post-communist period. The 2015 local elections recorded turnout of approximately 47.8%, while the 2019 local elections recorded turnout of approximately 22.97% due to the political boycott by opposition parties (Central Election Commission [CEC], 2019).

In the 2023 local elections, turnout increased to approximately 38.2%; yet, remained considerably lower than participation levels seen during the earlier transition period (CEC, 2023). These figures indicate declining public trust and limited citizen engagement with local political institutions. International observers similarly noted that political polarization and low public confidence have negatively affected participation at the local level (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights [OSCE/ODIHR], 2023).

The real effectiveness of participation depends altogether on legislation, institutional capacity, administrative culture, and the willingness of local authorities to treat citizen input as meaningful rather than merely procedural (Anastasi, 2015; European Commission, 2023). However, local elections in Albania are often dominated by national political parties, which limits the autonomy of local electoral debate and weakens the direct connection between citizens and local policy priorities (OSCE/ODIHR, 2023).

The 2015 territorial-administrative reform significantly altered the structure of local governance. The number of local government units was reduced from 373 communes and municipalities to 61 municipalities (Council of Ministers of Albania, 2015). The reform aimed to improve administrative efficiency, fiscal sustainability, and service delivery capacity. Empirical evaluations by international organizations and Albanian institutions indicate mixed results.

On the one hand, larger municipalities generally improved administrative capacity and access to financial resources (Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation [SDC], 2017). On the other hand, many citizens reported increased distance from local institutions, particularly in rural areas where former communes lost institutional representation (Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, 2016). Reports by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities noted that territorial consolidation risked weakening local accessibility and direct citizen interaction with municipal authorities in geographically remote communities (Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, 2016).

Empirical monitoring reports demonstrate important implementation gaps in public consultation procedures. Studies by civil society organizations have found that municipalities frequently fail to publish consultation drafts within legally required deadlines or provide insufficient explanations regarding the incorporation of citizen feedback (Partners Albania, 2021). In many municipalities, consultation meetings attract limited participation and often involve only a narrow group of organized stakeholders rather than broader community engagement (Albanian Institute of Science, 2022). Digital consultation mechanisms have improved access in some urban municipalities, particularly in Tirana, Durrës, and Shkodër, but participation remains considerably weaker in smaller municipalities with lower administrative and technological capacity (European Commission, 2023).

The findings also show that direct democracy mechanisms, including local referenda, are legally recognized but rarely used. Local referenda are important because they allow citizens to decide directly on matters of local importance. Their limited use suggests that the existence of a legal mechanism is not sufficient to ensure participation. Procedural complexity, limited civic awareness, weak institutional incentives, financial and administrative barriers, and political reluctance may all reduce the practical use of referenda (Venice Commission, 2020). As a result, direct democracy remains more symbolic than operational in Albanian local governance. This contrasts with several European states where local referenda constitute a more institutionalized component of municipal governance (Council of Europe, 2021).

The results further indicate that citizen participation varies according to socio-economic and territorial factors. Urban municipalities in Albania generally demonstrate higher levels of civic engagement due to greater access to

information, stronger civil society organizations, and better digital infrastructure. Rural municipalities, by contrast, often face lower participation rates due to demographic decline, migration, limited institutional accessibility, and weaker civic mobilization (European Commission, 2023). Youth participation in Albania also remains relatively limited outside electoral periods, despite the increasing use of digital communication platforms by municipalities (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2022).

Overall, the findings reveal a dual structure of participation in Albania. On the one hand, electoral participation is institutionally established and regularly practiced. On the other hand, non-electoral participation remains fragmented, weakly integrated, and often dependent on administrative discretion. This imbalance limits the development of a continuous model of local democracy. Citizen participation should not be confined to election day; it should also include regular opportunities to influence local policies, monitor municipal decisions, and hold local authorities accountable between elections.

Legal Framework of Local Governance and Democratic Accountability

Reports from (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights [OSCE/ODIHR], 2023) regarding Albanian elections have consistently highlighted political polarization, claims of coercion against voters and public employees, the misuse of state resources, and concerns over vote-buying as factors undermining electoral confidence. In the local elections of 2023, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights report (OSCE/ODIHR) determined that while the elections were generally well-managed and competitive, they also underscored ongoing polarization, the misuse of public resources, pressure exerted on voters and public-sector employees, and allegations of vote-buying (OSCE/ODIHR, 2023). These findings suggest that the main problem is not the absence of legal mechanisms, but the limited participatory effect of those mechanisms in practice.

The local elections of 2019 were characterized by a boycott from the opposition, which severely undermined political pluralism at the local level. In contrast, the 2023 local elections saw the main political parties participating again; however, ODIHR noted persistent polarization and issues regarding the misuse of public resources and voter pressure (OSCE/ODIHR, 2023). Furthermore, the Association of Albanian Municipalities has pointed out that the boycott during the 2019 local elections resulted in municipalities and municipal councils being predominantly dominated by a single political entity, thereby diminishing pluralistic oversight and local political competition (Association of Albanian Municipalities, 2023).

For municipal councils, the closed-list system means that voters generally choose among party lists rather than individual candidates. This enhances the role of political parties in structuring representation, but it limits the ability of citizens to reward or punish individual council candidates. The result is a weaker principal-agent relationship between citizens and council members. Council members may feel more accountable to party leadership, which controls list placement and future political advancement, than to citizens who cannot directly reorder candidates. This confirms the broader insight that closed-list systems reduce incentives for cultivating a personal vote (Carey & Shugart, 1995). In theory, this combination should balance representativeness and direct accountability. In practice, however, the balance in Albania is uneven because party leadership retains strong control over municipal council lists.

The direct election of mayors creates a different accountability logic. Voters select an individual candidate for executive office, making the mayor more personally visible and politically accountable. This can strengthen democratic legitimacy, especially where citizens identify local problems with mayoral leadership. However, it can also produce institutional imbalance. A directly elected mayor may enjoy stronger political authority than a municipal council elected through party lists, especially when the mayor's party controls the council. The 2023 elections showed this imbalance clearly: the Socialist Party won a dominant number of mayoral contests and also secured strong representation in municipal councils, creating conditions in many municipalities for limited council oversight of the executive.

Electoral Participation and Turnout in Local Elections

In Albania, citizen turnout in local elections has demonstrated a gradual decline over time, particularly following the territorial-administrative reform of 2015 and the political crisis surrounding the 2019 local elections. The 2019 elections represented an exceptional situation because the principal opposition parties boycotted the electoral process, resulting in historically low participation and raising significant concerns regarding democratic legitimacy and political pluralism (OSCE/ODIHR, 2019). By contrast, the 2023 local elections marked the return of major opposition participation and consequently produced higher turnout levels compared with 2019, although participation still remained below the levels observed in earlier electoral cycles (OSCE/ODIHR, 2023).

Empirical developments across the last three local election cycles illustrate the strong relationship between political context and voter participation. The 2015 local elections were the first elections conducted after the territorial-administrative reform that reduced the number of local government units from 373 communes and municipalities to 61 municipalities. Although the reform aimed to improve

administrative effectiveness and service delivery, concerns emerged regarding the increased distance between citizens and local institutions in larger municipalities. Turnout in the 2015 elections remained moderate, suggesting that the restructuring itself did not immediately undermine participation.

However, the 2019 elections produced a dramatic decline in turnout because the boycott by opposition parties substantially reduced electoral competition and weakened perceptions of legitimacy. The OSCE/ODIHR (2019) noted that the absence of meaningful political contestation negatively affected public confidence in the electoral process. In 2023, turnout partially recovered following the return of opposition participation and the restoration of greater electoral competition, yet participation still failed to return to the levels recorded in earlier years (OSCE/ODIHR, 2023).

These developments suggest that citizen participation in local elections depends not only on the formal existence of voting rights, but also on broader political and institutional conditions, including political competition, public trust, accountability, and the perceived meaningfulness of electoral participation (Easton, 1965; Putnam, 1993). The Albanian case therefore demonstrates that legal guarantees of participation are insufficient on their own to ensure sustained democratic engagement. Electoral participation is strongly influenced by whether citizens believe elections are genuinely competitive, politically consequential, and capable of producing responsive local governance.

TABLE 1. Voter Turnout in Local Elections (2011-2023)

Election year	Local election context	Reported turnout
2011	Pre-territorial reform local elections	50.9%
2015	First local elections after territorial-administrative reform	47.3-47.83%
2019	Opposition boycott and political crisis	22.9-22.97%
2023	Return of broader competition in local elections	38.23%

Note. Figures are compiled from public election datasets and reporting based on Central Election Commission data, and Open Data Albania.

Gender Quotas and Women's Representation in Local Governance in Albania

Although Albania's quota rules require political parties to include at least 30 percent of the less-represented gender on candidate lists, women remain underrepresented in local executive leadership. After the 2023 local elections, only seven of Albania's 61 municipalities were led by women mayors, demonstrating that candidate-list quotas have had stronger effects on council representation than on mayoral office (BIRN, 2023). This finding is significant because it shows that

formal equality mechanisms operate differently across electoral tiers: proportional council lists are more compatible with gender quota enforcement, while single-candidate mayoral races remain more dependent on party nomination practices.

The impact of these legal mechanisms is visible in women’s representation within municipal councils. According to global local government statistics published by UN Women and the United Cities and Local Governments database, women held 681 of 1,613 municipal council seats in Albania following the 2023 local elections, representing approximately 42.22 percent of local council members (UN Women, 2023). This figure demonstrates that Albania has achieved substantial progress in descriptive representation at the local level. It further indicates that legally binding quotas linked to candidate placement rules can produce measurable improvements in women’s political inclusion within representative institutions.

However, the situation differs substantially with respect to mayoral offices. Unlike municipal councils, mayoral elections are majoritarian and candidate-centered, meaning that the quota rules applied to proportional lists do not generate equivalent outcomes in executive contests. Prior to the 2023 local elections, UN Women reported that only 15 of 144 registered mayoral candidates were women, representing approximately 10.4 percent of all candidates (UN Women Albania, 2023). Subsequent election monitoring confirmed that women continue to constitute only a small minority of mayors across Albanian municipalities.

The contrast between municipal councils and mayoral offices reveals a structural limitation of Albania’s gender-equality framework: quota systems are generally more effective in proportional representation systems with party lists than in single-office executive elections, where candidate recruitment and party nomination practices play a decisive role (Krook & Norris, 2014; Krook, 2014).

International organizations and election observers have emphasized that quotas should be accompanied by additional institutional measures, including stronger internal party democracy, campaign financing support for women candidates, protection against gender-based political violence, equal media visibility, and leadership training programs (OSCE/ODIHR, 2023; UN Women Albania, 2023). Without these complementary mechanisms, women’s political participation may remain numerically significant while still constrained in terms of substantive political influence and decision-making power.

TABLE 2. Women’s Representation in Albanian Local Governance after the 2023 Local Elections

Indicator	Reported figure	Source basis	Interpretation
Women in local government seats	681 of 1,613 seats	UN Women global local government data	Women held 42.22% of local government seats after the 2023 municipal election results

Women mayoral candidates, 2023	15 of 144 candidates	UN Albania / UN Women public reporting	Women were only 10.4% of mayoral candidates
Women mayors after 2023 elections	Approximately 7-8 of 61 municipalities	Civil society and gender monitoring reports	Women remained strongly underrepresented in executive local offices
Local council quota rule	Gender-balanced ranking / alternating placement for local council lists	Electoral Code as summarized by UN Women / gender quota sources	List design supports descriptive representation in councils

Note. The table distinguishes council-level descriptive representation from mayoral/executive representation, where women remain underrepresented.

In conclusion, reports from OSCE/ODIHR have consistently highlighted the significance of women's involvement as a crucial aspect of electoral integrity. In the context of Albania, the rise in the number of women serving on local councils illustrates the impact of legal quota regulations, whereas the relatively low representation of women mayors reflects the constraints of formal equality, particularly in situations where party gatekeeping plays a critical role. Additionally, civil society reports have emphasized how women, youth, minorities, individuals with disabilities, and other marginalized groups continue to encounter obstacles to meaningful political engagement, including local governance. (Albanian Women Empowerment Network [AWEN], 2023).

Public Consultation, Citizen Initiatives, and Local Referenda

Despite a solid legal framework, empirical findings from both scholar and institutional sources indicate that the principal weakness of public consultation in Albania concerns enforceability and substantive impact. Consultation procedures may formally occur, yet authorities are often not legally required to demonstrate how citizen input influenced final decisions. As a result, participation risks becoming procedural rather than substantive.

The Council of Europe (2018) observed that many local authorities continue to treat consultation primarily as an administrative formality rather than as a mechanism for participatory governance. Similarly, studies conducted by Partners Albania for Change and Development have noted inconsistent implementation practices across municipalities, limited citizen awareness, insufficient publication of draft acts, and weak feedback mechanisms following consultations (Partners Albania, 2021).

These implementation gaps are particularly significant because they reduce public trust in participation processes and discourage future civic engagement. This challenge appears particularly acute in rural or peripheral municipalities where territorial consolidation following the 2015 reform increased the physical

and administrative distance between citizens and municipal institutions. Consequently, formal legal rights to participation do not always translate into effective practical access.

International assessments have also emphasized that Albania lacks a consolidated culture of local direct democracy compared with several European states where local referenda are more institutionally embedded (Council of Europe, 2018).

These findings demonstrate that Albania's non-electoral participation mechanisms remain vulnerable to procedural formalism. Although the legal framework formally recognizes consultation procedures, citizen initiatives, and local referenda, the practical influence of these mechanisms remains uncertain and uneven across municipalities.

This weakens local democratic governance because elections continue to function as the dominant channel of participation, despite the fact that electoral participation itself is affected by declining turnout, strong party control, and limited voter influence over candidate selection. The Albanian case therefore illustrates the broader challenge of transforming formal participatory rights into meaningful democratic influence within local governance structures.

Albania Compared with EU Member States and European Standards

A comparative analysis with European Union member states demonstrates that Albania has achieved substantial formal convergence with European norms concerning local governance and citizen participation, yet significant implementation gaps continue to persist in practice. The European Charter of Local Self-Government defines local self-government as the right and ability of local authorities to regulate and manage a substantial share of public affairs under their own responsibility and in the interests of the local population (Council of Europe, 1985). This standard connects local autonomy directly with democratic accountability and citizen participation. Local government should therefore not merely exist as an administrative structure; it must also possess the institutional capacity to represent, engage, and respond effectively to local communities.

Albania's legal framework reflects many of these European principles. The Constitution of Albania recognizes local self-government as a constitutional principle, municipalities elect mayors and municipal councils through democratic elections, and public consultation procedures are regulated through Law No. 146/2014 "On Notification and Public Consultation." From a formal legal perspective, Albania has therefore achieved substantial harmonization with European standards relating to decentralization, transparency, and local democratic participation (European Commission, 2023). However, the principal challenge lies less in the absence of legal norms and more in the effectiveness

and consistency of implementation. This reflects a broader pattern commonly identified in European integration and legal harmonization processes, where states adopt legislation aligned with European expectations while institutional practices and administrative culture evolve more slowly (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005).

Comparative experience from several EU member states illustrates that effective citizen participation depends not only upon legal authorization but also upon institutional practice and administrative habit. Participatory budgeting mechanisms, for example, have become increasingly institutionalized in municipalities across France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Poland, allowing citizens to propose, deliberate upon, and vote directly on local projects financed through municipal budgets (Sintomer et al., 2008).

Similarly, public consultation procedures in many EU member states are supported through digital participation platforms, structured feedback mechanisms, transparency portals, and mandatory reporting obligations that explain how public input influenced final decisions. In several European legal systems, local referenda and citizen initiatives are also more deeply embedded within local political culture, particularly in countries characterized by strong traditions of local autonomy and civic participation, such as Germany and Switzerland (Loughlin et al., 2011). Although participatory practices vary significantly across Europe, comparative analysis demonstrates that meaningful participation requires institutionalization, administrative commitment, and public trust in addition to formal legal rights.

Albania's closed-list proportional model limits this form of voter influence because party leadership largely determines candidate ranking and therefore electoral outcomes. While closed lists can facilitate implementation of gender-placement quotas and reinforce party-program coherence, they may simultaneously strengthen centralized party control over local representation. Comparative European experience suggests that reform debates in Albania could consider whether greater voter choice may be introduced without undermining proportional representation or gender equality protections.

Gender-equality frameworks provide another important area of both convergence and divergence between Albania and EU member states. Albania's quota requirements for municipal council lists are comparatively strong and have contributed to a relatively high level of women's descriptive representation in local councils. Nevertheless, several EU members states have adopted even more robust mechanisms, including parity systems, zipper-list requirements, and stricter sanctions for non-compliance with gender-balance rules. France, Spain, Belgium, and several Nordic countries provide examples of electoral systems that require alternating male and female candidates throughout party lists in order to ensure balanced representation (Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2005).

Albania’s principal challenge therefore extends beyond maintaining representation within municipal councils toward addressing the persistent underrepresentation of women in mayoral offices and executive local leadership positions.

The comparative findings indicate that European standards concerning local democracy require more than formal decentralization and legal harmonization. They also require effective local autonomy, administrative transparency, institutional accountability, meaningful citizen engagement, and genuine opportunities for citizens to shape public decisions.

TABLE 4. Albania and Selected European Participation Standards in Local Governance

Dimension	Albania	Common practice in stronger EU local participation models	Main gap
Local autonomy	Constitutionally and legally recognized	Protected through strong municipal competences and resources	Financial and administrative capacity remains uneven
Municipal council elections	Closed-list proportional representation	Open-list, preferential, or locally personalized models in several systems	Limited voter influence over individual council candidates
Public consultation	Legally required through public notification and consultation rules	Structured consultation reports, digital portals, and stronger feedback duties	Consultations may remain formalistic
Participatory budgeting	Limited and uneven practice	Used in many municipalities across France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Poland and others	Weak institutionalization
Gender equality	Strong council-list quota with significant women's council representation	Parity or zipper-list rules in several countries	Weak representation in mayoral offices
Direct democracy	Local referenda legally possible but rare	More frequent and embedded in some European local systems	Procedural and political barriers

Note. The comparison is functional rather than exhaustive; EU member states vary significantly, but stronger systems tend to combine legal rights with institutionalized practices.

Discussion

The findings reveal a structural tension within Albania’s system of local democratic governance. Although the legal framework establishes a comprehensive set of participatory rights and procedural guarantees, the practical capacity of these mechanisms to influence public decision-making remains limited. This

discrepancy between formal legal recognition and substantive democratic effectiveness is evident across the principal channels of local participation. Local elections are conducted on a regular basis within a stable constitutional and statutory framework; however, the closed-list proportional electoral system applicable to municipal councils constrains voters' ability to determine the selection and accountability of individual representatives.

Public consultation procedures are formally regulated through legislative requirements, yet they frequently produce limited normative or policy consequences. Similarly, although local referenda constitute a legally recognized instrument of direct democracy, they have remained largely dormant in institutional practice. While statutory gender quota provisions have substantially increased women's descriptive representation in municipal councils, this progress has not translated into comparable levels of representation within executive local government, particularly in mayoral offices and other positions exercising effective political authority.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that Albania has largely succeeded in institutionalizing procedural participation, but has been less successful in ensuring that participatory mechanisms generate meaningful influence over public decision-making. Consequently, citizen participation frequently operates as a procedural guarantee rather than as an effective instrument of democratic co-governance. This distinction reflects the classical differentiation between formal and substantive democracy: legal opportunities for participation exist, yet the institutional conditions necessary for converting participation into effective political influence remain underdeveloped. In Arnstein's (1969) conceptual framework, many participatory mechanisms continue to resemble consultation or placation rather than partnership or delegated authority. Where citizens perceive those participatory procedures rarely affect policy outcomes, democratic legitimacy may gradually erode, reducing both electoral engagement and broader forms of civic participation.

The electoral framework governing municipal councils represents one of the principal institutional factors underlying this democratic deficit. Representative local government is intended to establish a direct relationship of political accountability between elected councilors and the electorate. However, under Albania's closed-list proportional representation system, political accountability is predominantly mediated through political parties rather than through voters themselves. Candidate selection, ranking, and prospects of election remain largely determined by party leadership, thereby weakening the representative relationship between councilors and local communities.

This observation should not be interpreted as a criticism of proportional representation *per se*. Comparative constitutional experience demonstrates that proportional electoral systems remain among the most effective instruments

for ensuring political pluralism, minority inclusion, and gender-balanced representation. The institutional deficiency lies not in proportionality itself but in the absence of complementary accountability mechanisms capable of strengthening the representative link between voters and elected councilors.

Carefully designed preferential or partially open-list systems may improve democratic accountability without undermining proportionality. Nevertheless, any reform of ballot structure should be accompanied by safeguards capable of preserving existing achievements in gender equality. Comparative evidence demonstrates that preferential voting may disproportionately advantage candidates possessing greater financial resources, established political networks, or higher media visibility, factors that frequently favor male candidates. Electoral reform should therefore be evaluated alongside gender equality objectives in order to reconcile democratic accountability with substantive equality.

The analysis likewise exposes significant structural limitations regarding women's access to executive political office. Whereas proportional electoral quotas have substantially increased women's representation within municipal councils, the majoritarian election of mayors continues to reproduce considerable gender disparities. The relatively limited number of female mayoral candidates indicates that the principal barrier lies less in electoral rules than in party nomination processes and internal political recruitment. Because executive elections are candidate-centered rather than list-based, quota mechanisms applicable to proportional representation cannot operate with equivalent effectiveness.

Consequently, the promotion of substantive gender equality within local executive government may require additional legislative and policy instruments, including strengthened obligations regarding candidate nomination, financial incentives linked to balanced representation, enhanced transparency of party recruitment procedures, leadership development programmes, and other measures encouraging equal access to executive office.

The legal framework governing public consultation also warrants further institutional development. Compliance with procedural consultation requirements should not constitute the sole measure of participatory governance. Rather, the effectiveness of consultation should be assessed according to substantive criteria, including the accessibility of consultation processes, the adequacy of information provided to participants, reasonable consultation periods, inclusiveness of participation, and the existence of transparent mechanisms demonstrating how public input has influenced the final administrative or legislative decision. Municipal authorities should therefore be required to publish comprehensive consultation reports identifying the observations received, explaining the legal and policy assessment of those submissions, and providing reasoned justification for their acceptance or rejection. Such an obligation would transform public consultation from a predominantly procedural requirement into a meaningful instrument of administrative accountability and democratic transparency.

From a comparative European perspective, the challenges identified in Albania are not exceptional. Numerous European legal systems continue to confront the broader question of how to reconcile representative democracy with more participatory models of local governance. Nevertheless, these issues acquire particular constitutional significance within the context of Albania's European Union accession process. European integration extends beyond the formal approximation of domestic legislation to the *acquis Communautaire*; it equally requires the effective functioning of democratic institutions, respect for the rule of law, administrative transparency, and meaningful citizen participation. Local self-government represents one of the most tangible manifestations of democratic governance because it constitutes the institutional level at which citizens interact most directly with public authority. Persistent weaknesses in local participation therefore possess implications extending beyond municipal governance, affecting the broader legitimacy and democratic resilience of the constitutional system.

The analysis consequently supports the need for an integrated programme of local democratic reform that addresses electoral regulation, participatory governance, institutional accountability, gender equality, and administrative capacity as mutually reinforcing dimensions of democratic consolidation. Electoral legislation should strengthen the accountability of municipal councilors while preserving the representational advantages of proportional electoral systems. Local government legislation should reinforce citizens' capacity to influence municipal decision-making through effective participatory mechanisms.

Public consultation procedures should impose legally enforceable standards of transparency, reasoned administrative responses, and institutional accountability. Gender equality measures should progress beyond descriptive representation towards ensuring equal access to executive leadership and effective political influence. Finally, fiscal and administrative decentralization should provide municipalities with sufficient institutional capacity and financial autonomy to respond meaningfully to citizen participation. Absent such an integrated approach, the existing legal framework risks preserving procedural participation without achieving the substantive democratic empowerment that constitutes the normative objective of contemporary local self-government.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it relies primarily on legal analysis and available institutional data, rather than original fieldwork across municipalities. A more comprehensive empirical study could include interviews with municipal officials, civil society organizations, council members, women candidates, and citizens. Such research would provide deeper insight into how participation mechanisms operate in practice.

Second, data on citizen participation in Albania are not always systematic. Election turnout is available, and gender representation can be measured through official or international datasets. However, data on public consultations, citizen initiatives, participation in budget hearings, and local referenda are less consistently collected and published. This limits the ability to compare municipalities quantitatively.

Third, the article compares Albania with selected European practices rather than conducting a full country-by-country comparative study. EU member states vary significantly in their local government systems, electoral rules, and participatory traditions. The comparative section therefore identifies broad patterns and examples rather than exhaustive legal equivalence.

Finally, the article focuses on legal and institutional design. It does not fully examine socio-economic factors such as migration, poverty, education, digital access, media environment, or clientelism, all of which may shape participation. Future research should integrate these variables into a broader empirical model of local democratic participation in Albania.

Conclusion

This article has examined the legal framework governing citizen participation in local governance in Albania through a doctrinal analysis of constitutional provisions, local government legislation, electoral law, participatory mechanisms, gender equality measures, and applicable European legal standards. The analysis demonstrates that Albania has established a comprehensive normative framework that formally guarantees multiple avenues for citizen participation in local public affairs, including local elections, public consultations, citizens' initiatives, local referenda, access to public information, and representative participation through municipal councils. Furthermore, legislative measures introducing mandatory gender quotas have substantially improved the descriptive representation of women within local representative bodies.

Despite these normative developments, the study demonstrates the existence of a persistent implementation gap between the formal legal guarantees of participation and their practical realization. While local elections continue to constitute the principal mechanism of democratic participation, the operation of closed-list proportional representation limits voters' capacity to influence the selection of individual municipal councilors and consequently weakens electoral accountability. Similarly, although public consultation procedures are extensively regulated, they frequently remain procedural rather than substantive, with limited evidence that citizen input meaningfully influences municipal decision-making.

Direct-democracy instruments, particularly local referenda, remain largely underutilized, while the progress achieved through gender quota legislation has not translated into equitable representation in executive municipal offices or within political party nomination processes. Consequently, although Albania's legislative framework is broadly consistent with European standards governing local democratic participation, deficiencies in institutional implementation continue to undermine its effectiveness.

The findings suggest that further reform should move beyond the adoption of additional legislative guarantees and instead prioritize the effective implementation of the existing legal framework. Electoral legislation should be reviewed to strengthen democratic accountability while preserving political inclusiveness and the achievements attained through gender quota mechanisms. Equally, statutory consultation procedures should be accompanied by stronger procedural safeguards ensuring transparency, reasoned administrative responses, and demonstrable consideration of citizens' submissions.

The legal and procedural requirements governing local referenda and citizens' initiatives should be simplified in order to facilitate their practical use, while municipalities should be provided with adequate administrative, institutional, and financial capacity to implement participatory mechanisms effectively. In parallel, future gender equality reforms should extend beyond representative bodies and address structural barriers affecting access to mayoral offices, executive leadership positions, and candidate selection within political parties.

Within the broader context of Albania's European Union accession process, strengthening citizen participation in local governance extends beyond the sphere of administrative reform and constitutes an essential component of democratic governance, the rule of law, and effective local self-government. Although Albania has largely incorporated the principal legal standards derived from the European Charter of Local Self-Government, the Council of Europe *acquis*, and relevant European Union governance principles, the effectiveness of these guarantees ultimately depends upon their consistent implementation in administrative practice.

The consolidation of participatory local democracy therefore requires moving beyond formal legal compliance toward the effective implementation of the legal framework, ensuring that legally guaranteed participatory rights operate as enforceable mechanisms of democratic accountability, institutional transparency, and meaningful citizen participation in local decision-making in Albania.

List of references

Literature

- Anastasi, A. (2015). *Constitutional law in Albania*. Pegi.
- Arnstein, S. R. (1969). A ladder of citizen participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35(4), 216–224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225>
- Baldersheim, H., & Rose, L. E. (Eds.). (2010). *Territorial choice: The politics of boundaries and borders*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Carey, J. M., & Shugart, M. S. (1995). Incentives to cultivate a personal vote: A rank ordering of electoral formulas. *Electoral Studies*, 14(4), 417–439. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0261-3794\(94\)00035-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/0261-3794(94)00035-2)
- Dahlerup, D. (Ed.). (2006). *Women, quotas and politics*. Routledge.
- Dahlerup, D., & Freidenvall, L. (2005). Quotas as a “fast track” to equal representation for women. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 7(1), 26–48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461674042000324673>
- Dhamo, Z., & Bejko, R. (2025). Between efficiency and accountability: A survey-based analysis of Albania’s territorial reform outcomes. *Economicus*, 24(1), 31–49. <https://doi.org/10.58944/lboa6974>
- Easton, D. (1965). *A systems analysis of political life*. Wiley.
- Faguet, J.-P. (2014). Decentralization and governance. *World Development*, 53, 2–13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2013.01.002>
- Habermas, J. (1996). *Between facts and norms: Contributions to a discourse theory of law and democracy*. MIT Press.
- Krook, M. L. (2009). *Quotas for women in politics: Gender and candidate selection reform worldwide*. Oxford University Press.
- Loughlin, J., Hendriks, F., & Lidström, A. (Eds.). (2011). *The Oxford handbook of local and regional democracy in Europe*. Oxford University Press.
- Ndreu, A. (2015). Local governance in Albania: The new administrative-territorial reform. *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 4(3 Suppl. 1), 515–520.
- Norris, P. (2011). *Democratic deficit: Critical citizens revisited*. Cambridge University Press.
- OECD. (2025). *Public administration in Albania 2024: Assessment against the Principles of Public Administration*. SIGMA Monitoring Reports. OECD Publishing.
- Putnam, R. D. (1993). *Making democracy work: Civic traditions in modern Italy*. Princeton University Press.
- Schimmelfennig, F., & Sedelmeier, U. (2005). *The Europeanization of Central and Eastern Europe*. Cornell University Press.
- Shah, A. (Ed.). (2006). *Local governance in developing countries*. World Bank.
- Sintomer, Y., Herzberg, C., & Röcke, A. (2008). Participatory budgeting in Europe: Potentials and challenges. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 32(1), 164–178. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2427.2008.00777.x>
- Smoke, P. (2015). Rethinking decentralization: Assessing challenges to a popular public sector reform. *Public Administration and Development*, 35(2), 97–112. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pad.1703>
- Westminster Foundation for Democracy. (2025). *Gender Barometer: Albania*.

Legal Acts and Official Documents

- Central Election Commission of Albania. (2019). *Final results of the 2019 local elections*.
- Central Election Commission of Albania. (2023). *Final results of the 2023 local elections*.
- Constitution of the Republic of Albania. (1998). <https://www.parlament.al/Kuvendi/Kushtetuta>
- Council of Europe. (1985). *European Charter of Local Self-Government* (ETS No. 122). <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=treaty-detail&treatynum=122>
- Council of Europe. (2009). *Additional Protocol to the European Charter of Local Self-Government on the right to participate in the affairs of a local authority* (CETS No. 207). <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=treaty-detail&treatynum=207>
- Council of Europe. (2017). *Guidelines for civil participation in political decision making*. Committee of Ministers. https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=09000016807509dd
- Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. (2016). *Local and regional democracy in Albania* (Recommendation 384 (2016)). <https://rm.coe.int/local-and-regional-democracy-in-albania/16807198fc>
- Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. (2021). *Recommendation 459 (2021): Holding referendums at local level*. <https://rm.coe.int/adopted-texts-of-the-40th-congress-second-part-session-15-17-june-2021/1680a2edcf>
- Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities. (2023). *Observation of the local elections in Albania (14 May 2023)*. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/congress/albania-local-elections-2023>
- Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania. (2015). *Territorial administrative reform*. <https://www.reformaterritoriale.al/>
- Electoral Code of the Republic of Albania, Law No. 10019, dated 29 December 2008, as amended. <https://kqz.gov.al/kodi-zgjedhor/>
- European Commission. (2023). *Albania 2023 Report* (Commission Staff Working Document SWD (2023) 690 final). https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/albania-report-2023_en
- European Commission. (2024). *Albania 2024 Report* (Commission Staff Working Document SWD (2024) 690 final). https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/albania-report-2024_en
- Law No. 139/2015 of the Republic of Albania. (2015). *On local self-government*. <https://qbz.gov.al>
- Law No. 146/2014 of the Republic of Albania. (2014). *On notification and public consultation*. <https://qbz.gov.al>
- Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. (2019). *Republic of Albania local elections, 30 June 2019: ODIHR final report*. <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/albania/429230>
- Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. (2023). *Republic of Albania local elections, 14 May 2023: ODIHR final report*. <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/albania/545092>
- European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission). (2002). *Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters: Guidelines and explanatory report* (CDL-AD (2002)023rev2-cor).
- European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission). (2020). *Revised Guidelines on the Holding of Referendums* (CDL-AD (2020)031).