

EDITORIAL

The Unfinished Reform: Rethinking Local Governance in Albania _____

_____ *Ervis ILJAZAJ* _____

Local government represents one of the most important dimensions of modern democratic governance. As the level of government closest to citizens, it is where the principles of democracy, representation, accountability, and citizen participation should take their most concrete form. In Albania, more than three decades of democratic transition have been accompanied by a continuous process of reforming local government. At the same time, however, this process has revealed significant tensions between the formal framework of decentralization and the actual political, financial, and administrative autonomy of local institutions.

This issue of *Jus and Justicia* is dedicated to precisely this complex and evolving dimension of Albanian governance. Local government in Albania cannot be examined solely through institutional structures or legal reforms. It must also be understood as a political, legal, and social process directly connected to the quality of democracy, the distribution of political power, the relationship between central and local government, and the capacity of local institutions to respond effectively to the needs of their communities.

The administrative-territorial reform and the broader process of decentralization have brought significant changes to the organization and functioning of local government. The consolidation of local government units was intended to strengthen administrative and financial capacities, while the transfer of functions to the local level sought to create more efficient governance closer to citizens. Yet the experience of recent years raises a fundamental question: has institutional decentralization been accompanied by genuine political, financial, and administrative autonomy for local government?

This question is particularly important in a political system where relations between central and local authorities continue to be characterized by a considerable weight of central government. Local autonomy is not merely a matter

of competencies formally assigned by law. It also depends on financial resources, administrative capacities, the ability to make decisions independently, and, above all, the capacity of local institutions to provide citizens with meaningful opportunities to participate in decision-making.

In this sense, the debate on local government is also a debate about the quality of Albanian democracy itself. Democracy cannot be measured only through central institutions, national elections, or formal mechanisms of political control. It must also be assessed by the extent to which citizens are able to participate in decisions that directly affect their everyday lives. Municipalities, municipal councils, and other local institutions constitute spaces in which citizens should not be viewed merely as recipients of public services, but also as active participants in the democratic process.

For this reason, the issue of local government requires an approach that goes beyond the narrow concept of administrative efficiency. Local governance should be assessed not only in terms of efficiency, but also through the principles of democratic legitimacy, transparency, accountability, and citizen participation. If territorial reform produces larger administrative structures without necessarily creating institutions that are more representative, accountable, and accessible to citizens, a gap remains between institutional reform and its democratic purpose.

This issue of *Jus and Justicia* seeks to contribute to this debate by bringing together different perspectives on the development and challenges of local government in Albania. The contributions included in this issue approach the subject from diverse legal, political, and institutional perspectives, offering an opportunity to reflect on the achievements, challenges, and possible future directions of local governance.

At a time when Albania continues its path toward European integration, strengthening local government assumes even greater importance. The principles of local autonomy, subsidiarity, transparency, and citizen participation are fundamental elements of European democratic governance and provide important standards against which Albania's institutional development should also be assessed. Local government reform, therefore, should not be understood as a completed process, but as an ongoing institutional and democratic agenda.

Ultimately, the challenge facing local government in Albania is not simply how many competencies have been transferred to the local level, but how effectively and autonomously those competencies can be exercised in a democratic manner and in the service of citizens. The answer to this question will significantly shape the quality of Albanian democracy in the years ahead.

With this issue, *Jus and Justicia* seeks to provide another space for academic reflection on these challenges and to contribute to the broader debate on the future of local governance in Albania.