ADMINISTRATIVE AND TERRITORIAL REFORM

ADMINISTRATIVE AND FINANCIAL CONSOLIDATION OF THE 61 NEW MUNICIPALITIES
ONE STOP SHOP OFFICE
Modernized and rapid services delivery

Nezir Shtaro is a Durrësi resident who has set up a business in Ishëm and needs to obtain local tax records and proof of residence. With the establishment of the One-Stop office, which will function as part of the new administrative unit of Ishëm, he managed to get these services within 5 minutes. After the consolidation of the 61 new municipalities, the services offered to citizens will be fast, electronic, and modern, as in the case of Nezir, wherever they reside.

The inauguration of the One-Stop office in June tested the new IT system that will digitalize and standardize service delivery to citizens. The objective is to extend this system all over the country, in all municipalities and administrative units within the next year.

The Minister of State for Local Issues, Bledar Çuçi, who was present at the inauguration, said that they have taken all the measures to ensure that none of the services delivery points become more distant from citizens. “Today demonstrated the modernization of services through digitalization. We offer
Administrative and financial consolidation of the 61 new municipalities

this model for the future. After the pilot projects in municipalities of Durrës and Elbasan, the modernization will be extended throughout Albania”.

Durrës, Elbasan, Ishëm and Bradashesh were the new municipalities and administrative units selected for piloting the feasibility of One-Stop Shop offices. This initiative, undertaken in the context of the administrative and territorial reform, is intended to modernize and improve the quality of basic services for all residents avoiding bureaucracy, delays, and corruption. Each resident by presenting their identity card or, if necessary, the business ID can receive nine different services, such as request for information, complaints, registration of business for local taxes, assessment of local tax liabilities, local tax clearance certificate, public space occupancy permit, determination of domicile address, rental social housing and social housing with low cost. The system is based on an “open source” (open source code) platform, which has no license or maintenance costs and can be maintained, operated and further developed by the municipality or the administrative unit employees themselves.

Some of these services will be immediately provided by the One-Stop office in the administrative unit. The other services, which are more complex, will be more efficiently administered in all phases by other offices or departments through an electronic system which allows citizens to track online the status of their applications.

The One Stop Shop offices were established by the “Support to Territorial and Administrative Reform (STAR)” project, supported by the Minister of State for Local Issues.

In parallel with the process of territorial reform implementation, the foundations are laid for establishing a new system of digitized archives for every new municipality and administrative unit. The STAR project group of experts has developed an electronic platform, which will enable a more expeditious and accurate access to documents.

During the two months that a pilot project in Rrashbull was conducted, the new system facilitated the processing, the inventorization, and the digitization of all archival records and protocol registers found in the commune.

This ambitious initiative will be one of the future priorities of the government in the context of the territorial reform aimed at cleaning up the dust that has covered local archives for more than 20 years, and constructing an accurate system for preserving, tracking and filtering the documentary evidence.

Digitization of archives, the next territorial reform project

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Municipal employees prepare for the territorial reform implementation

During May-June of this year, working groups at municipal level were trained based on the manual for amalgamating local units according to the new administrative division of territory. The working groups comprised of experts on the fields of law, human resources, finance, IT, and communication. The trainings, led by the group of STAR project experts (Altjon Paloka, Elton Haxhi, Enkeleda Pulaj and Marenglen Biba), focused on the guidelines and recommendations for the amalgamation of local units into new municipalities in terms of operational and financial aspects of the process.

The municipal experts had the opportunity to learn to study in detail the process of consolidation based on the previous experience of the pilot project in Ura Vajgurore and Pogradec, and practice exercises for each phase of the new municipality reorganization.

Mrs. Raymonda Shuka, the deputy head of the Ura Vajgurore Municipality, said that consultants’ support in the field of finance, IT and human resources was essential for the municipal employees. “We have had constructive discussions on finding an optimal solution in the context of amalgamation. It is necessary that the consultancy on the initiation of procedures and the practical implementation of territorial reform continues even in the period after the elections,” she said at the end of the training.

Mr. Robert Shehaj, the deputy head of the Ballsh Municipality, considered the training very useful for the enormous task that awaits new municipalities. “In these three days of training, we got the right answers and the proper experience to carry out the amalgamation process. I think that now we are ready for the current process.”

Of 61 working groups that represent the new municipalities under the new territorial division, only 58 were present at the training. Municipalities of Tirana, Kamza and Lushnja, despite an invitation from the STAR project, did not attend the training.
The territorial reform is the future!

The government has all the available tools to quickly and successfully implement the consolidation of the 61 new municipalities! This was the message conveyed during a conference that was organized by the Minister of State for Local Issues, Bledar Çuçi, and attended by the Prime Minister, Edi Rama, the cabinet of the government, the representatives of the government agencies and international organizations. Minister Çuçi presented the path to be followed for the creation of the 61 new municipalities along with the financial and legal instruments at hand for implementing a successful amalgamation of the local government entities.

"Everything is ready for the amalgamation of LGUs into 61 municipalities and the transitional phase from the constitution of the new municipalities to the administrative and financial consolidation of them. The Ministry has prepared a manual for all steps in the days and months after the constitution," said Minister Çuçi. During his speech, Prime Minister Edi Rama stressed, "It is worth noting that this is a level of organization like never before, prepared by the government with special skills and a high sense of responsibility for putting at the disposal of the new elected and the new local assemblies the instruments to cope with the transition shock."

The Minister of Finance, Shkëlqim Cani, guaranteed the local government budget for the remainder of 2015, unveiling another part of the budget of about 20 million dollars the Ministry of Finance has at disposal for supporting ideas, projects, and visions of the competing candidates in the local elections.

During his presentation, Minister Çuçi, specified all the legal steps that were taken, such as the creation of the Agency for the Implementation of Territorial Reform, the decisions of the Council of Ministers and the relevant guidelines of the line Ministries to be followed by the new heads of municipalities upon receiving their mandates. Referring to this period, the government has granted a transition fund of 20 million dollars to support local government.

The Prime Minister, Edi Rama, and the Minister of State for Local Issues, Bledar Çuçi, presented the new package of decentralization on services, local finances, and economic development providing more authority for the local government and bringing reforms in the key sectors to improve the management of the new municipalities.
First meeting with local elected officials, guidelines for the implementation of territorial reform

The Prime Minister, Edi Rama, the Deputy Prime Minister, Niko Peleshi, and the Minister of State for Local Issues, Bledar Çuçi, held the first meeting with the June 21 local elected who were presented with a practical manual that will guide them through the transitional phase of consolidation of the new municipalities.

Prime Minister Rama, talking about the reorganization of the Albanian state and the challenges of implementing the territorial reform, said, "We are not any longer at the phase of municipalities as municipal entities, municipal works and municipal services; we are instead at the new phase of sub-municipalities as instruments of economic, social and urban development. In fact, we are in a situation where local government gains the notion of what it really is. I believe that you are aware of the approach of the government and the ruling majority to this process, which not only canit be considered unfinished, but with the new administrative map, it has just started. Because now we face the challenge of the real decentralization, which will help improve local government as an entity and as subject to accountability."

The Deputy Prime Minister, Niko Peleshi, expressed his willingness to help the newly elected municipal heads regardless of their party affiliation at every step in every challenge for ensuring good local governance, the progress of reforms and, above all, the successful implementation of the territorial reform.

In his speech, Minister Çuçi stressed, "I personally undertake to ensure the most appropriate climate for a fruitful and effective cooperation between us, to advance reforms in local government and support you to honor your promises and commitments to your communities."

The Practical Guide supplied to the new heads of municipalities contains recommendations and concrete measures starting from the first day of their tenure until the conclusion of transition phase by the end of 2015. The guide, prepared by the Minister of State for Local Issues and the Agency for the Implementation of Territorial Reform, contains practical guidelines for all the legal, financial, and administrative steps to be taken by local elected officials for actualizing and effectively implementing the consolidation of the new administrative units.
Students are introduced to the territorial reform

The master’s-level students and the lecturers from the University of Tirana, University of Shkodër ‘Luigj Gurakuqi’ and European University of Tirana had the opportunity to become acquainted with the complex and comprehensive process of implementing the territorial reform. In a series of open lectures organized in May, the Minister of State for Local Issues, Bledar Çuçi, presented the journey of one of the key reforms that will rearrange and regenerate the local government in Albania.

The calendar of this kind of reforms in Albania since the Declaration of Independence until now were part of the academic presentation, which continued with the initiative embraced by the government to review the administrative and territorial division. Minister Çuçi focused on the reform stakeholders, the concept, and the creation of functional areas, and the public consultation process throughout the country that preceded the design of the new administrative and territorial map. The presentation was also focused on the work done during the year, the challenges of the current process of administrative and financial consolidation of local government units and the successful implementation of the reform, which is intended to modernize services for citizens and develop local economy.

Students and academics followed the lectures with interest.

STAR project continues its support for 61 new municipalities’ most important phase of the administrative-territorial reform: the implementation of the amalgamation. This process will be assisted by a consortium of experts, representatives of one of the best companies in the world in the field of tax, audit and advisory services. Company Selection will be based on a set of criteria defined in the Terms of Reference and published by UNDP in August in an open competition between international experts in the field. Services offered by the company contracted will cover legal aspects, financial, human resources, information technology and communications. Contractual obligations will last until the completion of the amalgamation phase in March 2016.

Such reinforcements come at a very important moment for workgroups of 61 municipalities, who will need to have completed and their respective due diligence reports until October 31, in accordance with Decree no. 510, dated 06.10.2015 “On the approval of procedures for the transfer of rights and obligations, staff, tangible and intangible, archives and any other official documentation to local governments affected by administrative-territorial reorganization” and Instruction no. 3237, dated. 07.16.2015 “On the procedures, timelines, standards and eligibility criteria necessary documentation for administrative-territorial reorganization,” which is one of bylaws that completes the necessary legal framework for the administrative-territorial reorganization.
The photo competition “Snap It”, organized in the context of the administrative and territorial reform, concluded in May with the announcement of 12 winners from different regions of Albania. In a ceremony hosted by the Minister of State for Local Issues, Bledar Çuçi, the applicants for this competition were introduced to the 10 winning photographs in the categories of urban development and rural development and the two special prizes for creativity and originality.

The winning photos represent different statuses of urban and rural development highlighting the natural and human resources and the tourist attractions of various regions. In the competition in which the entry period lasted for one month, 266 amateur photographers from across the country applied with about 700 photos taken all over the territory of Albania revealing different angles and perspectives of development.

Under the slogan “Snap it”, the competition aimed to raise awareness of developments brought about by the administrative and territorial reform, which combines urban and rural territories and as a result creates joint development perspectives.

The exhibition was attended by the competition applicants, the territorial reform partners and the jury composed by the professional photographers, Blerta Kambo and Armand Habazaj, by the journalist and moderator Bledi Salaj, and the Director of Cabinet for the Minister of State for Local Issues, Eridana Çano.

The exhibition and the competition “Snap it” were supported by the administrative and territorial reform project, STAR, which is funded by the governments of Sweden, Switzerland, Italy, and by USAID and UNDP.