Report

On consultation tour

“Administrative and Territorial Reform in Albania”
1. Project Activity Background

The Albanian Government is currently developing and is committed to implement a Territorial - Administrative Reform (TAR) that will empower local government units by enhancing their capability to provide high quality and timely services to citizens and increasing the efficiency of local governments’ resource management. The TAR will lead to fewer and larger local government units in Albania capable of providing efficient services supported by increased revenues and efficient management of assets by these units.

There is a full understanding that a comprehensive reform would be required to not only re-draw the administrative-territorial map, but also to critically review and enhance a functional decentralization, clarify and strengthen local authorities’ competencies and vertical coordination, review and improve the fiscal decentralization system in place as well as local institutional and administrative capacities for increased local revenues, adopt standards of public services and strengthen the developmental role of local administrations.

Why a consultation tour?

The government is trying to build an all-inclusive cooperation platform for all stakeholders. Several mechanisms of information and expertise-sharing are being put in place. These mechanisms are trying to involve in the process the following groups:

1. Members of parliament
2. Central and Local Institutions
3. Media and Civil Society
4. Private sector
5. Communities in urban and rural areas.

However, a crucial element of the reform is the involvement of the public at large. The law on “organization and functioning of local government specifies in the article 67 - Justification and documentation of the reorganization process, states that “the proposal for reorganization of one or more units of local governments for each case shall be submitted to the Parliament accompanied by the following facts and justifications:

a) The economic, social, cultural, demographic, administrative reasons in favor of the need and advantages of reorganization proposed;

b) The methods, materials or documents used to inform the public on the reorganization and the issues related to it;
c) The opinion of the community that lives in the local units that shall be affected by the reorganization as well as the opinion “For” and “Against” expressed directly or indirectly by various interested subjects or groups in this reorganization;

d) The methods used to collect the opinions of the community such as public hearings, open meetings, surveys and referenda if it is possible;

It is important to emphasize that the Government of Albania, however, does not see this process as just a “formal”, “respecting–the law” process but rather as a way to get the public concretely involved and improve the overall outcome of the reform.

In this context, STAR planned to organize a tour in all the regions of the country as part of the national-wide awareness campaign on the importance of the territorial and administrative reform.

2. Aim and Methodology of the activity

The aim of the tour was to increase awareness of the public about the necessity of the reform and especially its effect on providing more efficient public services, increasing revenues and more efficient management of assets and resources. Presentation of the formulated draft criteria based on which the new division and amalgamation of the territory will take place was one of the objectives. In addition listening to participants’ opinion was important to assess people’s perception about the reform. This report prescribes the main highlights of the tour, especially focusing on the participants’ feedback.

During March 2014, Minister of Local Issues and Technical Secretariat organized 11 consultation meetings in Lezha, Elbasan, Pogradec Korçë, Përmet, Kukës, Shkodër, Durrës, Berat, Fier and Gjirokastër. 1075 representatives (245 women) from local government units, civil society, regional institutions, private sector, and citizens from urban and rural areas participated in these meetings. Representatives from the opposition participated in several meetings such as in Elbasan, Korçë, Përmet, Shkodër and Kukes. They were active, asking questions and providing their own opinion about the reform.

All the meetings in the respective regions and districts followed the below agenda:
• Consultation meetings were welcomed and moderated by the prefects of each region.
• Minister Cuçi’s speech tackled the following main issues:
  - Major problems resulting from the current administrative territorial reform division.
  - Citizens benefits of the reform.
  - Challenges related to the restructuring of the Local Government Units.
  - Statistical data of LGU efficiency in each region.
• Next, Mr. Bashkim Fino emphasized the necessity for the reform,
• Mr. Enea Hoti focused on explanation of the proposed criteria based on which the new administrative-territorial reform will take place.
  - Administrative-territorial division will be based on concept of functional zones.
  - Economic, social, cultural and development functioning of the units and performing of services are the basic principles of the new administrative organization.
  - Population number according to INSTAT population density; high density zones with population above 30,000 people; mid density zones with population above 20,000 people; low density zones with population above 10,000 people etc.
• Than it was the participants turn to ask questions, make comments and discuss about their concerning issues related to the reform and its implementation process.
3. Feedback on the reform

Here are provided in a summarized way the most prominent opinions and comments and most frequently asked questions by the participants:

- In general the territorial reform is highly approached by the participants. Surprisingly, they not only had knowledge about the importance of the reform process, but considered the reform process as delayed;
- The participants thought that the technical and political attitude towards the reform should not contradict each other; on the contrary it should be complementary;
- Most of the participants that managed to provide their own opinion during the meetings explicitly articulated that that restructuring of Local Government Units is necessary to provide better services to citizens and have direct impact to improving quality of life;
- The administrative territorial reform must be accompanied with more decentralized functions in order the new administrative units to be able to better plan at local level, collect revenues and better serve the citizens;
- Mainly in Gjirokaster, Pogradec and Korce the participants were interested to know about the minority communities and how the reform will affect them;
- Participants were also interested to know whether there was planned any process for reducing of regions and if the same criteria would apply;
- Participants supported the existence of regions although their role and competences have not been very clear and consequently not enabling them to properly play their strategic planning, economic development and coordination role. A good number of participants expressed themselves in favor of existing only three big regions in the country; Northern, Center and Southern regions. Some of them suggested changing of the way head of regional councils are selected. They propose election by voting in order to increase this institution’s responsibility towards the citizens on one side, and to avoid creation of absurd situations like in Fier region;
- Participants agreed in general with the criteria, highlighting that the historical and cultural development functions of LGU are as important as economic ones and should be taken into consideration when amalgamation process will take place;
- The mayor of Tajove Commune in Elbasan expressed himself against the reform. His argument focused on service provision and the fact that due to the reform a big gap will be created between service provision and citizens. The government’s aim – he said – should be shortening of this distance and not the other way round.