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Analysis of the Albanian legislation and perceptions of voters relevant to the quality of citizens representation in local government bodies

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Abstract:

The purpose of this research is to evaluate the way in which the Albanian legislation treats issues related to the election and functioning of the local government. Based on the results of the comparative analysis of this legislation with international standards, the scope of the study is to identify the problems and formulate the interventions that can be made, with the objective of increasing the quality in the functioning of representative democracy at the local level. The empirical research was based on primary data that reflects the perceptions and opinions of citizens related to the quality of their representation in the local government bodies and their opinions regarding the quality of services that the local government provides.

The expansion of the territories of the municipalities after the last territorial-administrative reform, influenced the growth of differences in development indicators and social, cultural, behavioral and traditional features that characterizes the different communities belonging to the same municipality. The current legislation according to which local government bodies are elected is not adapted to these changes. Citizens, especially in rural areas, say that local government bodies do not offer quality services in accordance to their requests. The need for changing the electoral system for electing local government bodies with open lists and to increase the opportunities for representation in municipal councils of marginalized communities and national minorities is identified as a demand expressed by the majority of citizens.

Keywords: Representative democracy, Legislation, Perception, Citizen, Local government

Introduction

“Democracy is a rule of the people, for the people and by the people” (Lincoln, A. 1863). According to Malaj, 2018, in this concept the two main constituent elements of democracy are brought together:

(i) democracy as the way of behaving, organizing and decision-making for the realization of coexistence in human society which is based on the implementation of the political will of the majority of the people, *and*

(ii) democracy as the opportunity for the realization of functional relations of the state

with the people as the way to implement the will of the people.

Democracy is the possibility and the rule according to which the citizen manages to exercise political control over his elected representatives (Yetano 2011; Tasco 2011; Jonas, and Wurm, 2011; Vasstrøm and Normann, 2019; Bino, et al. 2020). Democracy, as a political institution, is not a perfect model. As such, it is in a constant process of development and perfection, as a result of the developments of society itself. The relationships between democracy and social and economic factors are the main important sources for sustainable development of the country and society (Aziz, 2014; Kartal, et al 2015). In democratic societies, every citizen can participate in the processes of organization and good administration of affairs in the community where he lives. According the Irvin and Stansbury (2006) at the core of the democratic societies lies the following principles:

- Every citizen is free and has the right to be informed about what is happening and what is being done in the place where he lives.
- Every citizen has the right to openly express his opinions on various public issues.
- Every citizen has the right to engage in work to achieve certain expectations in various issues and problems, in social and economic activities.
- Every citizen has the right to make proposals for action or to submit requests for certain socio-economic developments at central and local level.
- Every citizen has the right to observing and monitoring the activities of the public institutions, to participate in decision-making process and in the implementation process for different reforms /policies and action plans, at central and local level.
- Every citizen has the right to elect the representatives he wants, etc.

The history of economic and social development shows that, in order to effectively enable the above principles, the society must be committed to develop processes and to establish appropriate representative and executive institutions. Citizen's participation in the building up of these institutions and in their activity is essential for the development of democracy (Chetwynd and Chetwynd 2001; Schmidt, 2008; Michels, A., De Graaf, L. 2010, 2017; Malaj 2018; Bino et al..2020). In particular, this participation is essential for the development of democracy in local government. Effective administration at the local level, finding and implementing solutions to various local issues in accordance with the expectations of local communities, to a large extent depends on the quality of representation of these communities in local elected bodies (Agolli et al. 2013).

The purpose of the study is to evaluate: (i) the current quality of citizen representation in local government bodies *and* (ii) the perceptions of voters regarding the actual legislation relevant to the functioning of representative democracy at local level and needs for future improvement.

Study methodology

The study was conducted through the combination of the method of desk study, comparative analysis of the legislation, and an empirical research based on primary data that reflects citizen's perceptions and opinions.

The Albanian legislation and the international principles, based on which the local government should be organized and should operate are part of these analyses. In order to perform the comparative analysis, the data of the literature related to the current local government legislations were used, such as: The Albanian Constitution, Law

no. 139/2015 "On local self-government" and Law no. 115/2014 "On the administrative-territorial division of local government units in the Republic of Albania". The articles of the Electoral code of the Republic of Albania, related to local government election were object of the analysis.

The quantitative component of the study was based on a national survey with 914 face-to-face interviews with citizens 18 years old and above with the right to vote. A structured questionnaire, with closed questions (Kume 2021) was used. Excel was used for descriptive data analysis.

The empiric study aimed at exploring the public perception of the different aspects related to the local self-government; like - the representation quality of citizens who belong to different communities in the bodies that are elected for local government, the role and the effect in the operation of the representative democracy of Neighborhood Community Councils in urban areas or Village Councils in rural areas. The assessment of citizens' perceptions for the system according to which local government bodies are elected and the possibilities that this legislation has for the election and representation in these bodies of national minorities and marginalized groups have been analyzed in this research.

Results and discussion

Albanian legal frameworks related to the development of representative democracy at local government level.

The Albanian Constitution.

The Constitution of the Republic of Albania defines the basic principles for the development of democracy, in its two main components - representative democracy and direct democracy. Article 2 of the Albanian Constitution stipulates "sovereignty in the Republic of Albania belongs to the people" and that "the people exercise sovereignty through its representatives or directly". These constitutional definitions are the legal basis related to the quality of the power legitimacy. According to these definitions, the exercise of functions assigned by the legislative, administrative or judicial organs/institutions, has its source in the people. People exercise their sovereignty through their representative, who are elected through an electing process. The Constitution stipulates that: "In Albania governance is based on a system of free, equal, general and periodic elections".

The Constitution of the Republic of Albania sanctions the freedoms and rights of citizens, in full compliance with international documents - the UN Convention on Fundamental Human Rights, the Convention on Freedoms and Political Rights, etc. The Constitution stipulates that every citizen who has reached the age of eighteen, even on election day, has the right to vote. The vote is personal, equal, free and secret. In accordance with international standards but also responding to concrete conditions and the stage of democratic development of society, the Constitution provides also a set of cases where the citizen is excluded from the right to vote and to be elected¹.

¹ Constitution of Republic of Albania. Article 45

2. Citizens declared by a final court decision as mentally incompetent are excluded from the right to vote.

For local self-government, the Constitution stipulates that "Self-government in local units is exercised through their elected bodies and local referendums." Article 109 of the Constitution states that:

- The representative bodies of the basic units of local government are the councils, which are elected every four years by general, direct elections and by secret ballot.

-The executive body of the municipality is the mayor, who is directly elected by the voters every four years by general, direct and secret ballot elections.

and

-Only citizens who have a permanent residence in the territory of the respective local unit have the right to be elected to the local councils and as chairman of the municipality or commune.

The Constitution, Article 113, clearly states the fact that local government units are legal entities with the right to:

a) regulate and administer in an independent manner local issues within their jurisdiction;

b) exercise the rights of property, administer in an independent manner the income generated, and also have the right to exercise economic activity;

c) have the right to collect and spend the income that is necessary for the exercise of their functions;

ç) have the right, in compliance with the law, to establish local taxes as well as their level;

d) establish rules for their organization and functioning in compliance with the law;

dh) create symbols of local government as well as local titles of honors;

e) undertake initiatives for local issues before the bodies defined by law.

The Constitution of the Republic of Albania emphasizes the need to build a legislative framework, which will facilitate the carried out of the basic missions of local government units - the implementation of a democratic governance in accordance with the interests and expectations of local communities. (IDRA, 2020; Haxhimali et al. 2021; Morina et al. 2021). The Constitution states that the fulfillment of this major constitutional objective could be possible when the bodies and local government operates in accordance with the requirements of representative democracy, where elected local bodies are the fulfilment of the will of local communities, expressed by vote, in democratic electoral processes. This definition is in line with the standards and practices applied by countries with developed democracies (Harold 1976; Schmidt, 2008; Böckenförde, 2011; Yetano, 2011).

The implementation of the constitutional provisions that regulate issues of representative democracy in local self-government, is realized through the implementation of the law "On local self-government in the Republic of Albania" and the "Electoral Code in the Republic of Albania"

3. Citizens who have been sentenced to imprisonment, with a final decision, for committing a crime, are excluded from the right to be elected, according to the rules determined by law approved by three-fifths of all members of the Assembly. In exceptional and justified cases, the law may provide for restrictions on the right to vote of citizens serving a custodial sentence, or the right to vote before a final decision is made or when citizens have been expelled for a crime. or for a very serious and serious breach of public safety."

Law "On local self-government"

Law no. 139/2015 "On local self-government" is a legislative act that regulates the organization and operation of local self-government units in the Republic of Albania. This law defines their functions, competencies, rights and duties and all other executive bodies at local level.

Article 5 of the law defines the content of the concept of "local self-government unit". According to this provision, the units of local self-government are municipalities, communes and regions:

-The municipalities and communes are the basic units, the second level of local government.

According to law no.115/2014 "For the administrative-territorial division of local government units" the territory of Albania is divided into 61 municipalities. There are no communes. The current municipalities were formed by the merger of several previous municipalities and communes.

-The regions are the first level of local governance. Its represents an administrative-territorial unit, composed of several municipalities that have geographical links, similar cultural and social characteristics, common interests for sustainable economic and social development.

In order to better administer the work in the service of the communities and to create opportunities for services to be as close as possible to the citizens and as much as possible in accordance with their interests, the law provides for each municipality to be divided into several administrative units. The division, in any case, must be made taking into account the traditional, historical, economic and social ties of the communities residing in the territory of the local government unit, as well as the geographical position of the administrative units in the territory. In most part of the current municipalities, their administrative units in the rural areas are the former communes.

The implementation of the territorial-administrative reform, law no 115/2014, has as a consequence the establishment of the municipalities, with an extension in the territory, in most cases, much more than the previous one.

The high level of economic, social and cultural diversity that currently exists within the municipality, generates negative effects on local governance. As a result, interventions are necessary in the legislation according to which the local government is organized and operates, aiming to increase the:

- quality of citizen representation in local elected bodies *and*
- quality of the services that local government bodies should provide for the citizens' communities.

Law "On local self-government", addresses this problem in Chapter XI – "Management and functioning of administrative structures of the municipality"

Article 65 of this law stipulates that an administration should be established in each administrative unit, under the direction of an administrator. The structure and staff of the administration of the administrative units are part of the structure and staff of the administration of the municipality. The administrator is appointed and dismissed by the Mayor. He/She is an employee who is accountable to the Mayor for the operation and the activity of the administration in the respective administrative unit.

Law no. 139/2015 "On local self-government" provides for the establishment and functioning of the "Neighborhood Community Council" in cities that are part of a

municipality. The "Neighborhood Community Council" establishment is based on civic initiative. These citizens' structures are organized and operate on the basis of and in compliance with the rules set by the Municipal Council. Article 70 deals with issues of establishment and functioning of community structures in the village. According to this provision, the village is headed by the Reeve and the Village Council. The village council is an advisory body to the Reeve. The members of the Village Council are elected in a village meetings, where not less than half of the eligible residents participate. The number of members of the village council is determined by the Municipal Council based on the number of inhabitants of the village and its constituent neighborhoods. The Reeve of the village is elected by the Village Council from among its members.

The provision requires for the elections of the Village Council to be held once in four years, after the elections for the Municipal Council and not later than three months after these elections. In case of non-compliance with this deadline, until the election of the Village Council, the Mayor temporarily appoints the Reeve of the village. The election process and the activity of the Village Council are overseen by the Municipal Council.

According to the requirements provided in article 71, the Reeve and the Village Council perform and support the self-governing functions of the municipality in their village. They take care of local economic development, use of shared resources and ensure social harmony. The Mayor may charge the Reeve or the Village Council with other duties as well.

Comments on the law "On local self-government" and the evaluation of the citizen perceptions regarding to the quality of their representation on local elected bodies

The constitutional principle according to which self-government in local units is exercised through representative elected bodies and local referendums is a legal definition which requires compiling a legislation that should use all possible spaces to guarantee:

- the establishment and effective functioning of local elected bodies and
- the implementation of the policies and tools necessities for establishing an effective direct democracy.

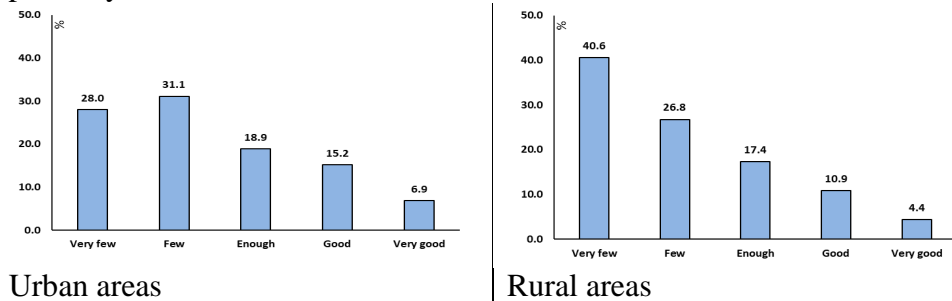
This constitutional definition does not exclude, but significantly narrows the space for local self-government through and by local bodies that are appointed and not directly elected by local communities. Consequently, the way this issue is resolved in law no. 139/2015 "On local self-government", although not in conflict with the Constitution, does not offer the best legislative conditions to support and promote the functioning of representative democracy at the local level.

The administration process of the former communes, currently named Administrative units of the Municipality, as a responsibility of the one appointed by the Mayor and not by elected bodies, significantly affects the quality of this administration process. Being employees appointed by the Mayor, administrators do not have the right to make decisions on various community issues that they administer. They only implement the decisions of the Municipal Council and the orders and instructions of the Mayor. As a result, the space for cooperation with the communities they administer and citizens participation in decision-making to solve their local problems, has been significantly reduced. In addition, referring to the results of the local government

elections, 2015 and 2019, this situation is exacerbated by the fact that the chances of electing representatives from the communities belonging to rural areas in the Municipal Council are small (Agolli, et al. 2013; IDRA, 2020; Haxhimali *et al.* 2021; Morina, *et al.*, 2021).

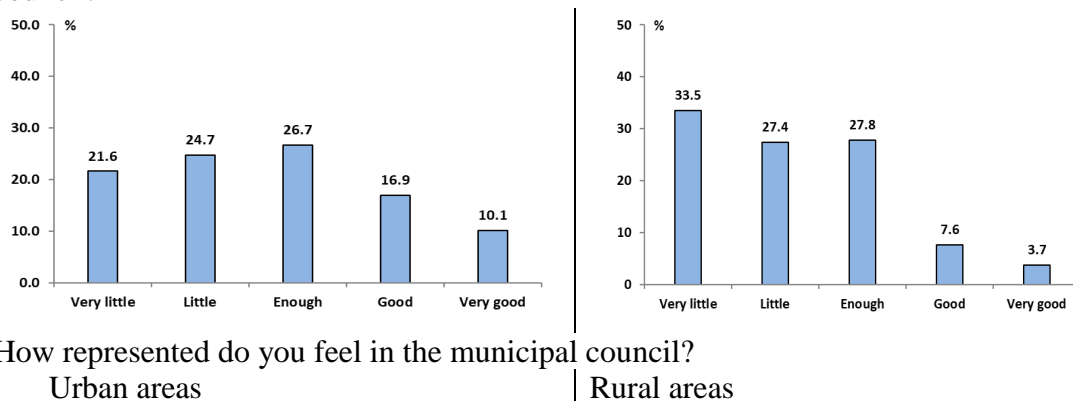
Citizens perceive the administrator of the administrative unit as an employee, whose main task is to implement the policies, programs, orders and instructions of the political party to which the Mayor belongs. In particular this perception is prevalent in communities in rural areas (Figure 1). About 67.4% of the respondents who live in rural areas and about 59.1% who live in the urban area of the Municipality, state that the administrator of the unit is not perceived as an employee who represents and protects their interests in the decisions he/she makes and the way he/she administers the affairs and problems of local communities.

Figure 1 Does the administrator of the administrative unit represent and protect your interests?



The current legislative framework, Law no. 139 / 2015 "On local self-government", which stipulates that only the Mayor and the members of the Municipal Council are elected by citizens, according to citizen's perceptions, fail to generate positive effects on the quality of representation of citizens in these bodies (Figure 2). About 48.3% of the interviewed citizens living in the urban area of the Municipality do not feel represented in the Municipal Council, while in the rural area the citizens who do not feel represented, constitute the absolute majority, about 60.9%. The difference in the value of these perceptions (12.6%; $p < 0.05$), shows that the quality of representation of different communities in the Municipal Council is significantly conditioned by where these communities are located, in urban or in rural areas. This difference in citizen's perceptions about the quality of their representation in local elected bodies, at its core has the appreciation of citizens for the quality of services provided by these bodies. Such a situation shows that, according to them, the way the election of local government bodies is treated in the current legislation fails to create the conditions that favor the increase of effectiveness in the functioning of representative democracy at the local level.

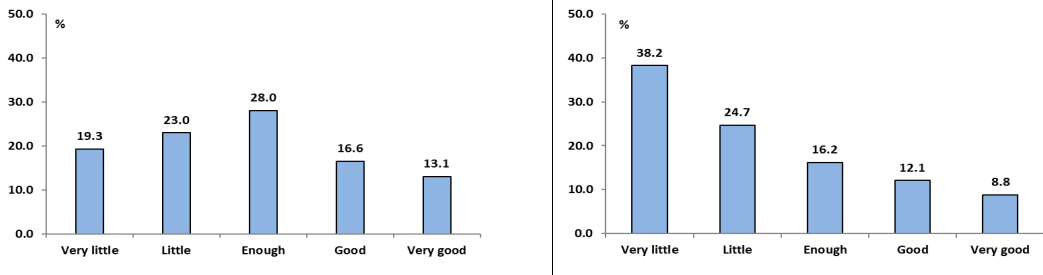
Figure 2 Citizens' perception of the quality of their representation in the municipal council.



To reduce the negative effects brought by the implementation of the law no. 115/2014 "On territorial-administrative division of the Republic of Albania" on the quality of implementation of the principle of local self-government, especially in relatively large municipalities, law no. 139/2015 "On local self-government in the Republic of Albania" provides the establishment and functioning of Community Councils in cities and the Village Council and Reeve in rural areas (villages).

Community Councils are set up in the city, based on civic initiatives, for each neighborhood. Article 6 of the law stipulates that a neighborhood, as a rule, can be created only in territories with over 20 thousand inhabitants. Community Council members are self-proclaimed neighborhood residents. As a rule, the composition of this council is an extension of the Municipal Council. The main object of the work of these councils is the support of the governing functions of the Municipality, the implementation of the decisions of the Mayor and the Municipal Council, in the respective neighborhood. The Community Council, in fact, is a body with insensitive effects on local self-government. The Reeve and the Village Council are bodies elected by the community, according to the the regulation and procedures approved by the Municipal Council. Consequently, this electoral process is exposed by the influence of the political preferences of the party to which the Mayor belongs or the party that has the majority in the Municipal Council. Moreover, referring to the responsibilities, duties and rights provided for these two bodies, in fact they are bodies that implement and support only the self-governing functions of the other local bodies, the Mayor and the Municipal Council. Although, the Reeve and the Village Council are elected, the law does not provide them with any decision-making rights. Their main role is only the connection, for various executive issues, of citizens living in the village and the executive organ in municipality. This makes the quality of representation of different communities in these bodies and their effectiveness in local self-government very low.

Figure 3 Citizens' perception of the quality of their representation in the Neighborhood community council or Village council



How represented do you feel in the Neighborhood community council?

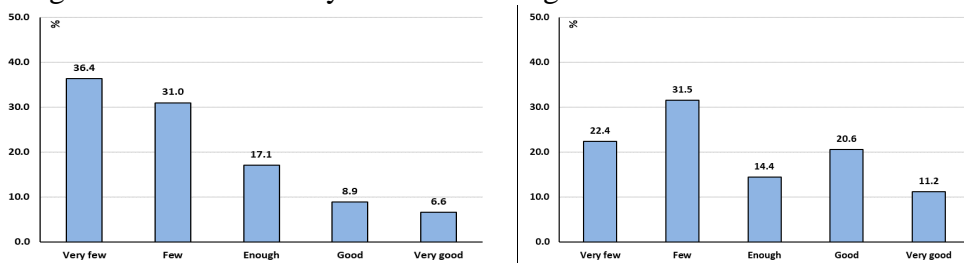
Village council?

Citizens' perceptions regarding the impact of these organs on the quality of self government at local level is not enthusiastic (Figure 3). Citizens' have the opinion that these local bodies are not effective and do not have positive impact in the quality of representation and their participation in local governance.

Citizens' interest and information about the work done by the neighborhood community council or village council is low (Figure 4). About 67.4% and about 53.9% of the interviewed citizens, respectively in the urban area and the rural area, stated that they had no knowledge or interest regarding the work of the neighborhood community council or village council. Difference of about + 16.3% ($p < 0.05$) of citizens in the rural area, who express that they have knowledge and interest in the work of the village council, compared to the level of interest expressed by citizens living in the urban area for the work of the neighborhood community council, shows that in rural areas citizens are more sensitive to the quality of service that should be done by the local self-government bodies.

The low level of citizens' perceptions regarding the neighborhood community council and village council, shows that the legislative solution, on the basis of which these local self-government bodies are established and operate is a formal solution. This solution, provided by law no. 139/2015 "On local self

Figure 4 Citizens' interest and information about the work done by the neighborhood community council or village council



How much interest do you have and how informed are you about the work of Neighborhood community council ? | Village council ?

-government" fails to fill the gap in the quality of representation of citizens in elected local bodies.

Electoral Code of the Republic of Albania and quality of the citizen's representation in local elected bodies - comments and evaluation of the citizen perceptions.

The Electoral Code of the Republic of Albania approved by Law no. 10 019, dated 29.12.2008, amended by Laws no. 74/2012, dated 19.07.2012, no. 31/2015, dated 02.04.2015, no. 101/2020, dated 23.7.2020, no. 118/2020, dated 5.10.2020, in article 3 "General principles" reconfirms the constitutional principle according to which "Every Albanian citizen, who has reached the age of 18, even on election day, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, language, political conviction, belief, physical ability or economic status has the right to choose and be elected in accordance with the rules provided in this Code". In this way, the legislation creates the necessary legal basis that serves the citizens to exercise the right of sovereign, according to the definition made in the Constitution. The Electoral Code sets out the conditions, requirements and procedures to be followed for the election of local government bodies - the Mayor and the Municipal Council.

The law recognizes the right of political parties to nominate candidates for Mayor or members of the Municipal Council. The right to run for Mayor or for a member of the Municipal Council also belongs to every citizen with the right to vote, residing in the respective local unit, who is registered as an independent candidate. In order to register as an independent candidate, the law requires the support of no less than 1% of the voters registered in the voter list in the respective municipality.

The electoral system for local government bodies is defined in Article 165 of the Electoral Code.

The election of the Mayor according to majoritarian system is a supportive factor for the effective functioning of representative democracy at the local level. However, it should be noted that the election according to the rule *the first wins* reduces the quality of this representation. The election of members of the Municipal Council through voting for candidates of a closed list submitted by the electoral subject, significantly reduces the quality of representation of citizens in the Municipal Council. The voter has the opportunity to choose only the subject, party or coalition of political parties. With his vote he has no opportunity to express himself for the candidate or candidates whom he wants to delegate the power to decide on his behalf (Malaj, 2018; Haxhimali et al. 2021).

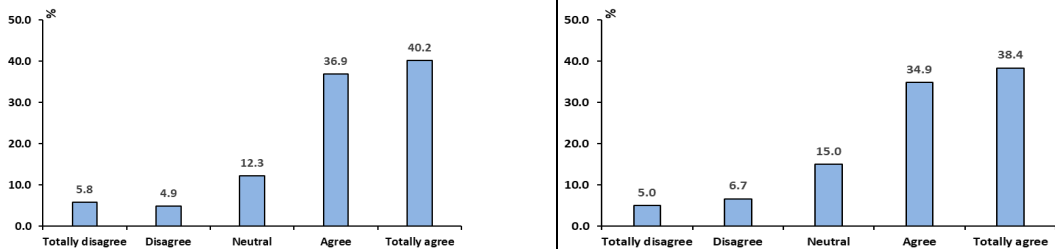
The provisions in the Electoral Code related to the election, in 4-year periodic electoral processes, only of the Mayor and the Municipal Council, generates undesirable effects on the quality of citizen representation in local government bodies (Agolli, et al 2013; Malaj, 2018; IDRA, 2020, Haxhimali et al. 2021). Significant changes made in the organization and territorial-administrative divisions of the country, Law no. 115/2014 "On the territorial-administrative division of the Republic of Albania", according to which from 65 Municipalities and 309 Communes, the country was divided into 61 Municipalities, brought negative consequences in the quality of representation of citizens in elected local government bodies. The real possibilities of representation in these bodies turned out to be not the same for all communities that make up the population of the Municipality. In particular, significant differences in the opportunities to be represented, with members in Municipal Councils, have been identified between communities in rural areas compared to communities of citizens living in urban areas (IDRA, 2020; Haxhimali et al. 2021). Prior to territorial-administrative reform, communities in rural areas were represented in local government through their elected representatives, as Mayor and

members of the Communes Council. The reform abolished the Commune as a local unit and replaced it with the administrative unit, as part of the organizational structure of the Municipality. The Electoral Code does not provide any provisions for the elections of self-governing bodies of this new structure. To reduce the negative effects that this situation generates, in Law no. 139/2015 "On local self-government" it is predicted for the election of Neighborhood Community Council and Village Council. The implementation of such legislative solution has shown that, especially in rural areas, this is a not effective solution.

Citizens' opinions on changes in legislation

Citizens support the need for changes in legislation which will make it possible to increase the quality of their representation in local self-government bodies. About 77.1% of the interviewed citizens say that the legislation should give them the opportunity to vote, with preferential votes, the members of the Municipal Council. About 73.3%, claim that open list voting affects the quality of their representation in this body of local self-government (Figure 5).

Figure 5 Citizens' opinion on the electoral system of members of the municipal council

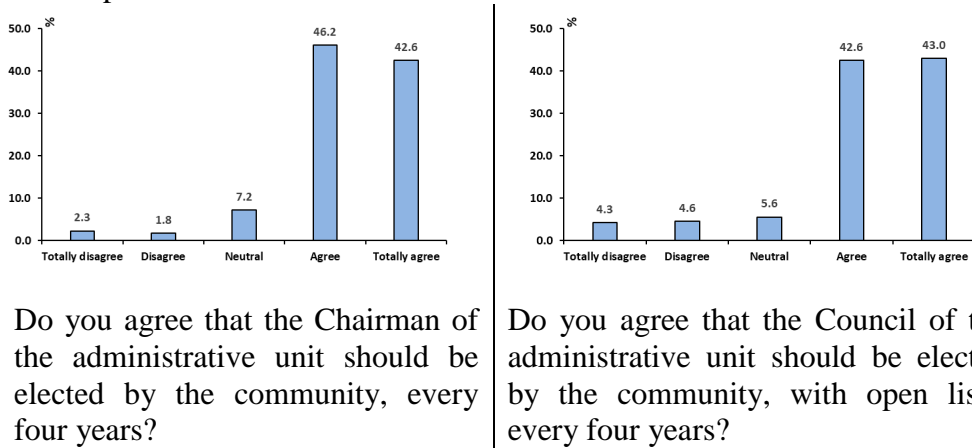


Do you agree that the election of members of the municipal council should be done with open lists of candidates?

Do you agree that the election of members of the municipal council with open lists made this council more representative?

In order to improve the quality of representation in local government bodies, citizens support the idea of legal amendments that should be made in law no. Law no. 139/2015 "On local self-government" (Figure 6). About 88.8% believe that the chairman of the administrative units should be elected by the community, every four years and 85.6% of the interviewed citizens support the option that the council of the administrative unit should be elected by the community, with open list, every four years.

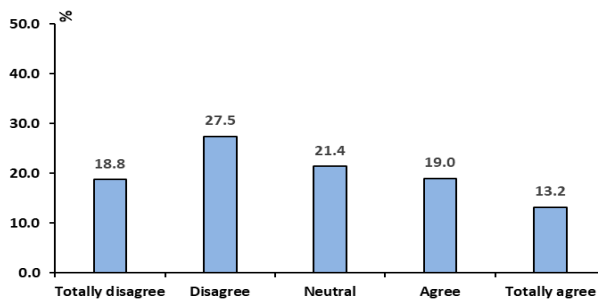
Figure 6 Citizens' opinion on the electoral system of members of the municipal council



Such opinions are complementary to citizens' perceptions of the negative effects on local self-government and the quality of services provided to them, as local government bodies appointed by the chairman of the municipality.

Regarding the interventions that can be made in the legislation to increase the possibilities and the level of representation of the communities belonging to national minorities in the local self-government bodies, only about 32.2% of the interviewed citizens support the implementation of the quota system, in electing the members of the municipal council (Figure. 7). Such a low percentage can be interpreted as a willingness not to address this issue. However, referring to the Albanian legal framework governing the issues of the rights of the national minorities of Albania, according to which, in local units where a national minority constitutes not less than 20% of the entire population, local services for this community should also be offered in their mother language, the above percentage highlights the need for more in-depth analysis, in order to take steps to introduce the quota of representation of national minorities in elected bodies for local self-government.

Figure 7 Citizens' opinion on the representation quotas for national minorities in municipal council



Do you agree that representation quotas should be set for members of the municipal council for national minorities?

Citizens' opinions on changes that can be made in the legislation in order to increase the quality of their representation in local self-government bodies, encourage the need for a more in-depth legislative analyses.

These analysis should be integrated with the analysis of issues related to sustainable social and economic development, culture and behavior of the communities at the local level.

Conclusions

1. The Constitution of the Republic of Albania deals with the right to represent citizens in local self-government bodies in accordance with the requirements of international documents and Conventions on fundamental human rights and freedoms and their political rights.

2. The Constitution stipulates that self-government in local units is exercised through their representative bodies and local referendums.

3. The Law "On local self-government" and Electoral Code of the Republic of Albania supports the basic constitutional principles that underlie the operation of representative democracy at the local level.

4. The current legislation provides much more attention to elaborate of the issues related to the establishment and way of functioning of executives bodies that are not directly elected by citizens of local communities in comparasion to the local bodies elected.

5. The Electoral Code and the law on Local Self-Government provide for the election, through four-year periodic electoral processes, only for the Mayor and the Municipal Council.

6. The "distance" between the Mayor, the Municipal Council and the communities, especially those living in rural areas, is not reduced through the establishment of executive bodies, such as the administrator of the administrative unit. These bodies are perceived only as an extensions of the mayor and have reduced the possibility to serve as self-governing bodies, in accordance with the interests of the communities they administer.

7. Enlarging the territory of Municipalities following the territorial-administrative reform, the significant variabilities on economic, social, cultural, behavioral and traditions that characterize the different communities belonging to the same municipality, conditions the needs for intervention in legislation that addresses issues on election and functioning of local government bodies.

8. According to the perceptions and opinions of the citizens, Community Councils in the city, the Reeve and the Village Council are local bodies that do not have significant effects on the quality of local self-government.

9. Citizens' perceptions and opinions on the level of their representation in local self-government bodies and the quality of services provided by these bodies, highlight the need for legislative intervention that can make possible:

- The election of members of the municipal council through the proportional system with open list - preferential voting
- The election of the administrator and the council of the administrative unit by the citizens, in four-year periodic electoral process.

- Addressing the possibilities for including the quota of representation of national minorities in the municipal council.

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any of the authors.

Conflicts of interest.

The authors of this paper certify that they have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial or non-financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; membership, employment; affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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