

POLICY BRIEF

2026 Territorial Reform

Civil Society Perspective - The POP (Juxtaposing Political Offers) Network Towards a citizen, local democracy and territorial cohesion-centered reform

Aim: To guide decision making towards a functional, evidence based, democratically legitimate reform with real impact on service quality and territorial equality.

Main message

The 2026 Territorial Reform success is not measured with changes to the territorial map, but from improvements to citizens lives.

The main priority should be:

- local governance functioning and performance;
- service quality and equality;
- proximity to decision making;
- transparency and public trust.

Territorial border changes should only be considered as a last resort option, when evidence clearly shows such necessity and when affected communities support the change in consultation meetings or through a local consultation referendum.

Lessons from the 2014 Territorial Reform

What worked:

- Institutional consolidation and an increase in administrative specialization
- Better projects and investment capacities (especially in urban municipalities).
- Formalization of transparency and information disclosure.
- Increase in the numerical representation in municipal councils.

What did not work (or worked partially):

- Bigger distance between citizen and decision making.
- Functional weakening of administrative units.
- Mainly formal citizen participation.
- Territorial inequality concerning investments and services.
- Representation of women did not always have a real impact on finances and development projects.

Main issues the 2026 Reform should address

The 2014 Territorial Reform ushered improved administrative capacities, but did not resolve some structural weaknesses with direct impact on local democracy and territorial equality. According to the POP Network monitoring (2019-2025) and the EU/SIGMA standards, the 2026 Reform should address the following:

- **Distance between citizens and decision making**, especially in rural and peripheral areas.
- **Administrative units functional weakening**, and their limited role in local planning and prioritization.
- **Weakened role of the Municipality Councils**, often limited to formal adoption of the executive decisions.
- **Completely formal citizen participation**, with low actual impact on decision making.
- **Territorial inequalities in investment and services**, within and among municipalities.
- **Differing fiscal and administrative capacities**, hampering balanced development.

Gender and Social Dimension: Measuring the Success of the Territorial Reform

- A territorial reform is not just an administrative reorganization; it has a direct impact on the lives of women and the most vulnerable groups. Territorial changes affect access to social services and care, transport, public safety and real opportunities for participation in decision making.
- Process centralization and weaker Administrative Units have disproportional impact on women, especially those in rural areas, because of the burden of care, time restrictions and transform challenges.
- Without a territorial and gender approach, inequalities in investment and services translate to actual inequalities in safety, economic access, and representation. The quality of a reform is measured based on its gender and social cohesion impact.

The 2026 reform should retain the benefits of consolidation, but remedy these weaknesses to strengthen local democracy and ensure equal outcomes of all citizens.

Demands of the POP Network for the New Territorial Reform

Any territorial border changes should be considered legal and sustainable only if the following conditions are met:

- evidence clearly shows a real need to intervene;
- a complete (fiscal, administrative, social and gender) impact assessment has been conducted;
- affected communities approve the change through a consultative local referendum.

Should the consultative local referendum not support the proposed changes, the results should be considered closely and weighed as a fundamental element in decision making. In such cases, functional, financial and institutional measures to address issues should be priorities, before proceeding with border changes.

This standard is based on:

- Article 108/2 of the Constitution (“obtaining the population opinion”);
- European Charter for Local Self Government (article 5);
- EU/SIGMA principles for democratic legitimacy, proportionality and public trust.

Minimum conditions to be met before any decision to change borders

Before any decision to change territorial borders is made, the Assembly of Albania should require:

- An ex-post evaluation of the 2014 Reform, focusing on actual outcomes for citizens (access, quality of services, territorial equality).
- A complete impact assessment for any alternative, analyzing the fiscal, administrative, social, territorial, and gender dimensions.
- Ex-post analysis pursuant to Law no. 119/2014 (on the right to information) and law No. 146/2014 (public notification and consultation) at the local level.
- Preliminary, documented and comprehensive consultation with all affected communities and units.
- Complete transparency on alternatives, costs and consequences of the transition.
- Establishment of a national level local performance monitoring system with measurable indicators.
- Local consultative referenda in affected territories and a mechanism ensuring democratic legitimacy.

POP Network suggestions: 8 priority measures for the 2026 Territorial Reform

1. Real Administrative Unit Strengthening - with clear competences, dedicated resources and active role in planning, to ensure services are provided as close as possible to citizens.
2. Establishment of actual national basic services standards, including social care, local transport, and public safety.
3. Compulsory territorial reporting of investments, to ensure transparency and equality within municipality.
4. Stronger fiscal equity mechanisms, and targeted support for municipalities with limited administrative and financial capacities.
5. Strengthening of the Municipality Council role as oversight body ensuring accountability and territorial equality.
6. Standardized public consultation with mandatory feedback, followed with periodic citizen satisfaction measurement, and use of this information in budgeting processes.
7. Systemic gender mainstreaming in planning and budgeting, through gender disaggregated data and steps toward gender responsive budgeting.
8. Democratic guarantees for any territorial changes, through complete transparency, early consultation and local consultative referendum.

Call to action

The 2026 Territorial Reform is a public trust and governance quality reform and not only an administrative map reform. To be sustainable and legitimate, it should:

- put citizens in the center,
- reduce territorial and social inequalities,
- improve service quality,
- integrate gender equality, and
- ensure democratic legitimacy for any territorial changes through a local consultative referendum.

What is the POP (Juxtaposing Political Offers) Network

The POP (Juxtaposing Political Offers) Network is a national Albanian civil society organizations initiative aiming to strengthen local democracy and public debate, through increased transparency, accountability, and citizen participation.

POP works to guide political platforms and public decision making towards real citizen needs and priorities, promoting an evidence and dialog-centered governance culture.

The network is supported by the “Olof Palme International Center”, Swedish Government and National Endowment for Democracy.

POP Network members:

- Gender Alliance for Development Center, Tiranë
- Center for the Development of Civil Society, Durrës
- Young Intellectuals, Hope, Shkodër
- Vlora Youth Center
- New Epoch, Fier
- Another Vision, Elbasan
- Youth Movement for Democracy, Pukë
- Center for Youth Progress, Kukës
- Women in Development, Korçë
- Light Steps, Vau i Dejës

Social Contract

The Social Contract is the main monitoring and citizen dialogue mechanism developed by the POP Network to strengthen local governance.

It operates through:

- identifying community priorities through focus groups and public consultations prior to local elections;
- translating these priorities into concrete commitments by local authorities;
- systematically monitoring the fulfillment of these commitments during the mandate through the analysis of strategic and budgetary documents;
- organizing citizen forums and advocacy activities to increase accountability.

The Social Contract serves as an instrument for measuring the performance of local governance and as a mechanism for guiding policies and investments toward the real needs of the community, in line with the standards of good governance and local democracy.

Read the full document (available in Albanian)

Scan the QR code to access it online

