



Citizens' Voices in the Albanian Local Elections 2015

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Local Elections
2015**

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Introduction

Pre-election periods are usually filled with surveys that aim at predicting the electoral turnout and elections result. These surveys are more interested in electoral calculations and the post-elections power dynamics than in citizens' perceptions and requirements, their satisfaction with the work of their representatives during the past mandate, or the overall level of knowledge and information about the electoral design and the specific modalities of their voting and representation. While Albania lacks a tradition of programmatic competition in elections, and candidates are vastly reliant on their party support and personal reputation in order to win the electoral race, citizens' needs and requirements are constantly ignored or marginalized throughout the pre-election period and beyond.

This survey is part of a broader project that aims at exploring citizens' views, needs and requirements during the pre-election period in order to affect candidates' agenda-setting before their term in office starts. By bringing to the candidates the issues that are considered important by citizens, the project aims at connecting the local representatives with their electorate from the early stages of the campaign in order for their political programs to better reflect and respond to local community needs.

This survey has three main parts aiming at measuring perceptions, the level of information about election-related issues and the level of citizens' satisfaction with the public services provided in their municipality.

The first part, **Elections and the selection of candidates**, tries to map citizens' willingness to participate in elections, their expectations, what they are looking for in a candidate as well as to evaluate citizens' knowledge of the candidates' selection process.

The second part, **Information and perceptions about the recent administrative reform**, touches upon a very important component of these elections, which is the new administrative reform that affects the size and configuration of the electoral units. While the reform was passed in the Parliament of Albania in late July 2014, it has not always been clear if citizens are fully informed about the changes that this reform will bring to their municipal units. Hence, the confusion about the upcoming elections doubles.

The third part, **The local government and public services**, digs into citizens' satisfaction with the services provided in their municipality and into what they consider as important to be improved in the future. It is from this last part on the level of satisfaction and needed improvements that the project will take on to intervene into early candidates' agenda-setting for the upcoming mandates.

Executive summary

Pre-election periods are delicate on the one side and resourceful on the other in terms of the insights that can come out from a snapshot of citizens' views and perceptions. This survey was conducted in the pre-campaign period in order to avoid the distorted perceptions that can come out as a result of the conflicting waves of information that electoral campaigns reflect on citizens. Nevertheless, this survey still wants to map some important views, perceptions and concerns that citizens expressed in the eve of these local elections 2015.

Willingness to vote and trust in elections' fairness

While a vast majority of respondents report willingness to vote in the upcoming local elections, a considerably smaller share believes that the upcoming elections will be free and fair. Thus, more than 70% of respondents in Tiranë, Durrës, Lezhë, Peshkopi and Pogradec reported that they would vote in the upcoming elections and more than 80% of respondents reported the same in Berat and Korçë. On the other hand, around 50% thought these elections would be free and fair in Berat and Korçë, while less than 50% thought so in Tiranë, Durrës and Peshkopi with as few as 36% in Lezhë and 27% in Pogradec thinking elections would be free and fair. Consequently, it is clear that overall, at least 1 in 4 respondents are willing to vote in the upcoming elections independently of whether he or she believes that the elections will be free and fair.

Voting decisions and the selection of candidates

On what basis do citizens decide which candidate to vote? While this is a very broad question to be addressed in this survey, we got some insights on the main reasons behind voters' decision-making. Although on a simplified scale, we used a Weberian approach in proposing the option categories and thus proposed options such as the candidate's personality and qualities, the candidate's political party and the candidate's programme. Qualities of the candidate were generally the most popular option among respondents, while the candidates' political party was only the third chosen option. It was surprising to see that overall respondents were slightly more inclined to indicate the candidate's programme compared to the candidate's party as a defining element of their vote.

Confusion over who selects the party's candidates for elections

While the majority of respondents think that candidates for mayor are selected either by the leader of the party or by the central leadership of the party, there is a clear confusion over the individuals or party structures that select candidates for the municipal council. Thus, around 80% of respondents in all the municipalities where interviews were conducted, apart from Peshkopi, answered that the selection of candidates for mayor was a very centralized practice, being conducted at the centre of the party. On the other hand, the range of responses about the selection of candidates for the municipal council varied from the leader of the party to the citizens of the unit, while respondents clearly saw this selection process as more decentralized than the one for mayor.

Undecided about the administrative reform: somewhat informed and somewhat happy

While the recently approved territorial administrative reform was discussed over a long time, many of its technicalities are still not clear to the public, especially when it comes to the organization of the new units and the management of the new territory in the post-election period. This dimension was clear in the survey as the majority of respondents were positioned in the middle ground between yes and no (somewhat or little) when answering about the level of information about the recently approved administrative reform. The same pattern is visible when respondents were asked if they thought the reform was necessary and if they were happy with its results. Thus, the biggest share of respondents in both cases answered that the reform was somewhat necessary and that they were partially happy with it.

On public services and the level of satisfaction

Overall, respondents tend to position themselves in the middle when asked to evaluate the quality of public services or their satisfaction with them. This was visible throughout the survey, although specific patterns can be noticed in relation to different services. Asked about their satisfaction with the work of the local government during the past four years, overall, almost half of respondents answered that they were partially happy. Nevertheless, the other half is more unhappy than happy with the work of the local government and this trend is

present throughout the sample. At the same time, the respondents that had to personally deal with the municipality in one occasion or another, reported to be more unhappy than happy with the solution or help the municipality provided.

The same trend was present when respondents indicated their level of satisfaction with a series of listed public services. Although the biggest share of respondents was positioned in the middle of the satisfaction spectrum, comparatively more respondents would indicate being not satisfied or very unsatisfied compared to being satisfied or very satisfied, especially in the case of services like housing, urban planning and social services. Similarly, regarding touristic and cultural activities in the selected municipalities, respondents were more unsatisfied than satisfied.

On the other hand, respondents were predominantly satisfied or predominantly unsatisfied with some services when specifically asked about them. Thus, a vast majority of respondents was satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the conditions of schools and kindergartens in their municipalities. When asked if enough was done for the economic development or to protection the environment in their municipality, a vast majority of respondents answered negatively.

Communities' major concerns

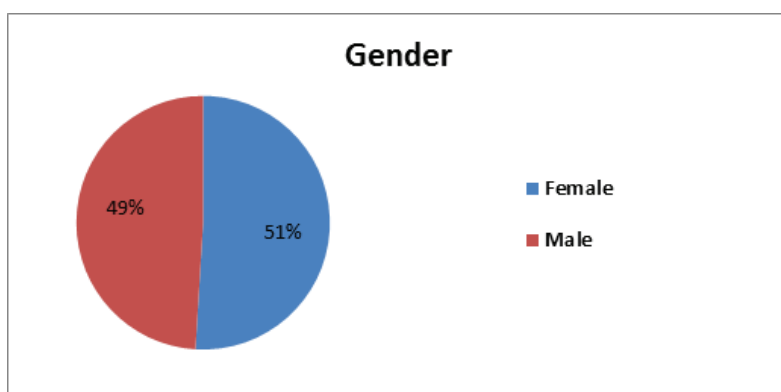
When it comes to indicating the main concerns of each community, unemployment, poverty and corruption are top overall concerns indicated by a vast majority of respondents.

Methodology

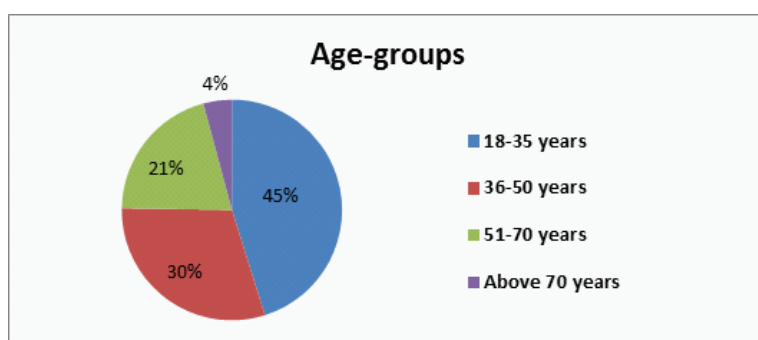
This survey was intentionally conducted in March in order to be far from the electoral campaign period. A total of 1600 questionnaires were administered in 6 municipalities: Berat (200), Lezhë (200), Durrës (200), Korçë (200), Peshkopi (200), Pogradec (200) and Tiranë (400). Interviews were conducted only in the cities, thus, central municipalities respondents were selected randomly.

The characteristics of the sample

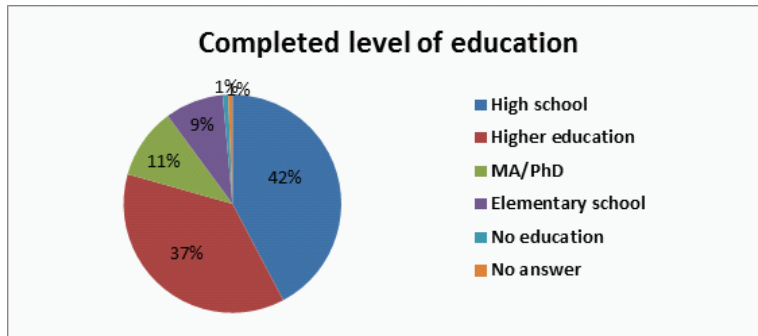
In term of gender, the number of male and female respondents was balanced throughout the interviews. Thus, this survey's sample was composed of 51% female and 49% male respondents.



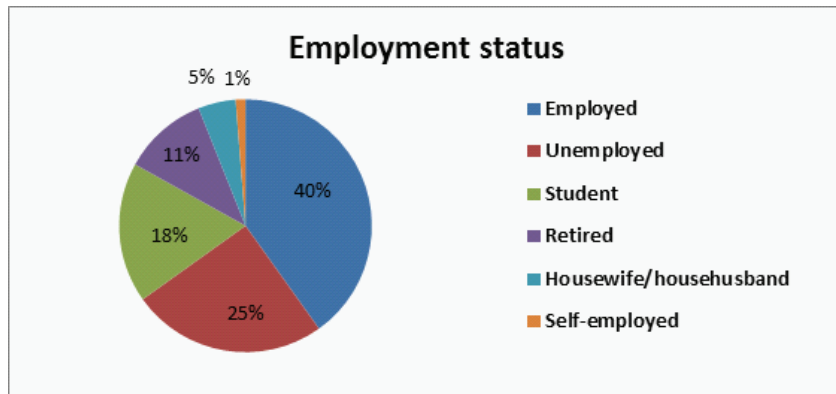
In terms of age, the biggest share of the sample (45%) is composed of people that belong to the 18-35 age-group. Another 30% belong to the 36-50 age group. Thus, 75% of the sample was relatively young, with respondents being below the age of 50. The the 51-70 age group accounts for 21% of the sample, while only 4% of respondents were above the age of 70.



In terms of the completed level of education, the biggest share of respondents (48%) has completed a university level education, either higher education (37%) or a master or PhD (11%). The second biggest group of respondents is composed of those that have completed high school education (42%). A smaller share of respondents answered that they had completed elementary school or had no education.



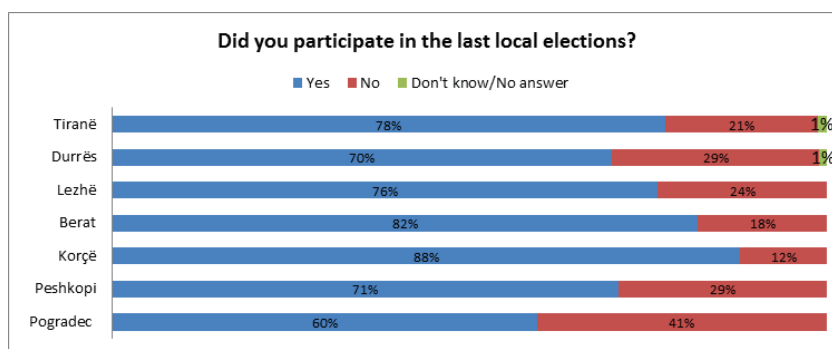
The biggest share of respondents in terms of the employment status was employed (40%). A considerable share (25% - thus, 1 in 4 respondents) reported to be unemployed, while 18% were students. Two smaller shares of the sample were retired people (11%) or housewives/househusbands (5%).



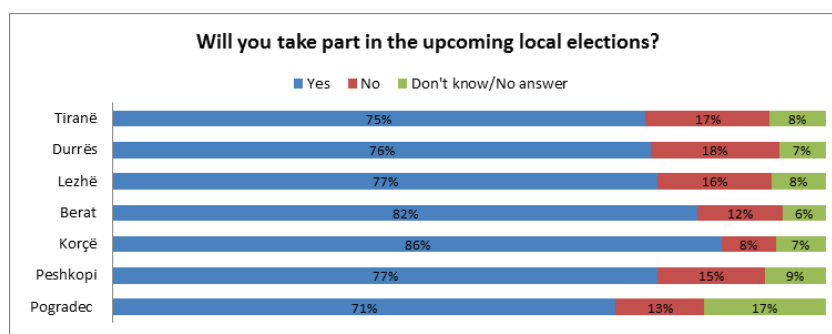
Findings and analysis

Elections and the selection of candidates

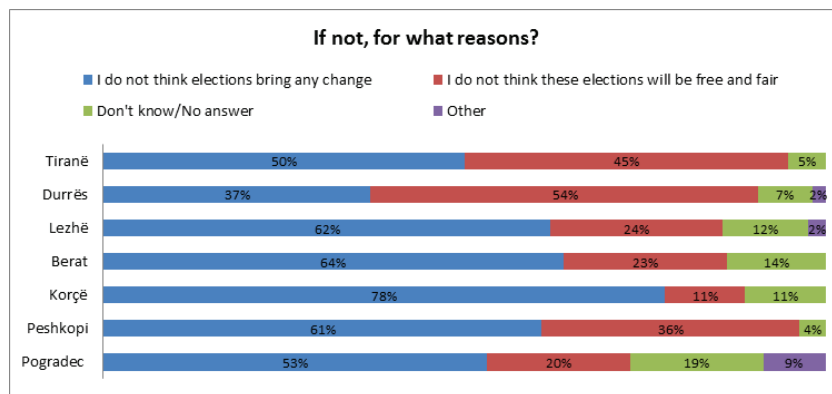
Asked if they participated in the last local elections (held in June 2011), the majority of respondents (more than 70%) answered positively. The highest election turnout was reported in Korçë with almost 9 in 10 people (88%) that reported voting in 2011, and the lowest was reported in Pogradec where 6 out of 10 people (70%) voted. The reported levels of elections' turnout in Tiranë, Lezhë, Durrës, Berat and Peshkopi were in between these values.



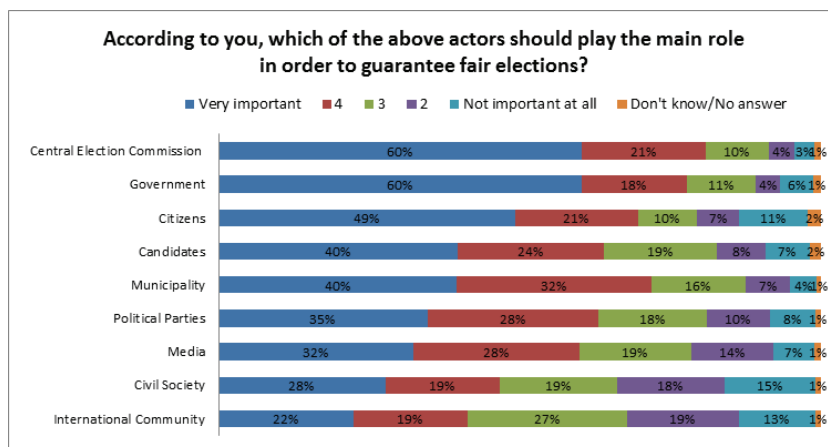
While overall roughly 8% of respondents were undecided whether they are going to vote or not in the upcoming local elections of June 21, the majority of them reported that they are willing to participate in elections. Almost the same share of respondents per city that reported participation in the previous elections, reports their willingness to take part in the upcoming ones. Nevertheless, it is worth noticing that some statistically relevant increases of the share of people that were willing to take part in the upcoming elections was noticed in comparison to the share that reported participation in the past elections in Durrës (from 70% to 76% of respondents), in Peshkopi (from 71% to 77% of respondents) and especially in Pogradec (from 60% to 71% of respondents).



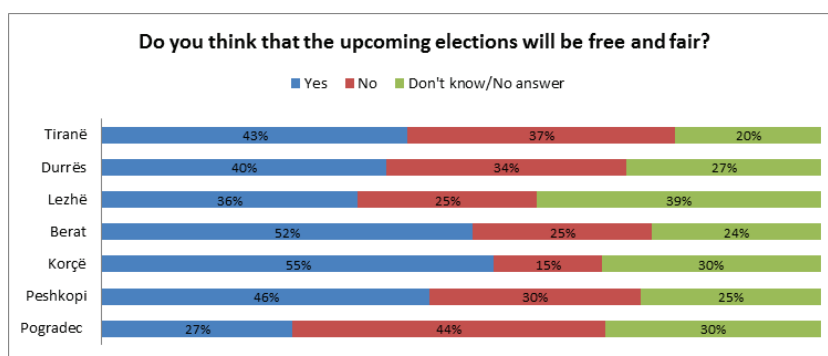
Asked about the reasons behind their decision to boycott elections, the answers of respondents in different cities varied. In fact, the majority of people in Korçë (78%), Berat (64%) Lezhë (62%), Peshkopi (61%) and Pogradec (53%) answered that they would not vote because they did not think elections bring any change. In Tiranë, half of respondents would not vote for the same reason, while almost the same share (45%) thought that the upcoming elections would not be free and fair. The majority of those that would not vote in Durrës (54%) also answered they did not believe elections would be free and fair. A considerable part of the boycotting respondents in Peshkopi (36%) were also distrustful about elections' fairness.



When it comes to the actors responsible for guaranteeing fair elections, on an aggregated level the majority of the interviewed respondents from Tiranë, Durrës, Lezhë, Berat and Korçë believe that the Central Elections Commission and the Government (both by 60%) are actors that play a very important role, followed by citizens with half of respondents (49%) indicating their very important role. It is important to note, that the international community is considered the least important actor in guaranteeing fair elections (compared to the other options), indicated as very important by only 22% of respondents. While this indicator looks important for a shift in Albanian citizens' mentality that usually considers foreign help pivotal in guaranteeing democratic practices in the country, citizens' views on the role of civil society continue to be not positive. Civil society is classified as the penultimate in terms of importance with only 28% of respondents indicating it as very important. At the same time, civil society is the most indicated as "not important at all", with 15%.



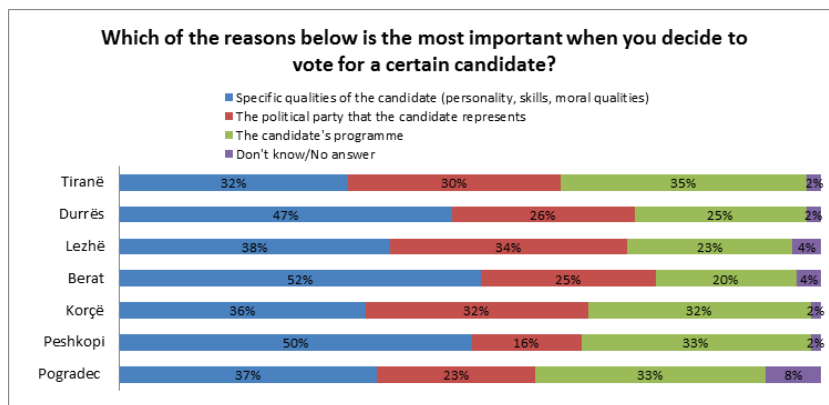
As the legitimacy of elections has always been problematic in the post-communist Albania, “free and fair elections” has been a theme that accompanies every pre and post election period in the country while dominating the public rhetoric. Asked if they believed the upcoming elections would be free and fair, citizens’ opinions varied when moving from one city to the other. Thus, the most optimistic respondents were in Korçë (with 55% of them thinking elections would be free and fair) and Berat (with 52% of citizens thinking the same). Fewer citizens thought so in Peshkopi (46%), Tiranë (43%), Durrës (40%) and Lezhë (36%), although these were still a majority compared to the share of citizens that did not think elections would be free and fair. Respondents in Pogradec were the most pessimistic with 44% of them thinking that elections would not be free and fair. It is interesting to notice that 39% of the respondents in Lezhë did not express an opinion on this.



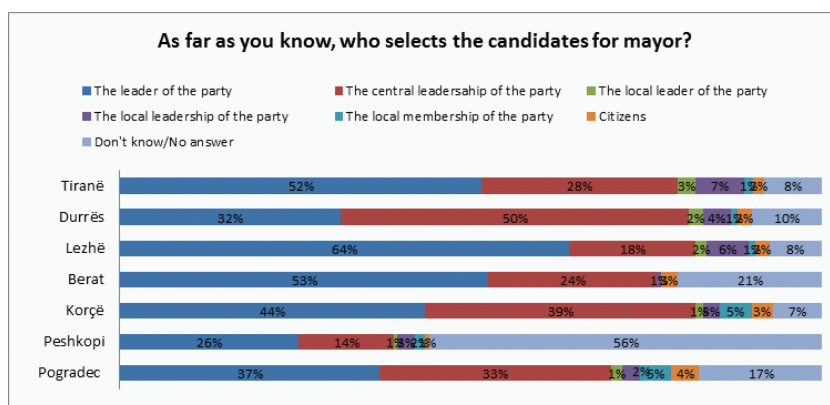
When it comes to how citizens decide on a certain candidate and on what they base

2 - After the parliamentary elections 2013, for the first time, the opposition accepted the result of elections.

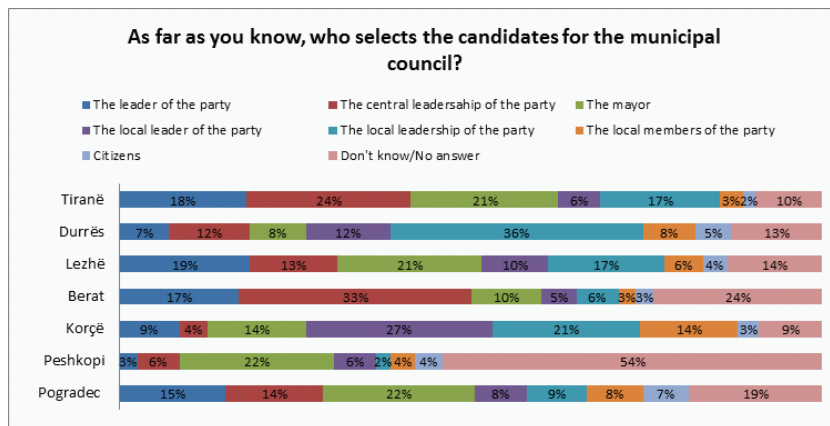
their decision, reasons vary in between personal qualities, partisan belonging and the candidate's programme. In Berat, the majority of respondents (52%) answered that their decision is based on the specific qualities of the candidate, while the same reason was decisive for half of respondents in Peshkopi and almost half of the respondents in Durrës (47%). Respondents in Tiranë, Lezhë, Korçë and Pogradec were more balanced in between the three reasons with similar shares indicating each of them. Only in Tirana, the share of citizens indicating the candidate's programme as a decisive reason (35%) was bigger than the share of respondents indicating either personal qualities (33%) or the candidate's partisan belonging (30%).



Coming to citizens' knowledge on the selection of candidates for mayor it is immediately clear that they see parties as very centralized entities. Thus, overall, more than 70% of the interviewed respondents think that either the leader of the party or the central leadership of the party selects the candidates for mayor. In Lezhë (64%), Berat (53%) and Tiranë (52%) the majority of respondents think that the leader of the party is the one to select candidates, while in Korçë and Pogradec the biggest share of respondents (44% and 37% respectively) think the same. In Durrës, 1 in 2 respondents thinks that the leadership of the party is the structure choosing candidates for mayor. While the biggest share of the respondents that expressed an opinion on the question in Peshkopi (26%) thinks that the leader of the party is the one to choose the candidates for mayor, the majority of respondents in Peshkopi (56%) did not have an answer for this question.

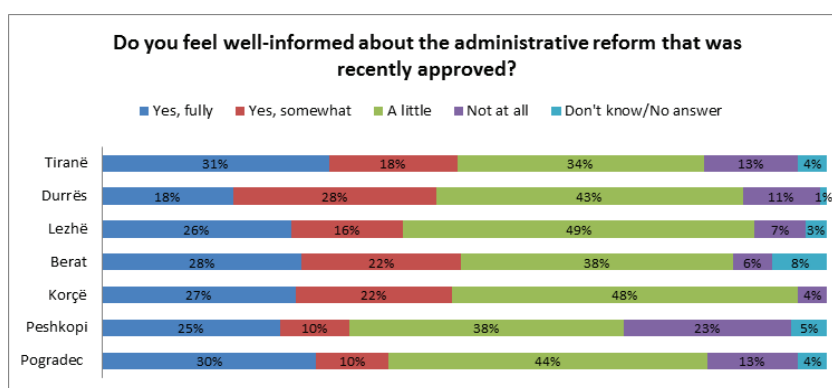


A lot of confusion is visible in respondents' answers when it comes to the entity that selects candidates for the municipal councils. Generally, when looking at the chart below, it is clear that respondents are more inclined to see the process of selecting candidates for the municipal council as more decentralized compared to the one for selecting candidates for mayor. Thus, in Korçë and Durrës more than half of respondents – 62% and 56% respectively – think that the local leader of the party, the local leadership of the party or the local membership of the party are the responsible structures choosing these candidates. Berat is the only city of the seven where 1 in 2 respondents thought that the process of selecting candidates for the municipal council is also based at the centre of the party with either the leader or the central leadership of the party being the responsible actor. Again, the majority of respondents in Peshkopi (54%) did not have an answer to this question.

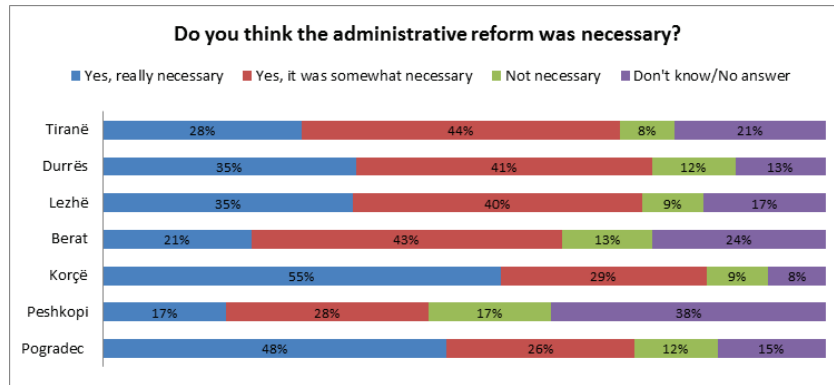


Information and perceptions about the recent administrative reform

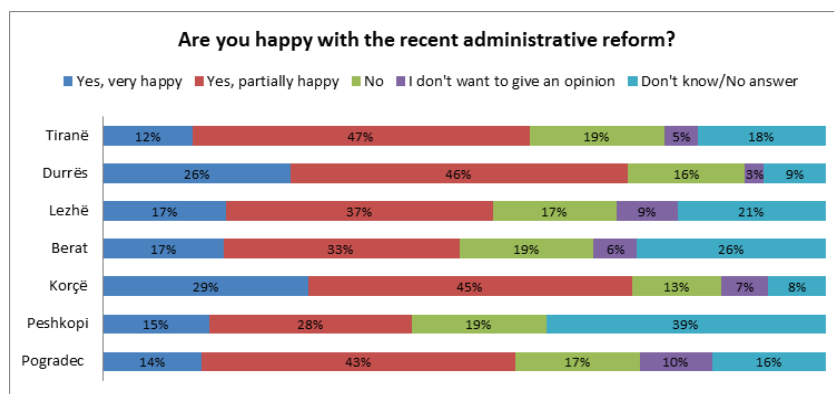
In the upcoming elections, Albanian citizens will be voting to elect only 61 mayors compared to 374 of the previous elections and this is because of the new Administrative Territorial Reform that was passed in July 2014. The drastic reshaping of the administrative map of Albania makes the reform crucial for these elections, while adding confusion to the process as citizens are not fully informed of the respective changes to their municipal units. Asked if they feel well-informed about the recent administrative reform, roughly 1 in 4 respondents answered they feel fully informed. Less than 1 in 2 felt fully or somewhat informed. Except for Berat and Tiranë, the majority of respondents in the other cities felt either little informed or not at all informed about the recent administrative reform. Respondents in Peshkopi were the ones to feel the less informed with 61% of them feeling either little informed or not at all informed, followed by respondents in Pogradec and Lezhë with respectively 57% and 56% of respondents answering the same.



When asked about the necessity of the administrative reform, opinions varied between the different cities. Thus, Korçë was the most supportive of the seven with 55% of respondents thinking that the reform was really necessary and 29% thinking that the reform was somewhat necessary. On the other extreme was Peshkopi, with only 17% of respondents thinking the reform was really necessary and 28% thinking it was somewhat necessary. In between, there are Pogradec, Tiranë, Durrës, Lezhë and Berat where the biggest share of respondents thought the reform was somewhat necessary. A considerable share of respondents in every city did not know or did not give an answer to this question, with almost 2 in 5 people in Peshkopi and 1 in 4 people in Berat choosing to do so.

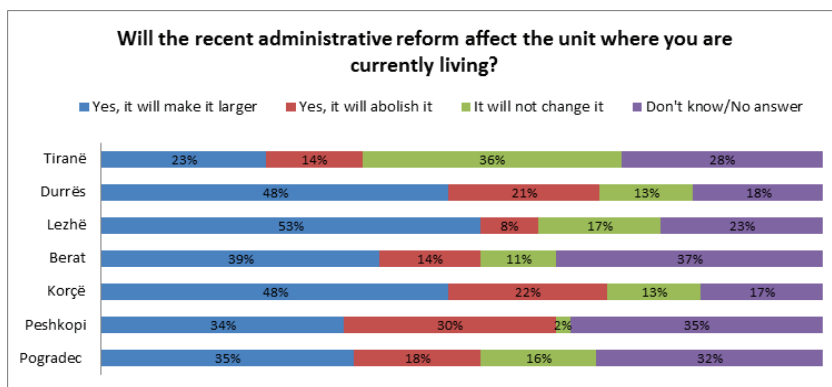


Apart from the question measuring the perception of necessity, respondents were asked whether they were happy with the recent administrative reform. In this case respondents in Korçë and Durrës are the happiest with respectively 29% and 26% answering they are very happy and 45% and 46% answering they are partially happy. On the other extreme is Peshkopi, where 15% of respondents answered they are very happy with the reform and 28% answered to be partially happy. A wide share of respondent in Peshkopi (39%) chose not to give an answer. The levels of happiness with the reform in Tiranë, Pogradec, Lezhë and Berat were in between these values. It is interesting to notice that the biggest share of answers in every city was “yes, partially happy”.



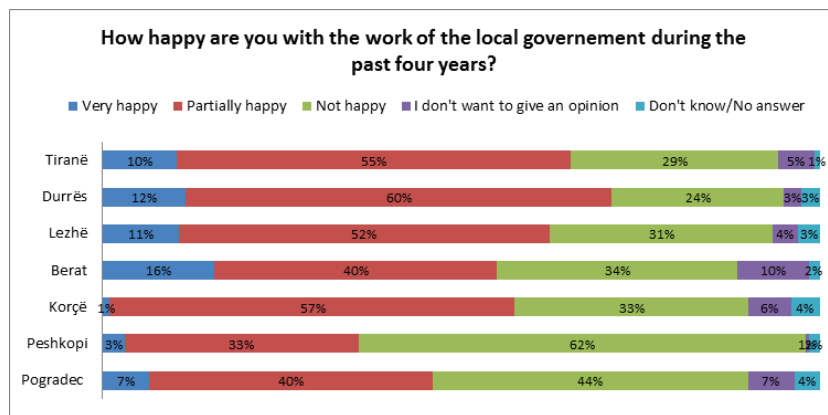
The administrative reform will increase the size of all the municipalities, where the interviews were conducted. Nevertheless, not all the citizens looked informed about the changes that the administrative reform will bring. The most informed respondents were in respondents about the changes were in Lezhë (53%), Durrës (48%) and Korçë (48%) with roughly 1 in 2 respondents indicating that their unit (municipality) will increase in size.. On the other hand, respondents in Tiranë, Peshkopi and and respondents in Pogradec looked with respectively 23%, 34% and 35% of respondents indicating that their units will get larger. A considerable share of respondents was not able or chose to not give an answer to this question.

There is also a possibility that some of the interviewed respondents in these cities actually came from the surrounding areas of the cities or the nearby villages which were formerly small municipalities and are currently being incorporated into these cities by the administrative reform. In this case, it makes sense that some respondents answered that their units (the units where they are registered as residents and where they vote) will be abolished.



The local government and public services

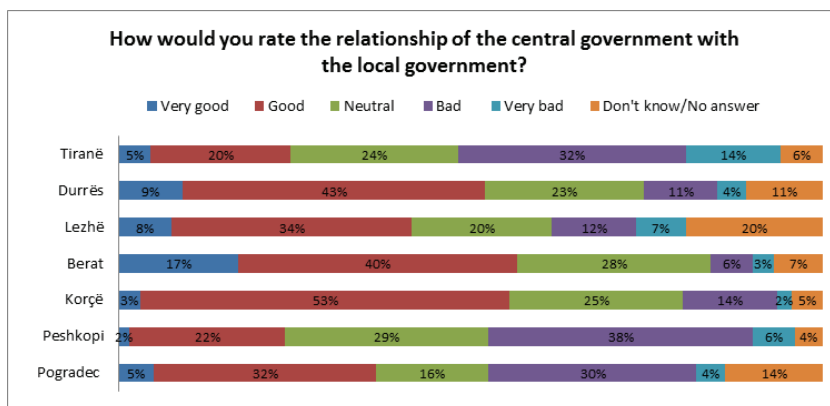
In the five cities where interviews were conducted, respondents looked more unhappy than happy with the work of their local governments during the past four years. While most of respondents in every city indicated that they were partially happy with the work of the local government in the past four years, a bigger share indicated being unhappy compared to the share that indicated being very happy. From the chart below it can be quickly noticed that only 1% of the respondents in Korçë answered that they are very happy with the work of the local government in the past four years, while a vast majority of 62% answered that they are not happy with the work of their local government in Peshkopi.



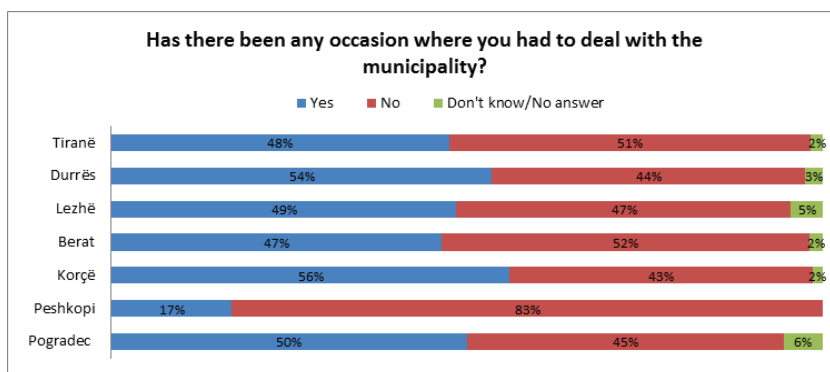
Asked about the relationship of the central government with the local government, generally respondents perceived this relationship to be better when the local mayor represented the same party as the leading majority (at least since 2013) – in this case the Socialist Party or its coalition parties. Nevertheless, this pattern was not always visible, as it was clear in the case of Pogradec where the previous mayor, Artan Shkëmbi, was from the Socialist Party, but 30% of respondents reported a bad relationship between the local government and the central government.

In Tiranë, Peshkopi and Lezhë, where the mayors during these past four years have been representing the Democratic Party, respondents perceive that the central government-local government relations have not been as good as in the case of the respondents in Durrës, Berat and Korçë. Thus, in Tiranë, where during the past four years the mayor, Lulzim Basha, was the leader of the opposition only 25% of respondents perceived the central government-local government relationship as good or very good, while 46% thinks that this relationship was bad or very bad. In Berat, Korçë and Durrës this relationship is perceived as rather positive with the

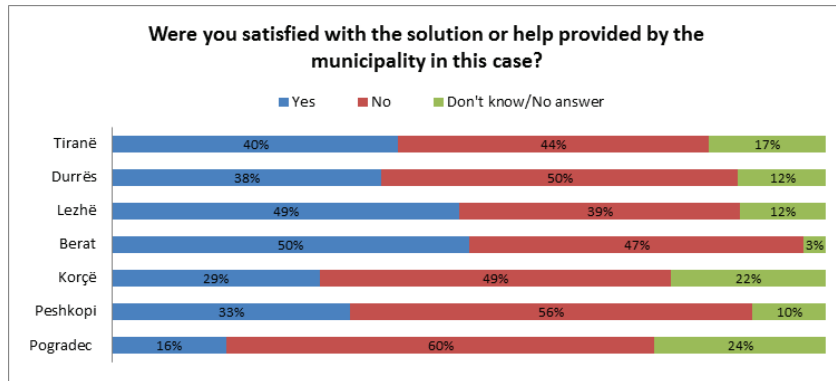
majority of respondents in all of these cities – respectively 57%, 56% and 52% of respondents – thinking the relationship of the central government with the local government has been either good or very good.



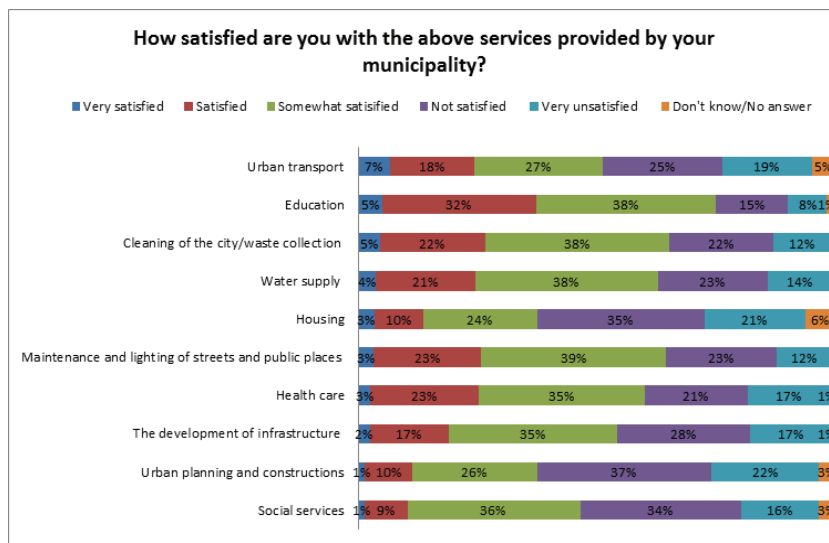
Approximately 1 in 2 respondents in the cities we interviewed have personally dealt with their municipality, thus, asked for help or relied on a specific service. An exception is Peshkopi, where only 17% of respondents reported having personally dealt with the municipality. More than 50% of respondents in Korçë (56%) and Durrës (54%) reported occasions where they dealt with the municipality themselves.



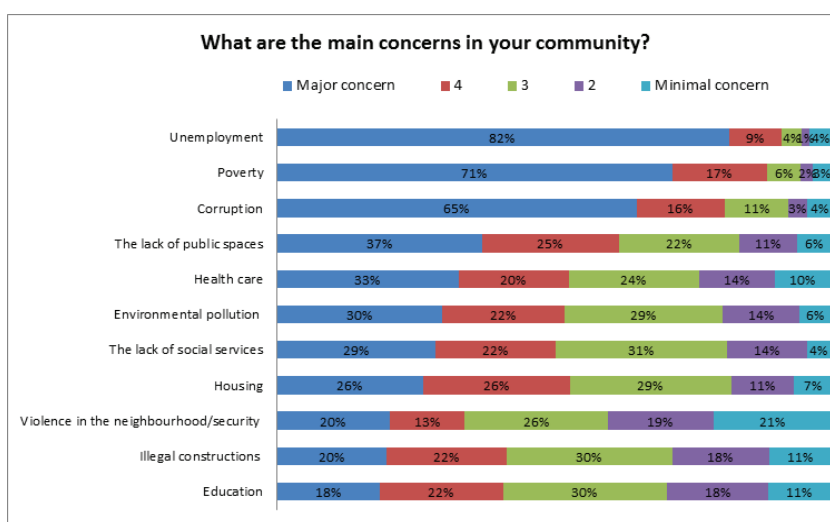
The respondents that answered yes to the above question were then asked if they had been happy or satisfied with the solution provided by the municipality. The least satisfied respondents were in Pogradec, Peshkopi and Durrës with respectively 60%, 56% and 50% of respondents reporting that they were not satisfied with the help provided by the municipality. The most satisfied respondents were in Berat and Lezhë with 1 in 2 respondents answering that they were satisfied with the help provided by the municipality.



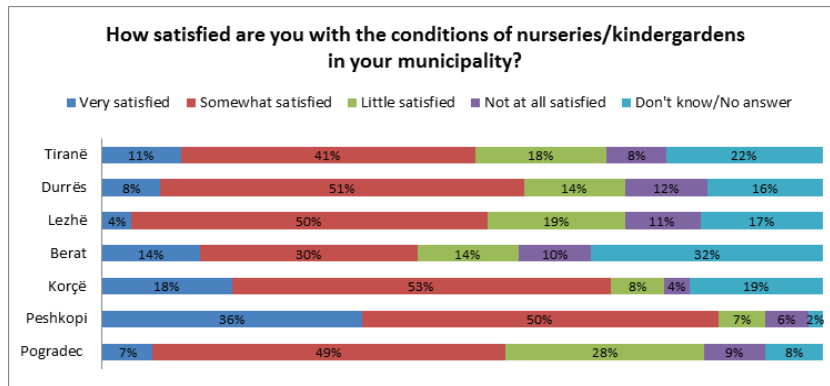
When it comes to the overall satisfaction with public services provided by municipalities, respondents were overall partially satisfied, with a bigger share indicating more dissatisfaction than the share indicating satisfaction. The most satisfied respondents were with education, in relation to which 37% of respondent answered being either very satisfied or satisfied. Trespondents were least satisfied with urban planning and constructions, housing, as well as social services, with respectively 59%, 56% and 50% of respondents indicating as options either not satisfied or very unsatisfied.



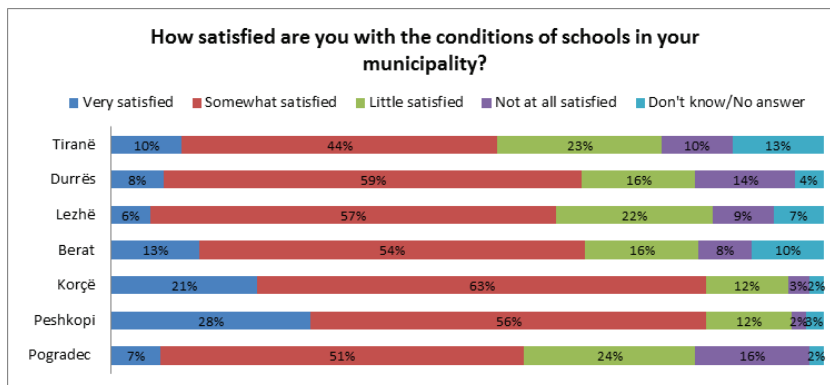
Regarding the main concerns of respondents in their respective communities, major ones are unemployment, poverty and corruption. Unemployment was indicated by 82% of respondents as a major concern and by 9% of them as a concern, thus, more than 9 in 10 respondents consider it a problem in their community. Poverty was indicated as a major concern by 71% of respondents and as a concern by 17% of them, thus, for almost 9 out of 10 people poverty is considered a problem. Corruption was indicated as a major concern by 65% of respondents and as a concern by 16% of them, thus, 8 out of 10 people consider it a problem in their community. The least concerning issues are violence in the neighborhood and security, illegal constructions and education. It is interesting to note that 1 in 5 respondents thought that violence in the neighborhood and security were minimal concerns.



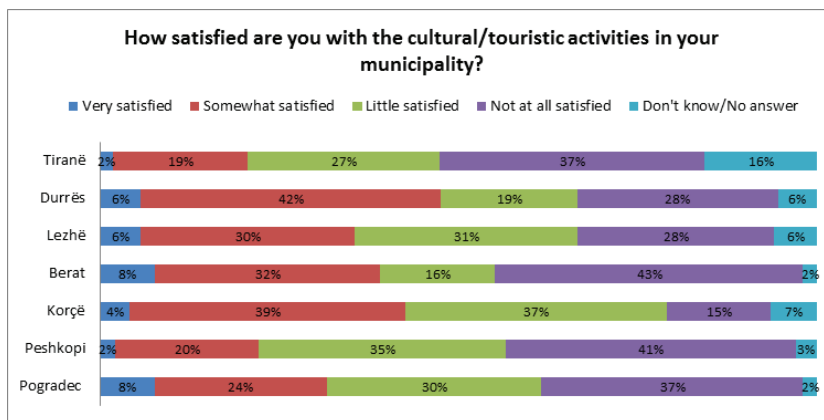
Respondents were then asked about their satisfaction with specific public services in their municipality. Regarding the conditions of nurseries and kindergartens, respondents' satisfaction varied through the different cities. Thus, respondents in Peshkopi were the most satisfied with 86% reporting to be either very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the conditions, followed by Korçë with 71% of respondents being either somewhat satisfied or very satisfied with the conditions. In Durrës, Pogradec, Lezhë and Tiranë the majority of respondents – 59%, 56%, 54% and 52% respectively – also reported being either somewhat satisfied or very satisfied with the conditions of nurseries and kindergartens. In Berat, respondents were the least satisfied with the conditions, with 44% indicating to be either somewhat satisfied or very satisfied.



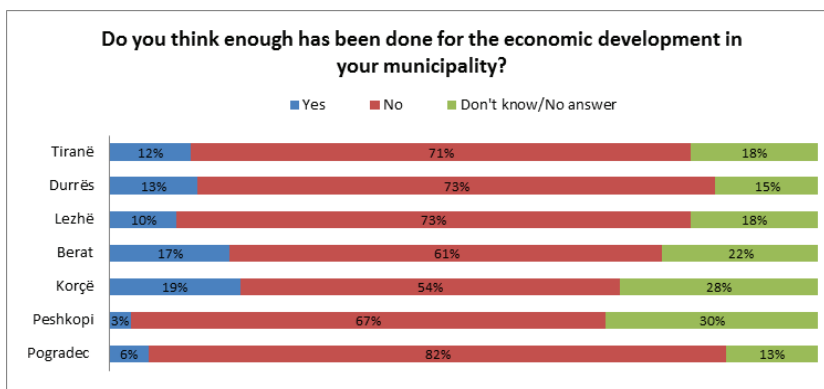
Regarding the conditions of schools, respondents in Peshkopi and Korçë were again the most satisfied with 84% of respondents in each municipality being either somewhat satisfied or very satisfied. The satisfaction level in other cities varied from 67% satisfaction in Berat and Durrës to 63% in Lezhë, 58% in Pogradec and 54% in Tiranë. Despite the different levels, it is important to notice that the majority of respondents in every city were either somewhat satisfied or very satisfied with the conditions of schools in their municipalities.



In regard to the cultural and touristic activities of each municipality, respondents were more unsatisfied than satisfied. Thus, the majority of respondents in Peshkopi (76%), in Pogradec (67%), in Tiranë (64%), in Berat (59%), in Lezhë (59%) and in Korçë (52%) are either little satisfied or not satisfied at all with these activities. Only Durrës presents a somewhat better result with 48% of respondents indicating they are somewhat satisfied or very satisfied with the cultural or touristic activities in their municipality.



Most of the interviewed citizens think that not enough has been done for the economic development, in their municipality. Thus, a vast majority of citizens in Pogradec (82%) think that not enough has been done in their municipality for the economic development, followed by Durrës and Lezhë with 73% each and Tiranë with 71%. A slightly better picture, although still negative, was reported in Berat and Korçë where respectively 17% and 19% of respondents reported that enough has been done in their municipality for the economic development while respectively 61% and 54% thought the opposite was true. The share of those that did not know the answer or chose not to give an answer in both Peshkopi (30%) and Korçë (28%) was also high.



A similar dissatisfaction is present when it comes to the efforts of the municipality to protect the environment. Thus, the majority of respondents in all of the cities where interviews were conducted answered that not enough has been done for the protection of the environment. Similarly to the opinions about the economic development, in Peshkopi (86%), Lezhë (80%), Durrës (77%), Tiranë (75%) and Pogradec (71%) a vast majority of respondents thought that not enough has been done for the protection of the environment in their municipality. This was particularly predominant in Peshkopi and Lezhë with more than 8 out of 10 respondents expressing this opinion. Again, respondents in Berat and Korçë felt more positive about the issue compared to the other cities with roughly 1 in 4 respondents thinking that enough has been done to protect the environment in their municipality, although the share of respondents being unsatisfied still represents the majority.

