

**Learning & Adapting  
Urban95****INNOVATIONS FOR  
SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES****RECONSTRUCTING A CITY IN THE INTERESTS OF ITS CHILDREN:  
TIRANA, ALBANIA, 2015–2019**

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based on interviews conducted in  
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**SYNOPSIS**

When Erion Veliaj became mayor of Tirana, Albania, in 2015, he inherited a fast-growing city with unchecked construction and traffic that threatened the health and well-being of all citizens—especially the youngest and most vulnerable. Overcoming public distrust and budgetary shortfalls, Veliaj’s administration worked with private donors and international experts to quickly construct parks, playgrounds, nurseries, schools, and pedestrian spaces. At the beginning of the mayor’s second term in July 2019, the city was poised to adopt new models for streets and neighborhoods redesigned to serve the interests of infants, toddlers, and their caregivers.

## INTRODUCTION

Over a series of mornings in early 2019, city planners, architects, engineers, and other municipal officers met in the gymnasium of a newly renovated school to rethink their city—Tirana, Albania—through the eyes of a child. Gathered around tables laid with scale maps of two primary schools and their environs, the group sketched out plans to make the city’s neighborhoods safer, healthier, and more comfortable for infants, toddlers, and caregivers. Where would benches and trees best provide for shady rest or snack breaks? Was it possible to calm the traffic? to lessen noise? to reduce danger? What kinds of objects or terrain would prompt children to think and to play? (Figure 1)



Figure 1: ITC workshop, Credit Gabriel Kuris

Such questions seemed counterintuitive in a cash-strapped government facing many urgent concerns. After decades of isolation under a totalitarian regime, Tirana had bloomed into a free and lively city, but unchecked growth had brought new problems. Citizens confronted pollution, traffic, haphazard construction, economic disparity, corruption, and social strife. But babies didn’t vote or pay taxes, so why focus on them?

After a quarter century of unplanned growth, Tirana had overcrowded schools, overgrown parks, crumbling sidewalks, and congested streets. (Figure 2) Children generally played in the streets or in private playgrounds in cafés and shopping malls. A 2018 survey of parents of preschoolers, conducted by Qendra Marrëdhënie, a nonprofit based in Tirana, found that although 62% of respondents preferred that their children play in parks and playgrounds, only 7% lived close to such public spaces.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 2: Tirana streets map, Credit: [openstreetmap.org](https://openstreetmap.org)

Veliaj’s childhood memories of communist Tirana made him sensitive to the needs of the very young. “Most of the lessons in life I learned through those years,” he said of his own childhood. He later studied politics at Grand Valley State University in Michigan and the University of Sussex in England and then worked in the United States, Rwanda, and Kosovo. Back in Albania, he cofounded and led an activist youth movement called MJAFT! (ENOUGH!) and then served as minister of social welfare and youth. In 2015, Veliaj won election on a platform of remaking the city into a place where young people

could thrive. “Let’s do things differently,” he said. “Let’s design a city where kids can have great early stories.”

## THE CHALLENGE

Days after taking office in July 2015, Veliaj toured a public nursery that was closed for the summer. “There was fungus everywhere,” he recalled. “There’s this leaking, seeping green juice of sorts, that you get from sewage water. . . . The occupancy rate was 30%. The conditions were so deplorable, no one was taking kids to the nursery.” Veliaj saw the same neglect at a kindergarten. “[It was] falling apart; it looked like prison cells,” he said. “If you start life like this, and if all social studies out there say that the first thousand days of your life are critical to your formation, . . . no wonder we’re becoming a violent society, a vulgar society.”

Tirana’s turbulent history created social, political, and practical impediments to bettering children’s lives, however. Those obstacles were closely intertwined.

Settled in 1614 on a fertile plain in the Western Balkans at the foot of Mount Dajti, Tirana had merely 10,000 residents by 1920, when it became the capital of Albania, newly independent from Ottoman rule.<sup>2</sup> As Albania shifted from republic to monarchy, to Italian and then German occupation, planners developed the small but growing city around a civic plaza later called Skanderbeg Square.

From 1944 to 1991, Tirana was a quiet, compact city of concrete buildings and empty boulevards at the center of an isolated police state akin to North Korea at the time. Under the authoritarian, communist government of Enver Hoxha, surveillance networks, secret prison camps, and hundreds of thousands of ubiquitous military bunkers fostered a culture of deprivation and paranoia. Citizens lacked freedoms of speech, movement, and private-property ownership. When communism fell in 1991, six years after Hoxha’s death, only 225,000 of Albania’s 3.2 million citizens lived in Tirana.<sup>3</sup>

As Albania lurched between political and economic crises, more than a million emigrants fled the impoverished country in search of opportunities. Many of those who stayed behind moved to Tirana, where market liberalization, overseas remittances, and smuggling tied to organized crime and the Yugoslav wars fueled new markets.

“People hated planning,” said Besnik Aliaj, an urban planner who cofounded and directed Polis university in Tirana, because “*everything* had been centrally planned—even people’s lives”—under communism. He added that without clear rules or coordination, “people took things into their own hands. And somehow, Albania survived because of that. But it produced informality because of the institutional vacuum.” The Tirana area became overcrowded with informal dwellings and businesses, often built without planning, legal title, or official approval.

A 2001 census showed that Tirana’s population had swelled to 418,495, and that 596,704 lived in the wider, Tirana County.<sup>4</sup> Hundreds of thousands of vehicles clogged streets that had seen little traffic under communism, when few

people owned cars. Many of the vehicles were secondhand and banned by European Union environmental regulations. They polluted the air with smog, exhaust, and noise. Homeownership and car ownership were status symbols for families long denied such rights. By 2015, Tirana was one of Europe's most-polluted capitals<sup>5</sup>—due largely to vehicular emissions.<sup>6</sup> And young children were uniquely vulnerable to the dangers posed by air pollution.<sup>7</sup>

Albania had one of Europe's youngest populations, but the overcrowded, freewheeling city was not conducive to child-rearing. The fertility rate of three births per woman in 1991 declined until 2005 and then leveled off at 1.7—near parity among countries in southeastern Europe.<sup>8</sup> With little tax revenue and high levels of corruption, the government built few new schools or parks; and informal construction encroached upon existing public spaces. Underinvestment in public infrastructure and human capital perpetuated cycles of cynicism and alienation that kept Tirana and its citizens from reaching their potential.

Partisanship in public decision making complicated efforts to change people's expectations. Politics had ethnic and ideological dimensions. The Socialists were most popular in southern Albania, where most people spoke the Tosk dialect. The Democrats drew more support from northern Albania, where most people spoke Gheg Albanian. Neither ethnicity dominated Tirana, and past corruption scandals and personal rivalries made many voters skeptical of both parties.

Tirana's rocky shift from a reclusive communist capital into a globalized city impeded the formation of a sense of solidarity, a shared identity, and civic engagement among citizens. "We are still children of communism," said Nevin Bilali, Tirana's director of projects. "Fear and distrust are still in our mentality. We need another generation," she said.

Deputy Mayor Arbjan Mazniku, another MJAFT! activist, who served as deputy minister of education under Prime Minister Edi Rama, said Albanians felt alienated from politicians they saw as remote and unhelpful. "Albanians have a very strong concept of a nanny state," he said. "Because of communism primarily . . . a lot of people think the government has to solve their problems for them. On the other hand, we come from long tradition of weak governments."

From 2000 to 2011, Rama worked to bring order and coherence to the growing city. (See ISS case study "[A New Face for a Tired City: Edi Rama and Tirana, Albania, 2000–2010](#)."") Rama's Socialist Party administration (1) cleared illegal construction from the banks of the Lana river, which bisected the city; (2) reformed municipal administration and finances, and (3) repainted drab concrete buildings in lively patterns. "Rama transformed the city, starting from almost nothing—no decentralization and no budget," said Aliaj. "The main criticism was that he purposely didn't develop the city according to an approved plan." Frequent clashes with the opposing Democratic Party, which took over Parliament in 2005, stalled more-ambitious efforts that required central government support, like renovating Skanderbeg Square.

Democrats won the mayorship and city council by a razor-thin majority in 2011 and proposed a city plan, but they achieved little before 2013, when Rama became prime minister and a Socialist coalition retook the city council. “For four years, nothing happened in this city; it was total stagnation,” said Juliana Hoxha, director of a nonprofit resource center called Partners Albania, about the years before Veliaj’s election in 2015.

Veliaj had a rare chance to break the political deadlock. Fellow Socialists controlled the municipal and national legislatures throughout his four-year term. Because Rama was a former mayor and Veliaj had been Rama’s minister of social welfare and youth, the two allies understood each other’s position. Rama also had connections from his past career as an artist and activist with European architects and designers who took interest in the redesign of the city, like Italian architect Stefano Boeri and German architect Peter Wilson.

Tirana’s revitalization had national implications because the city was Albania’s economic and political center and public face. Complying with child-friendly international urban policies like the Urban Agenda for the EU (European Union) would ease Albania’s integration with international markets.

Practical challenges such as rapid growth, strict budget constraints, and new social tensions compounded the social and political difficulties of getting things done. Tirana was not only fast growing but also newly expansive. National reforms that took effect after the 2015 elections consolidated local governments and gave them new powers and resources (text box 1). The new Tirana Municipality encompassed 24 former local government units and ballooned in area from roughly 40 square kilometers to nearly 1,200, including 135 villages, farmland, lakes, and mountains. Veliaj compared the consolidation to “a big mergers-and-acquisitions operation” that combined a third of the country’s population and half of its economy. The city gained room to take shape and diversify its economy from manufacturing and services to agriculture and tourism, but the expansion also raised the likelihood of more traffic, worse pollution, and haphazard development.

By 2015, Tirana had roughly 800,000 residents, according to government estimates, nearly 50,000 of whom were younger than six years of age. Based on energy and water usage, the city estimated that more than 1 million people lived and worked within the expanded municipal borders. “We can’t change the fact that Tirana is the face of opportunity: everybody wants to be here,” said Veliaj. “Sure, it’s a challenge in terms of urban planning . . . [but] it’s a pool of talent. It’s a labor force that speaks languages, is young, and has creativity.”

To foster healthier childhoods in the burgeoning city, Tirana had to address air pollution, overcrowding, unsafe streets, and shortages of public parks, playgrounds, nurseries, kindergartens, and schools. To meet those deficiencies, the new administration required plans, resources, and public support. But Tirana’s resources were limited. The city collected local taxes and fees and received a fixed share of national revenue, but in 2015, Tirana was in deficit, with roughly €100 million (US\$110 million) in annual operating expenses and €30 million (US\$33 million) in revenue.

### Box 1. Local-Government Reforms in Albania

Albanians embraced decentralization—after years of Enver Hoxha’s communist rule—in order to restore historical traditions of close-knit and self-ruling communities. The 1998 constitution redivided the country from 36 districts into 384 municipalities that were either cities or rural communes. However, the subsequent proliferation of local offices increased opportunities for waste and abuse of authority while impeding oversight and regional coordination. Outside Tirana, most municipalities lacked the resources and expertise to cultivate reliable tax bases and make plans and improvements.

In 2014, Albania enacted reforms that consolidated the country into 61 municipalities, with support from the United Nations Development Programme and other international partners. “There was quite a heated debate and an extensive consultative process,” said Juliana Hoxha, director of a nonprofit resource center called Partners Albania (and no relation to the former president), whose center helped support rural local governments. Concentrated ethnic minorities, as well as inhabitants of remote villages, protested that the consolidation diluted their political power.

The enlarged municipalities gained new powers—and new responsibilities, including early childhood education, school construction, and drainage. The municipalities shared some responsibilities with the central government, like environmental management. Cities like Tirana gained new rural areas and associated responsibilities like irrigation.

The new laws allocated municipal grants from the central government based on a complex formula that accounted for both population and needs. The laws also established a consultative council to foster political dialogue between mayors and the central government; the council began operations in 2018 after an opposition boycott ended.

Legal ambiguities and implementation challenges hampered the municipal reforms, and it would be years before results became clearly visible. “These first four years are a testing period—even for the mayors—to assess gaps and loopholes,” said Hoxha.

The 2014 municipal reforms did not alter the structure of Albania’s 12 counties, which comprised an intermediate level of government with little power. Aliaj argued that Albania needed more *regionalization* rather than *local self-rule* so the country could determine regional disparities and then pool resources to tackle shared challenges. He noted that many European countries had strong regions.

Tensions also began to divide those who lived in the historic core of Tirana from those in the urban and rural peripheries. Poorer and more-recent migrants, as well as minority groups like the Roma, tended to live in outlying informal settlements that lacked infrastructure like paved roads, sewage systems, and schools. Many felt remote from city government. Veliaj said: “The people who came here earlier do not have the moral authority to tell these [new] people, ‘You are overcrowding us.’ Everybody should get a chance.”

To make the city more amenable to children and caregivers, the Veliaj administration had to draw upon untapped resources and build public trust and political will.

## FRAMING A RESPONSE

Young children were at the center of the mayor's rhetoric and reforms, although at the time the city had no formal, coordinated agenda or working group to promote early childhood development. Joni Baboçi, general director of planning and urban development, said: "The role of children in the [public] sphere wasn't there from the beginning for us. It *was* for him. He was campaigning on it. And then it quickly became our way of thinking."

Improvements that helped children were relatively low-cost, conspicuous, and popular. Playgrounds were not free of cost or controversy, but their value was self-evident. Clear international models and best practices for parks and playgrounds and safer streets eased implementation. Veliaj learned from peer cities worldwide through international organizations like Bloomberg Philanthropies, led by former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg; 80 Cities, led by former Bogotá parks commissioner Guillermo Peñalosa; and the Bernard van Leer Foundation, based in the Netherlands.

Child-friendly policies also addressed the low quality of life and education that drove many young, upwardly mobile families to emigrate. Traditional Albanian culture valued close-knit families and communities, intergenerational child-rearing, and education. And the focus on children helped create a common ground that softened the rancorous tone of national politics.

Policies that helped young children also helped their caregivers and other adults. For example, ramps built to accommodate baby strollers had the added advantage of making sidewalks more navigable for older people and people with disabilities. Helping children was a selling point for broader urbanist policies and design choices.

Infrastructure and early childhood education were two more areas in the city's domain. The national government managed most public services, but cities fully controlled public nurseries (for children six months to three years of age) and kindergartens (for children four to five years of age). For schools, the city was responsible for buildings and grounds, and the central government supervised staff, curricula, and schedules.

More broadly, the mayor saw the opportunity to shape a new generation that would have positive associations with the city and its government. Children who grew up in a more livable city would be more civic-minded and better socialized to build relationships of trust and mutual obligation.

In the meantime, Veliaj's team would counter public cynicism by following through on public promises with quick, inexpensive, and visible results. "This city is a chicken," Veliaj said. "People need to see an egg every day: a concrete, tangible, physical space that has been transformed. It can be a school, a kindergarten, a nursery, a bike lane, a new park, a library, but . . . unless people can see concrete things [change], then it's just politicians' talk."

Public engagement was essential to that strategy. Veliaj was already active and accessible on social media and continued handling his Twitter account himself. As mayor, he used media strategically to champion projects, herald results, highlight partnerships, and build political will.

“First, you have to make people believe and then make what they believe come true,” said Blendi Gonxhja, whom Veliaj made founding director of the Tirana Parks and Recreation Agency. “A mayor or leader or executive officer . . . must motivate the team and then motivate the people served so they’ll believe in the project.” As a design student in 1990, Gonxhja had helped lead student protests that toppled communism at a time when few dissidents dared to publicly challenge the regime. He later served two years as deputy mayor under Rama and worked in the private sector.

The mayor’s team initially prioritized city improvements and policies with high impact and high visibility. Despite the urgent needs of the outlying areas, work began in the city center where efforts would serve—and be seen by—the most people. Early projects included shovel-ready renovation plans developed by both previous administrations but blocked by political conflict. In the longer run, city leaders planned to develop ambitious programs, frameworks, and data collection efforts to more rigorously target young children’s needs.

Veliaj and his team analogized their strategy to acupuncture—looking for pressure points to release energy and stimulate growth and repair—with a consistent view to child-centered policies. Deputy Mayor Mazniku said: “If you build something that’s right for kids, it turns out to have externalities that help every other part of society: the environment, . . . the socializing of a community, the development of trust. They turn into an acupuncture exercise. In a way, if you touch one nerve, then that generates that level of energy throughout the system.”

The team looked for simple, cost-effective investments like painting all public trash cans bright orange or redesigning Skanderbeg Square, a national icon.

## GETTING DOWN TO WORK

The Veliaj administration’s first priorities were to organize a new leadership team capable of coordinating across city offices and to revamp citizen communications in order to build public trust and support. Child-friendly policies started with renovations of nurseries, kindergartens, parks, and playgrounds. And as the administration accrued more and more political and public support, it undertook more-ambitious urban reforms to make the streets safer and healthier for young people and to build new schools as community centers.

### *Coordinating efforts across city government*

To build a team capable of delivering results at a brisk pace, Veliaj tapped into the Albanian diaspora to find young and likeminded experts with overseas education and experience. Most of these executive leaders came from civil society and the private sector and shared a commitment to making Tirana more livable and child oriented. For example, Erinda Fino, Gonxhja’s deputy and successor, had worked for a multinational company in Tokyo, where she was deeply impressed by public spaces that were clean, orderly, and family-friendly.



Returning to Albania, she felt inspired to join city government to make her “hometown [Tirana] into a better place.”

Veliaj’s close-knit executive team met weekly for interdepartmental coordination of policies and projects. The weekly meetings were typically organized around specific themes such as building a child-friendly city, followed up by regular, breakout meetings of smaller teams.

Below the executive level, Veliaj retained most of the civil servants who had worked for his predecessor to save time and maintain staff morale. The move ran counter to Albanian mayors’ common practice of awarding jobs to members of their own party. “We identified leaders who were already working in city government by talking with other employees—people they trusted,” Baboçi said. “These people have been doing their work for decades. . . . They wanted to keep working for the city . . . [and] were willing to experiment.” For example, Namik Simixhiu, director of the sanitation department, had been hired by the previous mayor. “Generally in Albania, when the mayor changes, [civil servants worry about their jobs]; but I was not worried in this case,” he said. “Mayor Veliaj was focused on the selection of his staff based on merit and professionalism, the people working hard for the city.”

To ensure competence, the new administration ultimately filtered out some underperforming staff after consistently poor performance reviews. “Many people from the old administration could not keep up with the new pace,” Veliaj said. “Some decided to get off the train. Some decided to [embrace] reform.”

Veliaj’s team reoriented existing departments around clear objectives and deliverables, which Baboçi called “a much more proactive, agile” approach aimed “to capture opportunities” and “push ideas forward” (exhibit 1). For example, Baboçi’s planning directorate had previously been led by a lawyer and focused mostly on approving private projects. As an architect, Baboçi refocused the directorate on urban design and planning. Likewise, an architect took over the projects department, which approved road designs; and the department’s architects and engineers began to plan their own projects rather than react to those submitted by other agencies.

Major organizational changes required city council approval—like changes in department staffing, responsibilities, or budgeting. Controlled by Veliaj’s party, the council supported Veliaj’s reorganization efforts.

### *Enlisting the public*

As former activists and community organizers, Veliaj and his team promoted civic participation and local ownership. The mayor was a relentless cheerleader for Tirana and frequently appeared on television, planting trees, meeting schoolchildren, and unveiling new projects.

The administration solicited public input and feedback through e-mail and social media platforms as well as by way of its own smartphone application (text box 2). The communications team worked two shifts to respond promptly. “People see that if they write to the mayor, they will get a reply and their problem will be addressed,” said Erka Mato, general director of public relations

### **Box 2. Citizens as Inspectors: The My Tirana Smartphone Application**

When Veliaj became mayor, he was shocked to receive letters from constituents concerning their neighbors' private scandals. Some older citizens held on to communist-era habits of reporting politically valuable compromising information to the government. "How can we turn this vice into a virtue?" he recalled thinking. "What if [citizens] kept their eyes open for stuff we can actually use?"

Working with information technology staff and with help from local telecommunications companies, the city developed a smartphone application called Tirana Ime (My Tirana). In addition to local events and information and city communications, the user-friendly app included a feature for reporting nonemergency complaints—akin to dialing 311 in US cities. Typical issues were trash piles, broken sidewalks, vandalism, and missing manhole covers. Users could choose a category, write a description, enter the location (or toggle automatic geolocation), and upload a picture. Reports could be anonymous or include names and contact information.

Submissions were processed quickly and assigned to relevant departments. The city aimed to address issues within 24 hours. After resolving a situation, staff would take a picture and send it back to the user with a reply and thanks. If the issue required more time to resolve, the city would reply with an explanation and time frame. "Instead of our having 100 inspectors going around . . . now we have 20,000 people who do this for free," Veliaj said. Savings from the elimination of inspectors funded the dispatch office and repair task forces. "[Users] feel a sense of ownership," Veliaj added. "If you reported something and you got a push [notification and] picture that says it's fixed, then each user felt like a minimayor of [their] own city."

The parks department also launched a spin-off called My Tirana Outdoors, which listed events and enabled users to reserve playing fields. Submissions through both apps helped the city respond to vandalism and other property damage that made playgrounds and other public spaces less safe for children.

and communications. "I believe the high numbers of people who write to him are because of that."

The mayor's team also engaged with the public through frequent public hearings. The team tried to schedule public consultations for every major project as well as annual hearings for the budget and made sure to hold the hearings in all 24 administrative units of the city. A research team distributed questionnaires at the hearings to gather anonymous feedback. And the communications office published hearing minutes on the city's web site.

The mayor paid unprecedented amounts of attention to the views of his youngest constituents. He met daily with schoolchildren and actively solicited ideas and feedback from a children's city council composed of hundreds of child volunteers. He said children served as effective advocates among their families and communities. He also hoped to inspire children to feel important and valued by city hall. Baboçi explained: "Treating little children as important as grown-ups—[who] get to meet the mayor, whom their parents probably wouldn't be able to meet on any day of the week, . . . and who go back home and tell the story—empowers them to think differently about government."

Finally, the city pushed each residential building in the city to appoint an officer responsible for interfacing with the city and planned to ask the city council to make such appointments a legal requirement in 2019. “It helps us facilitate a lot of things in the neighborhoods,” Mazniku said. “If we want to organize things, we have a number to call [someone] who can then send down information to people. Playgrounds, debates about street parking, whatever the local issues, we now have people in the community who serve as intermediaries.”

Some critics found the mayor’s upbeat style saccharine and his nonstop media presence unsettling. “We see him every day; it’s too much,” said journalist Fatjona Mejdini. “My mother jokes that if one day she doesn’t see the mayor on television, she will become concerned about him.”

Veliaj deflected such criticisms. “We are happy to be accused of overinformation [rather] than no communication,” he said. Frequent announcements reinforced an image of constant delivery “to give people hope,” he added. “This city is huge. . . . We don’t have a magic wand to fix everything immediately, but as long as we’re doing something every day, it’s only a matter of time before we reach your alley.”

Veliaj also used media to counter disinformation and pushback from antagonists like corrupt business interests. He said: “Our social media operation was very helpful so that even if the [property] developers with all their media [connections] gang up against us, there is an alternative way for our story to come out. . . . We’re not beholden to their media shops.”

Outside the media spotlight, Veliaj’s charisma proved critical in building support and moving projects forward. “The mayor is a great communicator; that’s a given,” said Baboçi. “He’s really able to connect with people, and he’s really able to put weight where he thinks weight is needed.” Once he took office, the mayor used his persuasive skills to champion the concerns of children too young to advocate for themselves, including those under the age of three.

#### *Extreme makeover: Kindergarten edition*

After observing the disrepair of the city’s public nurseries and kindergartens during his first days in office in July 2015, Veliaj set a goal of renovating all of the city’s 32 kindergartens before the school year started. Mazniku told him the task was impossible within only six weeks, because new funding would itself alone take months to approve. Mazniku recalled Veliaj’s replying: “The kids don’t care about our processes or our budgets. They want a place without humidity, without mold on the walls, and not [too] warm.”

With no discretionary funds left in the city budget, Veliaj reached out to the business community for help. He appealed to the heads of major telecommunications companies, banks, construction firms, and other local businesses. “One day you’ll need the mayor,” he told them. “Now the mayor needs *you*.” He jokingly announced “a city version of *Extreme Home Makeover*,” an American reality television series about rapid home renovations.

Veliaj used his high media profile to publicize donors and honored them with public ceremonies and plaques. After the first companies agreed to adopt kindergartens, others felt public pressure to follow. And the city expanded the effort to cover all nurseries as well. The sponsors provided funding, volunteer labor, and attention, arranged through donation agreements that specified obligations of the funder and the municipality. The city provided plans and engineers to make sure the renovations followed standards and regulations, and it inspected the work before acceptance.

Mazniku said: “People stood up from very unexpected corners of society and actually got together and managed to repair the grounds in 45 days. All of them. At the end, we had people offering [their help] because it had become a trend.”

Baboçi said that once they adopted the projects, sponsors became invested in the projects’ quality and timeliness. They often invested far more than required, motivated by both genuine concern and competitive pressure. “The kids were very impressed, but the parents were wowed,” Baboçi said. “They had taken their kids out of kindergarten in July, and they’re taking them back to the same kindergarten in September, but the changes were astronomical [and] very visible.”

“In a couple months, you could see kindergartens renovated very beautifully,” said Hoxha of Partners Albania. “It became quite popular in the city, widely promoted and recognized, with very clear impact. . . . Everyone wants to send their kids there [to a public kindergarten]; it’s very affordable.” Government subsidies made public facilities cheaper than private alternatives.

The city also channeled the new energy and attention into other nursery and kindergarten reforms: better staff training, more-educational activities to prepare children for primary school, and more-engaging play spaces. In 2018, the city also made lunch and snack menus healthier, which Veliaj said caused a “revolt by the parents.” At first, children accustomed to junk food complained to their parents of hunger when the menu switched from pizza and soda to more-wholesome choices like vegetables and hummus and yogurt and muesli. Parental opposition ebbed, though, as the children acclimated to the healthier diets recommended by the World Health Organization to avoid poor child nutrition and its societal impacts.

#### *A pitched battle over parks*

Grand Park, Tirana’s most prominent green space, was built around an artificial lake near the city center in 1955. Sixty years later, the 260-acre “Central Park of Tirana” was beloved but neglected and only partially usable because of a lack of lighting, paths, benches, and facilities. Some families even built informal dwellings in unused areas.

Baboçi and other Albanian planners worked with German architecture firm Bolles+Wilson to design a master plan for the park, with a large playground and other amenities. That renovation was the first task for the new municipal agency of parks and recreation led by Gonxhja—the first of its kind in the region. But

in February 2016, initial work on the new playground prompted a dramatic showdown of unanticipated ferocity.

Skeptics of the renovation spread rumors and disinformation that the city planned to build a private hotel or restaurant in the park rather than a playground, and they circulated photos of poured concrete and fresh tree stumps as evidence. In response, the city released its plans and renderings online and through social media and held public hearings to explain the renovation plans. To assuage critics, the city altered the plans to minimize its footprint, although the work still required some laying of concrete and culling of unhealthy trees. The city considered relocating the playground but couldn't find a suitable site with shade cover.

Drawing crowds of thousands, disruptive public protests occurred on 78 of the 100 days the renovations took.<sup>9</sup> Some people came armed with guns or clubs and threatened construction workers, sabotaged city equipment and construction work, or tried to plant new trees. Some of the protestors were environmentalists and preservationists distrustful of city government and terrified of losing the park to the forces of development that had overtaken the city. Others were political opportunists. “We encounter[ed] a lot of opposition from a very thin sliver of people who were very sincerely worried,” Baboçi said; “[most others] just saw this as an opportunity to throw the first hands of mud on the mayor.” The country’s president joined them.

Some critics proposed building the playground at a different location, but the area they had in mind lacked shade cover. When the president got involved, Veliaj said, “a lot of my advisers were saying: ‘Let’s quit this. It’s gotten too big. It’s this big national fight.’ I said, ‘No, because the moment we blink now, we will never be able to do another playground. The moment we allow them to bully us about building this



Figure 3: Grand Lake Park Credits: City of Tirana, [Startek Constructions](#), [Visit-Tirana.com](#)

playground, the message we'll be giving the kids in this city is that bullying is OK; and once you encounter the bully, you let the bully win.”

The construction work progressed slowly, and the playground opened on International Children’s Day, June 1, 2016. (Figure 3) The biggest playground in the Balkans, it was convenient, well equipped, integrated with the landscape, and immediately popular. The city had stunned skeptics by faithfully implementing its public plans. Public relations general director Mato said that local parents who had been intimidated by the political conflict were telling her, “We were with you from the very beginning.”

“The whole summer, it was full of children,” Baboçi said. “I think that gave us the trust and the political capital to then move on to a lot of other important projects. The bazaar, the 48 playgrounds now spread out around the city, the bike lanes, [Skanderbeg] square. All of those things were, I think, very much helped by that first conflict, which resolved well because the intention was positive from the beginning. . . . Of course, people are going to be against us, but look at the end results, and then judge us by those, not by the political infighting.”

Encouraged by the playground’s success, Veliaj committed his administration to building or renovating 48 local playgrounds over his term—one each month. He called the initiative Play Tirana. The city started by renovating old playgrounds in disrepair and then applied lessons learned to create new ones sited across the city in small pockets of public land that were otherwise being informally used as local parking lots (figure 4).

The parks agency inherited more than a hundred groundskeepers from the former greening division and added a couple dozen designers, landscapers, architects, and engineers. Crucial volunteer technical assistance came from Darell Hammond, an American fortuitously living in Tirana. Hammond had founded and led an American nonprofit called KaBOOM! which helped build thousands of playgrounds across North America, pioneering a



Figure 4: Before & After, Credit City of Tirana

private sponsorship model adaptable to Tirana. Hammond said his advice helped accelerate and de-risk the ambitious plans of Tirana's new parks agency.

Fino, who took over the parks agency in 2018, when Gonxhja became general director of the national transport services department, said private donations from local and multinational corporations and other sources funded roughly 70% of the playgrounds. As in the kindergarten renovations, sponsors provided volunteer labor and capital for construction, oversight, and maintenance. Each playground took two or three months from planning to opening, so results manifested quickly. The playgrounds featured a multigenerational, inclusive design, with play areas and shaded seating.

The city also continued to improve Grand Park by banning cars, building a path encircling the lake, and creating the city's first dog park. Gonxhja said his "passion project" was renovation of a derelict amphitheater that had hosted national cultural events under communism and that Gonxhja believed "was in the hearts of all Tirana's people." Private donors funded amphitheater seats, park benches, and other fixtures. "We were doing magic tricks to build without much money," Gonxhja said, "to find donors, to cajole them publicly to fund projects they would never say yes to in private meetings."

Beyond the construction and maintenance of parks and playgrounds, the department also focused on recreation, which Gonxhja called the "human side" of the department. The department organized events and activities among the parks and playgrounds—particularly for children and caregivers. The reopened amphitheater hosted cultural events for citizens of all ages.

#### *Planning for cleaner skies and safer streets*

City hall worked to make the city friendlier to walking and bicycling and less dependent on driving so it could expand public space and reduce air pollution, noise, traffic, and collisions. But Tirana's drivers often opposed any changes they feared would increase traffic. "Our fundamental questions," the mayor said, were, "Do we build cities for cars or cities for people? and Are roads for transporting people, or do we design roads for transporting cars?"

With financing from the central government, Italian architect Boeri won a global competition to work with Baboçi and a team of more than 50 Albanians to develop a vision for Tirana in 2030—to coordinate and rationalize development. In June 2016, the mayor announced the master plan, dubbed TR030 (short for Tirana 2030). The planning department led public hearings across the city, and the communications office released it online, including a version of the plan in Google Docs that enabled users to leave comments and questions that Baboçi answered.

Unlike the master plan the previous administration had proposed, TR030 de-emphasized cars as merely one among many modes of transportation. The plan did not specifically address young children and caregivers, but it anticipated the needs of future generations. The plan envisioned Tirana's doubling in population to 1.6 million and becoming a polycentric urban area with dense development around several emerging hubs beyond the city center. The plan

proposed new greenways, transit corridors, local roads, schools, and kindergartens. An urban growth perimeter would limit future development and create a greenbelt called the Orbital Forest around the city. To address the region's deforestation, the mayor committed to planting more than 100,000 trees every year, to reach 2 million trees by 2030. The forest was designed to serve future generations by adding beauty and recreational opportunities and by reducing erosion, air pollution, and waste heat.

The city council approved TR030 in April 2017, thereby giving it the force of law. Until that time, Veliaj had refused to approve new construction permits for private developments. “[The moratorium] wasn’t very popular with builders, but we couldn’t carry on with such ad hoc decision making,” Veliaj said. “We needed to have a map. . . . It was also a great opportunity to sort out the housing markets: what the needs are and for what kinds of markets.” With the plan in place, the city’s revamped buildings department approved a wave of new projects to increase density within approved urban growth corridors, which generated a rush of construction and city revenue.

The city promoted pedestrian plazas, sidewalks, and bike lanes across the city. “Before the ’90s, most people biked,” Baboçi said. “There was no other way to get around [besides] public transportation or biking. . . . People would hang out on the first floor of their five-story apartment buildings and gossip with one another before. They now do it in a more proper setting, where their kids can play and the mothers and fathers can sit on benches. So we try to use these small projects as catalysts to re-create that thing we have lost.” The city promoted bicycling lessons in primary schools and introduced a dockless bike-sharing system called Mobike.

Pedestrianization faced its first flashpoint in Skanderbeg Square, which had become the largest traffic circle in southeastern Europe. Rama had run into insurmountable opposition when he tried to pedestrianize the central plaza. Veliaj turned to the children of the city—already excited by the new parks and playgrounds and schools—to advocate for change. He proposed a car-free day and asked the city’s children to “take your roller blades, your roller skates, your bikes, . . . anything you’ve always wanted to play with but never had space enough to do, because I’m going to close off downtown, and we’ll see what happens.”

“In the morning, it was a complete PR disaster,” he said. Driver complaints about the rerouting overwhelmed the communications team. But the children



Figure 5: Skanderbeg Square, Credit Gabriel Kuris



came home and raved to their parents about how much fun they had had playing in the plaza. Veliaj said, “By that evening, we had won . . . a 20-year-old debate about turning downtown Skanderbeg Square from a place that saw 120,000 cars a day [into a place that] sees more than 120,000 people a day (figure 5).

In 2016, the city renovated and pedestrianized Pazari i Ri—the New Bazaar—a farmers market built in 1931 that anchored one of Tirana’s oldest neighborhoods. The redevelopment added seating and public art to attract local families and tourists to the area’s shops, cafés, and eateries (figure 6).



Figure 6: New Bazaar, Credit Gabriel Kuris

The architects and engineers of the projects department, led by Bilali, planned “micro public spaces”—small public plazas developed from space previously used informally for parking. By April 2019, the city had completed 6 such spaces and planned 10 more.

In 2019, Bilali’s team also developed Tirana’s first design guidelines in order to standardize streetscapes across the city. Based on international models, she said the guidelines would avoid “this [aesthetic] cacophony you can see in our city” while maintaining local character. Design elements included features like storefronts, benches, greenery, sidewalks, bike lanes, and lighting.

If the mayor won reelection, the team planned to pilot the guidelines in one downtown neighborhood before wider testing and dissemination. Then the mayor aimed to ask the city council to enshrine the guidelines into law. “The city should have its own identity [and] shouldn’t depend on changes in administration,” Bilali said.

#### *New schools to anchor child-oriented communities*

Together with a small, dedicated school tax levied on each household, new fees from building permits helped fund the construction of five new schools in Tirana during the four years after Veliaj was elected. TR030 included plans for 17 additional schools designed by Boeri and other top architects, sited in the underserved urban and rural peripheries. The city planned to rely on private–public partnerships to accelerate the construction of the schools without raising new taxes. The new schools’ locations would make it possible for most children in the city to live within walking distance of a school and enable all students to attend classes on the same shift. (In Albania, schools typically ran two half-day shifts, but studies showed students performed worse during the second shift. The central government had to approve changes in school schedules.)

The new schools would benefit residents of all ages because of a policy of 24-hour schools that Veliaj announced in spring 2018. The policy expanded on a

2014 national law Mazniku had developed when he was at the Ministry of Education. The policy encouraged the reuse of schools as community centers. International nonprofits administered school reuse projects nationwide—generally for educational and recreational programs like homework help and athletic activities for at-risk youth. Baboçi said, “A lot of schools are now seen as community centers in terms of sports fields, having a classroom for holding public meetings for citizens [and] a computer room that can be used.”

Baboçi said the 17 new schools planned for the city, which he called “high-quality, cathedrallike spaces,” were “being designed from the ground up with that purpose”: to serve community members of all ages. The city also planned to redesign schoolyards as child-oriented public parks, which would nearly double Tirana’s green space—without new land acquisition.

Toward the end of his term in 2019, Veliaj and his executive team looked beyond constructing new facilities to rethink neighborhoods from the perspectives of young children and caregivers. In the summer of 2018, five fellows from Harvard University’s Graduate School of Design, supported by a grant from the Bernard van Leer Foundation, researched ways Tirana’s schools could anchor ITCNs (infant, toddler, and caregiver-friendly neighborhoods) to serve infants, toddlers, and caregivers.

As planned, each ITCN would encompass the area within a 300-meter radius of a primary school—the distance an average toddler and caregiver could walk in 20 minutes. Within that zone, city planners would redesign streetscapes to suit ITCN needs for stability, safety, health, engagement, and emotional attachment. Relevant design elements included sidewalks, crosswalks, benches, greenery, play areas, signage, traffic calming, and noise abatement. The city would encourage related services like nurseries, health clinics, and fresh-food markets to cluster in the area as well. In less-densely-populated outlying areas, the city considered extending ITCNs to 500-meter radii.

In 2019, a nonprofit consultancy called Qendra Marrëdhënie (Relationship Center)—led by American architecture scholar Simon Battisti and funded by the Bernard van Leer Foundation—worked with the city to translate the Harvard study into a concrete plan called Born Thriving. Battisti’s team developed a theoretical framework and practical design guidelines for the ITCNs, as well as a data package of quantitative and qualitative indicators in order to assess their implementation and impact. Indicators included measurements of vehicular traffic and air pollution, the presence of supportive services like clinics and nurseries, areas of adequate and unobstructed sidewalks, walking distances between resting points, numbers of trees and streetlights, street noise, density of parks and green space, and maintenance of facilities.

Tirana planned to integrate the Born Thriving framework into its policies and projects in several ways. First, Tirana’s projects department incorporated the work into the city’s new manual of design guidelines, which would be promulgated into law pending city council approval. Second, Tirana planned to launch in late 2019 a pilot ITCN centered on two downtown schools. Third, city workers collaborated with Qendra Marrëdhënie to collect data for the ITCN

indicators in the pilot neighborhoods. Field tests forced data collectors to confront and resolve questions such as how to capture daily and seasonal patterns in street usage.

Battisti led a series of workshops that convened small groups of planners, engineers, and other city builders to refine and disseminate the design guidelines. Working hands-on with scale maps of pilot neighborhoods, the groups plotted the placements of roads, sidewalks, benches, lighting, greenery, street signs, reduced speed zones, and other ITCN design elements.

Workshop participants reported that they had not previously considered the city through the eyes of young children or caregivers—a perspective shift that Battisti and other organizers said could durably change the cityscape. “This content resonates with people very fast because it’s extremely pragmatic, and most people we work with are parents or have been parents,” Battisti said. “They might remember a time when they were walking through the city and had to put their kid down for just a second, but it was super loud and crowded and polluted, and there was nowhere to sit.”

Well-placed benches and shade trees were examples of small interventions that made neighborhoods more friendly for infants, toddlers, and caregivers. “These things can be really cheap, quite humble,” Battisti said. “What does a baby need to play on? Rocks, sand, gentle topography.” Simple interventions fit the administration’s search for acupuncture points to alleviate stresses on the city. “Focus on what is healthy and good for the mental well-being of the baby,” Battisti said.

Hammond, who became a senior adviser of the Bernard van Leer Foundation in 2017, connected Veliaj and Battisti with the foundation and its ITCN-oriented Urban95 initiative. In addition to its support of Qendra Marrëdhënie, the foundation provided a grant whereby Tirana could create a new position called *chief child development officer* for someone who would serve as expert adviser, internal advocate, and policy coordinator. Doruntina Vinca, who assumed the office in early 2019, focused mostly on assisting Qendra Marrëdhënie, on promoting child-friendly design approaches among city staff, and on facilitating data collection on the ITCN indicators.

Vinca said her hardest challenge involved finding direct applications for the ITCN model rather than advocating for its use. “People intuitively understand it,” she said. “The argument is strong. We’re not asking for the impossible; we’re asking for something meaningful and impactful.”

As the city’s ambitions for ITCN policies expanded, the Bernard van Leer Foundation’s global network and knowledge base provided crucial connections and lessons. For example, the foundation brought Battisti and Hammond to other cities—like Bhubaneswar, India—to share lessons and further refine the ITCN model. In May 2019, the foundation supported an international conference on child-friendly cities in Tirana, which confirmed how far the city had come in the quarter century since the haphazard growth of its early postcommunist transition.

## OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

“Whenever you try to implement change, you always have a lot of people who are against it,” Baboçi asserted.

Veliaj agreed: “None of this has been without a fight.”

As it turned out, some of the fiercest fighting involved Tirana’s drivers, who felt disenfranchised by the city’s move to embrace walking and bicycling. The government’s new sidewalks, parks, playgrounds, nurseries, kindergartens, schools, and other improvements had taken over vacant spaces that drivers had commandeered as informal parking spots. “The issues we’ve had the most resistance to is parking,” Mazniku said in 2019. “In this city, parking was free until three years ago. You could park your car more or less everywhere. You didn’t have to pay anything. As it turns out with a lot of things, once you have [something free] for a time, it turns into an entitlement.”

To manage overwhelming demand for parking, the city created a new parking agency, began instituting paid parking downtown, and issued residential permits to each household in the neighborhoods. City officials tried to shift the civic debate from a question of entitlement to one of trade-offs. Mazniku said: “How much of the space are you going to allocate for parking, and how much are you going to allocate to playgrounds . . . [or] sidewalks? It’s a much more democratic discussion.”

Residents were incensed by city efforts to take interstitial public spaces they had used as informal parking lots in order to turn them into pocket parks and pedestrian areas. Motivated by displaced parking or the noise that children made, neighbors sometimes sabotaged and vandalized new playgrounds. Some vandals even struck playgrounds the night after they opened. City officials said communist-era norms of acquiescence deterred neighbors who supported the playgrounds from interfering with, or reporting, acts of vandalism. The problem occurred most often in outlying areas, where residents felt more disconnected from city authorities.

Hoping to avoid the use of security cameras, heavy policing, or other surveillance measures reminiscent of communism, the city responded to the vandalism with passive countermeasures. Most important, maintenance task forces cleaned up vandalism as soon as possible—within a day at most. Quick responses neutralized vandalism as a means of protest or self-expression. And even diehard vandals gave up if their efforts changed little.

The city also moved away from shiny play modules and instead toward natural elements like rocks and sandpits. Such lower-profile playground and park designs were passive antivandalism measures and often provided more-positive experiences for young children and caregivers, even if some such designs required greater care than plastic and metal modules. “If you have an invisible target anyway, the impact of the vandalism is lost,” said Battisti.

The administration had less success in dealing with people whose lives were disrupted by the repossession of untitled land on which they had built houses and businesses without city approval. Since the end of communism, many

residents had appropriated vacant public spaces or quietly encroached on pedestrian thoroughfares. When the city tried to reclaim those spaces for roads, sidewalks, and other public uses, those who lived or worked there resisted. “There are loud minorities,” said Mato. “Most of the time, the buildings are illegal. After communism, everyone built everywhere. The fact that you built on public property doesn’t make you an owner. Why should Albanian taxpayers pay with their money for someone who built on public property?”

The city tried to minimize the footprint of redevelopment as well as to work around existing buildings. Bilali said: “Every time [the city redevelops a street], we have to go to the site to see the reality. Informal uses take up public space, but expropriation takes a lot of time.”

By law, the city provided a month’s notice before demolishing informal construction. The city tried to negotiate with displaced residents and ease their transition, sometimes providing alternative housing. Legal property owners received compensation at fair market value. However, displaced residents complained of difficulties in obtaining legal title to their properties—even after years of effort. Laws covering title legalization were confusing and frequently amended. Critics argued that the beleaguered national privatization agency served as a convenient scapegoat whereby the city could avoid eliminating favoritism, corruption, and dysfunction in local property markets and siting decisions.

Besides opposition from citizens who said they felt threatened by changes, city leaders reported few unanticipated hurdles in the design and implementation of policies oriented toward children.

## ASSESSING RESULTS

The city’s lack of data collection made specific progress, in terms of numbers of families reached or other impact evidence, hard to gauge. Battisti said that “data collection was the main challenge” hindering implementation of the ITC neighborhood policies developed by the Harvard fellows and Qendra Marrëdhënie. “There isn’t an appetite for data because there isn’t public trust that the data would be true.”

To coordinate and improve data collection, Baboçi started the city’s first data office under the Department of Planning in April 2019, with an initial staff of four. The city government planned to introduce more methodical data collection efforts later, including the ITC neighborhood indicators of Qendra Marrëdhënie’s “Born Thriving” framework.

However, some of the capital improvements of Veliaj’s four years in office were clear. In the space of four years, the city renovated more than 100 nurseries and kindergartens, constructed five schools, built 48 playgrounds, planted nearly a half million trees, and redefined the cityscape by making improvements to Grand Park, the New Bazaar, and Skanderbeg Square, as well as paving new and improved roads that included both central arteries and outlying streets.

These initiatives attracted international attention. The Economist magazine and City Lab, a media program that monitored innovative urban development

initiatives globally, covered the early phases, as did the blog *Rethinking Childhood*.<sup>10</sup> The Centre of Contemporary Culture of Barcelona awarded Skanderbeg Square its biennial European Prize for Urban Public Space in 2018.

“Tirana has changed into a totally different city in the past three years,” said Hoxha of Partners Albania. “Not only the square but also interventions like schools, cycling paths, and the quality of sidewalks, parks, and playgrounds. . . . Erion [Veliaj] is a master of public relations and promotion, but in this case, it is important because people need to see real results.” Hoxha emphasized that the city still had far to go: “Should they do more? Absolutely. There’s always more to be done in Tirana.”

The city’s achievements helped Veliaj win reelection in June 2019 with more votes than in his initial election, although a nationwide opposition boycott lowered turnout and created legal and political disputes. An internal poll a year before the election found that the administration’s efforts to improve playgrounds, parks, and green spaces were the mayor’s most popular policies, earning the approval of nearly two-thirds of residents polled.

The city budget had grown fivefold, due largely to an increase in building fees (text box 3). The city’s new parking agency paid for itself through fee collection. The new parks and recreation agency was on track to become revenue neutral based on donations and small activity fees, licensing, concessions, and parking. “The idea was to make it a self-sustaining enterprise,” Gonxhja said.

The kindergarten renovations prompted many more parents to send their children to public facilities. Mazniku said that over the four years, the city went from having less than one request for every kindergarten slot to 9.2 requests. “Now we have become victims of our success,” he said. “Everyone wants to send their kids to public kindergarten, but we just don’t have enough space anymore.”

The city used public–private partnerships (PPPs) to fund construction of new kindergartens and nurseries, as well as schools and other facilities. “Definitely, Tirana set the model for PPPs—especially when it comes to kids,” said Hoxha. “According to our monitoring for the past five years, kids are the area that gets the most donations. Anything around children, individuals, and businesses is attractive for donations. What we liked in the case of Tirana is that not only businesses but also the public could . . . see the results and feel the dramatic changes made in daily life.” However, Hoxha cautioned that the rising usage of PPPs in Albania—especially for conducting national infrastructure projects—had sparked a “big debate” about whether they invited favoritism and abuse. And in response to such concerns on the part of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and domestic critics, Albania curtailed the use of unsolicited PPPs in 2019.<sup>11</sup>

Although it was too early to measure the impact of urban reforms on the city’s youth, observers agreed that the city was better serving its youngest citizens. “If Tirana persists as a child-friendly city beyond the tenure of this mayor, that’s the real achievement,” said Battisti. To address sustainability, the

### Box 3. Revenue Generation

The Tirana planning department issued few new permits before the TR030 master plan passed, but it unleashed the pent-up demand beginning in summer 2017. Whereas the previous administration had issued just 100 building permits in its last year, Baboçi's office approved 1,200 in 2018.

The department implemented several changes as test cases for public service reforms promoted by the central government. First, Tirana barred all informal construction. Previously, the city had reserved the permitting process for major projects, and it had tolerated informal construction for smaller buildings—often tacitly approved by local police or inspectors.

Second, the planning department set up a transparent online system for processing and publishing proposed plans. The city imposed time limits at various stages, with a policy of silent approval that approved applications automatically if the city failed to respond quickly to requests. “We are under pressure to actually get things done on time and get them done right,” Baboçi said.

Third, the department dramatically increased developers' fees: from 2% of the *cost* of construction to 8% of the *value* of construction. Baboçi said that with more permits accepted, fee revenue surged from less than 2 million euros (about US\$2.5 million) to 52 million euros (US\$58.28 million) annually, which funded half of the city's expanded budget. Affected developers sued the city, but the constitutional court unanimously upheld the tax. “After someone pays a huge amount of money to the city formally through a tax, you treat the person as a customer,” said Baboçi.

The department tried to create a service culture that provided developers with more-efficient, more-reliable processes that lowered business costs. Opposition ebbed over time as developers saw their money well used to improve city services. Construction was still profitable in the growing city. However, the deluge of building permits the city issued after the two-year moratorium risked causing a housing glut, and a slowdown in construction could destabilize the city budget. Aliaj, a Democratic member of Tirana's city council and planning commission, criticized the Veliaj administration's encouragement of new construction. “I don't think that fueling construction in this moment is smart for Tirana or Albania,” he said. “They are giving permission [to new construction] at a rate that is not justifiable. It is not clear where the money comes from. . . Who is going to buy and occupy these buildings? Meanwhile, Albania is losing population.” He added that addressing disputes over property rights and informal construction was a higher priority than further development.

administration tried to enshrine its plans and policies into law. Some of those policies had already passed the city council by mid 2019, such as the master plan, building reforms, and new agencies for parking and parks and recreation. And the mayor planned to introduce others such as the design guidelines and ITCN pilots.

Successfully implementing popular parks, playgrounds, and pedestrian spaces helped depoliticize those issues for the future. “Now the playgrounds are politically neutral—after the big fight in the beginning,” said Baboçi. “You will always have smaller-scale opposition in neighborhoods, or you might have

smaller-scale opposition by certain members of a certain party, but as a whole, there is no discussion about playgrounds' being important and good."

Raising expectations also put pressure on future administrations to keep up the pace of reform. "If you set the bar that high, it will not be easy for the next mayor to lower the bar," said Hoxha. "Setting the expectation that the municipality will deliver [improvement] is an investment in a healthy relationship between the citizens and their government."

Urban planner and city council member Aliaj criticized the TR030 master plan as the result of an opaque process led by a foreign architect without local context. "The plan was done quickly—in one year and with no consultation," he said. "If there *was* any consultation, it was done in a closed circle and within one political party. That was a big mistake." Although the mayor's office held public meetings, Aliaj said the office had not shared the plan with the city council and planning commission until very few days before the final vote. And although Aliaj conceded the plan "had some interesting ideas," he said its high-density designs risked "destroy[ing] the social structure of the neighborhood unit of the city" and promoting "economic segregation, in a country with a poor property registration system and high indicators of corruption." The mayor's office contended in return that its processes were lawful, transparent, and publicly inclusive.

Aliaj also criticized the mayor's focus on small-scale projects like parks and playgrounds. "I was expecting Rama as prime minister and Veliaj as mayor to be a good combination along the same political spectrum, to start strategic projects like the city ring road, or to solve the problem of flooding with a modern drainage system, or to invest in public transportation. Instead, their projects are just beautification—like lipstick," he said. He said he also thought the city should "lead by example" on resolving issues of restitution and informal property ownership rather than dismiss the issue as a matter for central government. On the other hand, the Veliaj administration did begin work to improve sewage systems and traffic arteries but felt constrained by the limited resources and powers of the municipal government.

Others outside government agreed with Aliaj that Veliaj's government had failed to engage with civil society and other groups in substantive ways beyond public hearings. "Even in Tirana, consultative processes are a bit alien for our decision makers," said Hoxha.

Journalist Mejdini criticized the city for lack of transparency. "We haven't seen Tirana municipality show responsibility to hold private companies accountable when they do public investments," she said. Mejdini further criticized the Veliaj administration for its focus on public relations and personal style rather than on addressing deep-seated challenges like unemployment and corruption.



## REFLECTIONS

“Tirana itself is like a big playground,” said Erion Veliaj, shortly before his reelection as mayor of the Albanian capital. “It’s full of life, full of energy.” But even Veliaj’s critics agreed that his administration had reinvigorated the city. With support from local and international donors and experts—as well as local caregivers—the mayor’s vision for a child-friendly city had disseminated across city hall. And as more and more city workers adopted and included a child’s perspective in their projects and policies, they built a legacy that could outlast the mayor.

To relieve crowding at Grand Park, the parks department planned to develop comparable parks around Farka Lake in the city’s southeast and Kashar Lake to the northwest. The city also planned more than 200 playgrounds. “We are expanding the map,” said Erinda Fino, general director of Tirana’s parks and recreation agency. “People feel responsible for new playgrounds, feel they are part of their community. . . . People see that nowadays they can trust local government.”

The city planned to focus more attention on underserved outlying areas if Veliaj won reelection, as he did in June 2019. “One of the things we are trying to work on a lot now for the future is what happens in the [rural] periphery,” said Joni Baboçi, general planning director. “Most of our schools and a lot of playgrounds are in the urban periphery. [But] we are not just an urban municipality, so we’re trying to see how we can also address some of the issues that occur in rural areas.” Tirana hoped to stimulate the agriculture, tourism, and recreation industries and thereby preserve open space.

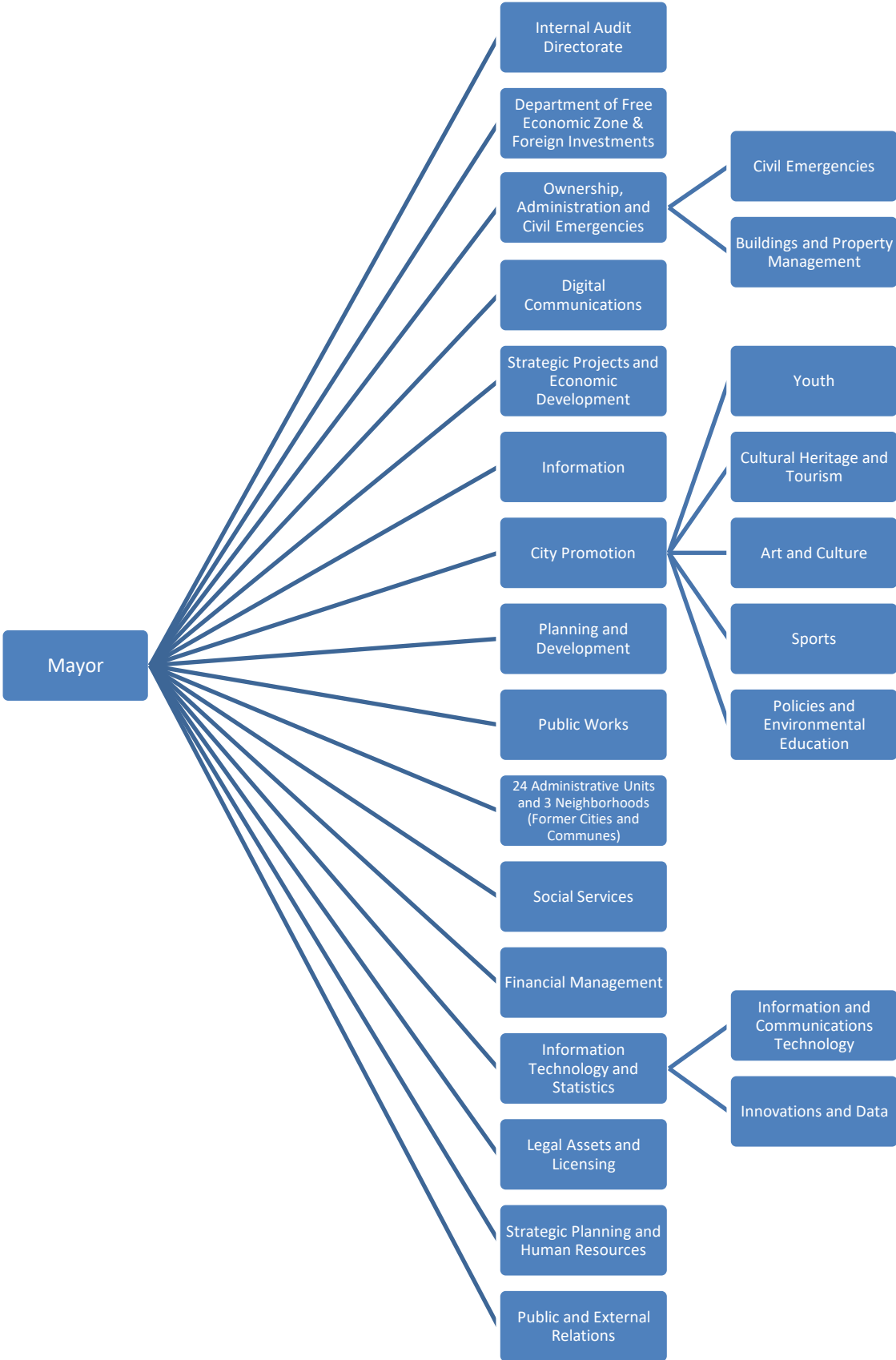
The strategic choices made by the mayor and his team involved trade-offs. Although the city’s new public spaces proved popular among local families the theory that civic participation and child-friendly development would reinforce each other in the long term remained untested. Citizens loudly and sometimes destructively protested the city’s reclamation of parking spaces and informal property. No one could be sure that children raised with amenities like new playgrounds and new schools and safer streets would become more-productive and more-engaged citizens and less likely to emigrate.

Veliaj’s savvy use of media also had both strengths and drawbacks. Although media enabled Veliaj to build political will and counter disinformation, critics charged that he promoted himself more than he did the city, personalizing and politicizing city government. Some critics said he had developed a cult of personality reminiscent of Tirana’s communist era.

Third, the decision to seek quick, visible wins in the heavily trafficked city center diverted resources that were arguably more needed by underserved peripheral areas. The early efforts helped build a coalition behind the idea of a child-friendly city and did not aim to reduce inequality. Veliaj was the first mayor after consolidation, and his outreach efforts to outlying communities, as well as the citywide vision of the TR030 master plan, showed commitment to those outside the heart of the city. His administration promised to address the urgent concerns of the periphery in its second term.

Ultimately, Veliaj staked his legacy on children, not construction. As the first mayor elected mostly by those born after communism, Veliaj said his fundamental challenge lay in changing the mind-sets of the city and its workers. With a shift in mentality, citizens would participate more in urban affairs and expect more from their leaders but also give those leaders a chance to deliver results. And both citizens and city workers would see the city anew from a child's-eye view. "The biggest and the most difficult infrastructure project [we faced] was only 10 centimeters long," Veliaj said, indicating his head. "Mental infrastructure."

Exhibit 1



**Table 1.**

Dependent Institutions	Self-Financing Dependent Institutions	Incorporated Dependent Institutions
Municipal Police	Metal Agency of Tirana Competence Delegation	University Student Residence No. 1
Directorate No. 1 of the Workers of the City	Mechanical Plant	Sports Center
Directorate No. 2 of the Workers of the City	Plant for Vehicle Replacement Parts	Agency for Students Treatment No. 2
Directorate No. 3 of the Workers of the City	Vehicles Office Competence Delegation	Agency for Students Treatment No. 3
Agency of Funeral Services	Recreation Center of Culture Competence Delegation	Eco Tirana Sh.a.
Agency for Parks and Recreation	Sports Center Tirana	Water Supply and Sewerage Sh.a.
Agency for Consumer Protection	Urban Transport Terminal Competence Delegation	
Tirana Parking Agency	Agency of Decor	
The Economic Center for Child Education and Development		
Directorate of Local Taxes and Rates		
Inspectorate of Territory Protection		
Tirana Cultural Center		
Directorate of High School Dormitories		
Tirana Sports Club		
Multidisciplinary Social Center		
Let's Stay Together Center		
The Common House Center		
Community Center Shkoze		
Agency of Markets Administration		
Tirana Youth Center		
Fire Protection and Rescue		
Second pilot at COMPAZ Center		

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