



■ In Profile – Kelmend Zajazi, Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South-East Europe (NALAS)



Kelmend Zajazi has held the position of Executive Director of NALAS, the Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South East Europe, since 2007. Prior to his time at NALAS, he managed several USAID projects, including the “Local Government Reforms Project”, the “Make Decentralization Work in Macedonia” project, as well as the USAID “Democracy Network Program for Civil Society Development”. In addition, he has served as an Advisor to the Minister of Health of Macedonia and has worked with the European Commission Humanitarian Aid Office. Kelmend Zajazi is a Medical Doctor and holds a master’s degree in Public Policy and Management from the University of Pittsburgh, USA.

NALAS was created in 2001 by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe. NALAS works in close collaboration with 14 Local Government Associations (LGAs) from 12 economies, representing 9,000 municipalities overall. For over a decade South-East European (SEE) countries have been undertaking intensive local government reforms. In the spirit of the European Charter of Local Self-Government, NALAS’ member LGAs have been the main promoters of such reforms.

Since its formation NALAS has maintained close institutional cooperation with the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe maintaining the status of Institutional Partner. Mr. Zajazi serves as a member of the Council of Europe’s “Group of Independent Experts (GIE) on the European Charter of Local Self Governments”. GIE is mandated to provide legal assistance to the Congress within its political mission and helps its three statutory committees in drafting reports on the situation of local and regional democracy in countries subject to a follow up of the application of the Charter.

Dear **Kelmend**,

Thank you for taking the time to answer our questions today and for providing our readers with an insight into NALAS’ work.

NALAS just joined the DeLoG Network. Please tell us a about NALAS’ interest in becoming a partner of the DeLoG Network and how both Networks will benefit from each other?

It was the quality of the work you are doing at DeLoG that attracted our attention initially. Soon after, it became clear that it will be of mutual benefit that we find ways to structure our exchange and connect our networks. While we have a clear mandate and focus within South East Europe only, we at NALAS are aware that an exchange with our peer fellows in other parts of the world can help us reflect on our experience and document it in a way that it may be of use for others too. So, joining DeLoG means for us a synergetic connection of two networks of common professional interest and



complementing knowledge which will mutually inspire our membership base in learning about new concepts, new solutions for common problems and a fresh view on state-of-the-art realities. This type of inspiration very often leads to new approaches and innovation.

What role does decentralisation play for NALAS' work and how does NALAS support decentralisation processes in the South-East European region? How important is EU integration in this context?

To contribute effectively to decentralisation as a democratic reform process is the main part of NALAS' mission. NALAS supports the decentralisation processes in the region by supporting the member LGAs as key reform actors. NALAS acts as a knowledge hub on local government issues in SEE, enabling exchange and capacity development. It helps inform the advocacy efforts of LGAs and works with them to continuously strengthen their capacities and successfully participate in intergovernmental policy dialogues at the national level.

We believe that decentralisation and democratisation go hand in hand and lead to stability and prosperity. Decentralisation makes reforms in public sector visible to citizens in their daily lives. Unfortunately, decentralisation and local government reform have not been at the centre of the EU integration process and the pre-accession funding instruments and therefore even the EU vision and the EU led reforms have still not touched upon the quality of lives of citizens in EU candidate countries. Luckily, Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia joined the EU earlier and they have been able to invest in modernisation of public services at the local level through cohesion funds and other structural funds available for EU member states. We hope that the EU enlargement will be rounded up soon enough, not allowing a dangerously increasing trend of inequal and unbalanced territorial development and quality of life in EU member versus non-member states within the Balkans. Demographic trends all over the region show both rural-urban migration at national level and East to West migration at the regional and European level. The demographic challenges in EU countries and the subsequent lack of skilled professionals only speeds up the brain drain which seriously affects the development potential of the Western Balkan region. We are convinced that a faster track approach of the EU enlargement agenda coupled with more in-depth reforms and increased EU focus on local governance in genuine decentralisation will dramatically speed up the modernisation of local services and infrastructure and will improve quality of life of EU's potential future citizens. This will certainly bring back the hope for a better future.

NALAS takes a number of actions to achieve these objectives. We take an active role in enabling Local Government Associations to become stronger brokers in localisation of SDGs. We maintain active communication with the EU Commission on all these issues and have developed strong allies in Brussels including the Committee of the Regions and the Council of European Municipalities and Regions – CEMR, among others. We continuously collect evidence to back up and promote our policy positions.

In NALAS' Strategy for 2018-2022 Local Government Associations (LGAs) are given a central role. Please explain why and how LGAs are contributing to NALAS' overall mission?

LGAs have the central role in NALAS. Actually, LGAs are the '*raison d'être*' of NALAS. Thus, our approach in LGA association development has evolved over time and a number of services are now available on demand. I will illustrate it with a couple of examples. LGAs are entitled to initiate a so called "Quick Response Service" at any time for a certain policy issue. Usually, they do it when there is a legislative process on the national reform agenda and the LGA uses the service to learn about the specific policy experience in the region. NALAS collects contributions from all 14 national LGAs and in only a few days we can develop a mini study with regional best practices and very strong policy arguments which the



LGA uses in the dialogue with the national government. We have been able to positively influence over a hundred policies with this real time knowledge exchange instrument. Another example is our flagship annual study on Fiscal Decentralisation in South East Europe where we monitor the status and development of local government finance and local government finance reform in South-East Europe, for more than a decade. This provides a comparative view of the local finance patterns and reforms in SEE, highlighting both positive and negative trends and successful policies for an informed and effective policy dialogue. For instance, NALAS had a fruitful collaboration with the LGAs and the Ministry of Finance of Albania where this report and a tailored peer learning and knowledge sharing exchange assisted in shaping their new law on local finances at the time, with best practices from the region. This dynamic exchange is made possible by active involvement of all NALAS member LGAs in an intensive process of sharing knowledge and evidence-based data. Here you have a crucial fact and reason for NALAS members being strongly connected in our network.

During the COVID-19 crisis, subnational governments have played a critical role for crisis management, trying to find solutions to maintain service delivery. What main challenges are subnational governments facing during the crisis and do you believe that this experience will result in a strengthening of the role of subnational governments for multilevel governance systems?

The immediate response to crisis in SEE is usually fully centralised, leaving the local governments to cope with it in a solitary and unsupported manner. We have seen the same patterns earlier with the response to repeated floods and Balkan migrant routes as well. Local governments are expected to absorb the crisis with their own resources. In this context, small municipalities, towns and cities have been on the frontline by providing immediate emergency assistance to those who are in need notwithstanding their limited capacities and depleting their resources.

The COVID 19 pandemic is perhaps the crisis that will last long enough for us to learn how global crisis should be tackled with a multilevel governance approach. Local leaders at municipal level have to act and solve issues rapidly and have the political courage to try new approaches, learn from trials and errors, take bold actions, search for creative and innovative solutions. We, as networks of these local leaders, are monitoring and identifying such practices and scale them up. This makes Local Governments and their Associations an indispensable actor in crisis prevention, preparedness, management and recovery.

Fortunately, we have witnessed substantial involvement of several Local Government Associations in crisis management hand in hand with national crisis management authorities in several cases in our region. This is an important experience we are gathering and we need to create more structured patterns of coordinated multilevel government response to crisis for more effective mobilisation of resources and more innovative ways to build resilient governance at local level. Now, more than ever, the region needs effective intergovernmental policy consultation and coordination. NALAS calls for targeted support from central government, increased financial decentralisation, stronger local tax powers and higher intergovernmental transfers.



Recently NALAS convened an online Mayors Conference to exchange information on the NALAS COVID-19 Survey and to identify policy positions for Socio-Economic Recovery at the local level in the South-Eastern European region. Could you share some key insights, challenges and lessons learned from this survey with us? How are South-Eastern European local governments addressing COVID-19 and how is NALAS supporting its Network's members?

The NALAS Study on the COVID-19 impact showed that the local governments are the frontrunners, not only coping with the crisis, but also providing the necessary prevention measures, supporting vulnerable groups and subsidising local economies. Furthermore, many of them also took a brave step forward: using innovation and digitalisation to solve the problems caused by the pandemic.

In a recent exchange among Directors of our member LGAs, we noted an increased productivity of LGAs during 2020. Their advocacy efforts have been more effective being able to exchange remotely even more often than before with Ministers and other government representatives on discussing policy issues. Just as well the overall number of attendees of capacity development / training activities have increased by using online delivery technologies. An overall increased volume of activities in 2020 is noted in NALAS performance as well. It was achieved with fast adaptation to the new circumstances, going online and transforming NALAS services to respond to the new needs. We were even able to organise specialised training for facilitation of online events and a guidebook to help our member LGAs utilise online tools to keep the continuity of their activity. For instance, we organised six well attended webinars for business continuity of solid waste and water and sanitation management services in times of crisis. We have also had targeted activities to address the Agenda 2030 “leave-no-one-behind” principle with special emphasis and social rights of vulnerable groups.

However, we are concerned that the financial downturn is yet to be felt at the local level as foreseen in our recent COVID-19 Survey. The data obtained indicates that there will be a 30% drop in local government financial revenues (or a total estimated loss of 17 billion Euro) if the crisis will last until 2022. This would in effect mean a drawback of relative successful progress of local finance reforms of the past 10 years and exert a crucial effect on the investment capacity of local governments which is already very limited in the region compared to the EU average.

Generally speaking, what are your expectations for the Network as a new DeLoG partner and what do you hope to accomplish during the upcoming years?

We are in continuous search for new ideas, new approaches, new methodologies in improving decentralisation and modernizing local government services.

We own a newly designed instrument in monitoring decentralisation called NALAS Regional Decentralisation Observatory composed of some 100 essential indicators organised around four key dimensions: local autonomy, quality of services, citizen participation and intergovernmental dialogue. We will be looking at opportunities with DeLoG partners to use this and other studies to look at the decentralisation trends, compare perceptions and test our assumptions and facilitate peer learning and knowledge sharing across local government policymakers, experts and practitioners. We will be foremost looking for innovations to enrich the offer to our members and increase the impact of our and our members' work. Potentially we could also extend our offer to other regions throughout the globe.



Before we close, is there anything you would like to add?

Lastly, I would like to round up our burning topic on COVID-19 crisis with a positive note, that perhaps we could expect the crisis to accelerate digital transition and intergovernmental dialogue, coordination and cooperation. This is because the demand for e-services has grown in these prolonged lockdown conditions.

It is a great opportunity to make a leap jump in increasing and simplifying the access to public services. By the same token, the post crisis recovery is the golden opportunity to turn into greener and more inclusive economic development through place-based policies developed and implemented in partnership with local governments and their associations.