

Parliamentary Elections in Albania

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On April 25th Albania held its 11th parliamentary elections since the fall of communism. Only twice there were early elections in the 1990s, and since 1997, governments have been able to complete their four-year terms, an indication of a quasi-stable democracy for a post-dictatorial country.

The government from the Socialist Party - in office since June 2017 - ruled with a majority of 74 out of 140 seats. The opposition parties relinquished their 66 mandates on the second year of the legislative period, following demands of resignation for Prime Minister Edi Rama, accused of corruption, vote manipulation and links to organised crime. The vacant seats were filled with the candidates in existing lists, and local elections were held without the participation of the opposition parties, giving both central and local governance to the Socialist Party, much to the chagrin of their voters.

For the opposition to return to the electoral process, a new mechanism was set-up: the “*Political Council*”, a cross-party mechanism for negotiations on amendments to the electoral code and election administration. A deal was signed on the 5th of June 2020 to push Albania towards meeting the new conditionalities introduced by the European Union before the start of accession negotiations earlier that year.

In July and October 2020, several amendments to the Electoral Code were adopted. They aim at strengthening the guarantees for gender representation, contain safeguards against misuse of public resources, alter the structure of the CEC, the verification of the candidates and the nomination procedure as well as the campaign financing and the electoral dispute mechanism.

140 members of the Parliament out of 1850 candidates from 46 different parties have been elected on April 25th in Albania. It was another test for the fragile democracy after the postponed accession talks with the EU. Therefore, these parliamentary elections are unprecedented not only due to Covid-19 restrictions. Changes started in February 2019, when the current opposition members exited the parliament amid accusations of corruption and crime linked to some members of the ruling majority. Seats were filled by existing candidates, creating for the first time in modern democracy, two positions: one with substitutes inside the parliament, and the other one on the streets, protesting and refusing to enter local elections. It took two years and intense international support to reach a political agreement in June 2020 to bring the opposition back in the institutional discussions. Political analysts called it “*a hasty agreement*”, and it was followed in October of the same year by an even hastier electoral reform, which lacked any consultation and was rushed into adaption.

Background:
**How did we
get here?**

**New code, old
habits**

**Think you can
choose your
candidate?
Maybe.
Maybe not!**

The new code modified the regional proportional representation system. It introduced the voters with the opportunity to cast preferential votes for individual candidates as well as for political forces. However, it is still the party leaders who decide on the ranking of candidates on the winning list, raising discontent amongst voters. There is a complicated formula that would allow a candidate ranked in the “not safe” list to cast several votes that would be higher than the party’s average. This clause was used as an exit strategy by both leaders of the major parties to “list down and let loose” all names and candidates with whom they wanted to part from the joint political journey.

**The legal
framework:
Too much ado
about
nothing?**

The political agreement preceded the amendments on the legal framework between June and October 2020. They changed the structure of the Central Election Committee (CEC), introduced electronic voter identification in all 5200 voting centres and piloted electronic voting and ballot counting only in one. New regulatory safeguards measures have now brought further restrictions on the use of public resources and public administration (without any visible effect so far). Stricter regulations were introduced also for the financing of the campaigns, media coverage and electoral disputes. Results are still to be seen, especially regarding the transparency of the campaign costs and financing. The relevant innovations on the procedures for these elections have not been matched by equal efforts to deliver a nationwide education program for voters, particularly since the electronic identification and the new voting ballots were introduced beyond the legal limit and very close to the elections date. This allowed no time for the CEC, political parties, or NGOs to run education programs for voters, and it raises concerns about the number of invalid votes it may cause. In February 2021, the Ministry of Interior confirmed 3.5 million voters, including Albanians who reside abroad. Only about half of them regularly vote every 4 years. It is expected that all 1.8 million voters will be registered electronically for the first time, to avoid double voting or voter impersonation, which has occurred in the past.

**Overall Turnout in
2021 elections: 46,3%**

**12 parties running in
the elections**

**140 seats in the
parliament**

What type of campaign?

There was an intense atmosphere of political volatility and mistrust between political parties, displayed in the campaign in all 12 districts. This year's campaign was taking place with certain limitations due to Covid-19 restrictions, however, several violations occurred. Monitoring organisations and the media have condemned the reiterated breach of anti-Covid-19 regulations by all parties, as they prove to be unable to refrain from the traditional way of campaigning with large gatherings.

A door-to-door campaign in the early stages was fast replaced by mass-gatherings, putting at risk the health of voters, as Albania was at the peak of the second wave of the pandemic.

In general, all political parties were investing time, resources, and energy on both traditional and social media electoral campaigns. These were dominated by several accusations of bad governance, corruption, links to organised crime and strong rhetoric towards the opponents. Fifty-two official statements were made on the first day of the campaign regarding the pejorative language used by the Prime Minister. Rama allegedly made comments targeting mainly women from the opposition party, portraying himself in a deeply misogynist way. Civil society activists as well as the Central Election Committee (CEC) called upon political parties to refrain from using derogatory language during the campaign.

Public servants or Party Officials?

Misuse of public resources for electoral campaign is a long-standing challenge in Albania. Increased benefits, short term employment, hasty procedures for property benefits, use of public time for political gain and other forms of abuse have been registered in Albania since 1991. This year, the Central Election Committee reminded all ministries and municipalities to refrain from using state resources in support of electoral subjects. The restraining clause went as far as prohibiting civil servants from liking and sharing political support on their personal and institutional accounts on social media. The concern was raised by the media and NGOs who reported a high number of violations on the use of public resources and personnel for electoral campaign.

A big question mark remained on the financial expenditures of the political campaigns, as there is no legal requirement for any contestant to publicly disclose the source of the amount of funds raised for the campaign.

Media

There is an interwind relation between media owners and political parties in Albania, making media to be perceived as a lobbying platform for both sides, challenging thus editorial independence and sophisticated self-censorship.

A new trend was rising in prime-time TV: main candidates and politicians, especially from the Socialist Party, dictated the rules of TV programs, and they accepted to go to on air only if they were alone with the host. In addition, they wanted to receive all the questions in advance, and they refused to answer to anything that went against their agenda. This refusal to sit in TV programs with politicians from the opposition parties or with journalists other than the host has

brought a new wave of concerns over the power and control that politics exercise over media, and over the real role of television in this campaign.

Also, party-produced contents were still widely used in news programs, even though they are clearly labelled as such. The social media arena was the new swapping scene used by all parties, and particularly by the Socialist Party (SP). Reports revealed an escalating number of payments to sponsor Facebook posts by the SP, 300 thousand dollars only in March. NGOs monitoring the campaign have reported several discrepancies between the well-designed posts on social media showing meetings in respect of the anti-Covid19 measures, when in reality those meetings were rather crowded and only selected pictures have been posted on Facebook, manipulating the viewers' perception.

Vote buying

Since 2017, international observers have raised concerns on vote buying, and there are two prosecution cases from 2016 and 2017, gaining international media exposure and including ministers, mayors, MPs, and party officials, suspected to be involved in electoral fraud. The cases have not been addressed by the justice system in Albania and the EU has emphasised in the top 5 conditionalities that Albania will have to initiate the proceedings against those accused of vote buying. The issue remains unaddressed up to these days.

Youth voters

Multiple campaigns were focused on calling young people to vote, based on the very low turnout of youth on the 2019 elections. Only 18% of the population turned out in the one-party voting two years ago, and only 11% were voters under 35. This shows the increased mistrust in political processes and the veracity of the voting system, especially among youth. Snowlines and failure of the justice system to deliver on its promise to punish politicians and electoral fraud brought further mistrust on the vote. Youth also feel misused, as they were called in campaigns, but felt neglected in designing programs or running them within political parties.

Party	Main Candidate	Political Ideology
Socialist Party	Edi Rama, Prime Minister, <i>incumbent</i>	Left
Democratic Party	Lulzim Basha, Opposition Leader	Right
LSI – Movement for Integration	Monika Kryemadhi	Central Left
Other parties	Various, 9 parties	All spectrum
Independent candidates	5	Mainly left

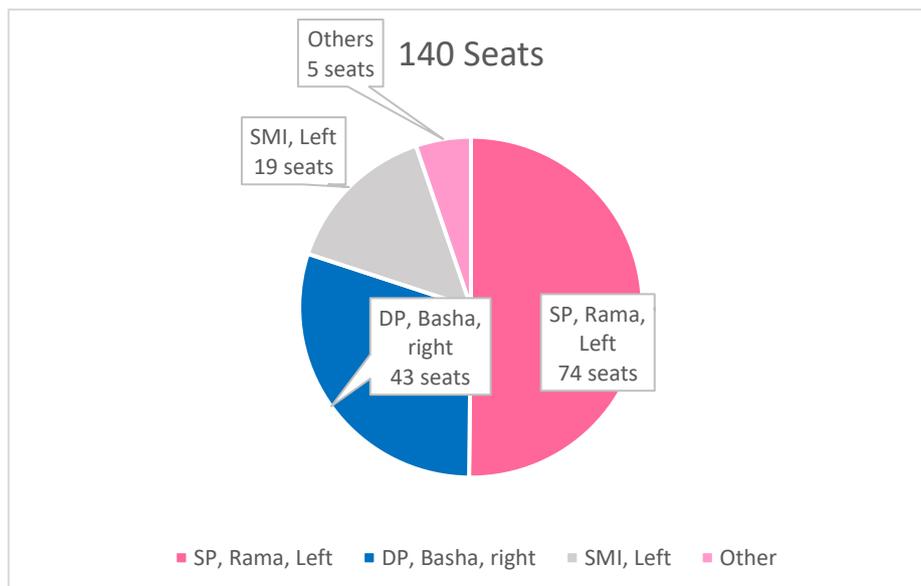
Last remarks

The 2021 election was the first election under the new electoral law. The elections were taking place whilst Albania was undergoing a deep reform in the judicial system, which seem to have caused some fatigue amongst its people, as no real results are shared with the public yet. The campaign was a neck-on-neck fight between the ruling Socialist Party, in search of a third mandate, and the Democratic Party, which looked ready and eager to enter again the political arena. Polls were showing a narrowing gap between the two. The Socialist Party was using two major points to call the emotional side of the voters: the successful management of the pandemic and vaccination campaign as well as the rebuilding pace after the 2019 earthquake. The Prime Minister and his party claimed immense credit for both and were certain on the entitlement to have a third mandate.

However, an alarming lack of transparency in funding of electoral campaigns and the efforts to hide any accusation of electoral fraud were concerning and overshadowed the above claimed successes.

The latest concerns addressed by media and civil society were related to the strong language and behaviour used by the Prime Minister as well as by the unusually active role of President Ilir Meta, therefore, influencing the environment with strong political statements.

Figure 1: Parliamentary Elections results in 2017



Post elections reflections

Among the 3.5 million Albanians entitled to vote, only 1.6 million (46.3%) turned out on the ballots on April 25th. The official data concerning the result of the elections are not clear yet and, there is no official news about the party who obtained the majority of the votes. Reports confirm that 1/3 of the voters were Albanians residing outside the country, mainly in Italy and Greece. Around 770.000 people voted for the Socialist Party (SP), which represents approximately 21.4% of those who are entitled to vote.

If these numbers are confirmed, this would be the first time a political party wins a third consecutive mandate in Albania since the fall of communism. In this perspective, the SP keeps the same number of votes and seats in the parliament: 74 of 140. The right-wing Democratic Party sees a little increase when it comes to its presence within the Parliament compared to the results achieved in 2017, going from 44 to 59 seats. However, these numbers were not sufficient to defeat the ruling Socialist Party.

Great disappointment for the Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI), the party established by the now-president Meta and led by his wife, Monika Kryemadhi, the LSI shrank from 19 to 4 seats for this term. This is an unexpected result not in terms of number of votes but for the outcomes in the seats distribution which has changed due to the electoral reform. The reason behind this failure may be linked to the strategy of the LSI which assumed the role of a national-wide party, getting small number of votes around the country, instead of investing its energy and resources in designated regions. On the contrary, this was the exact strategy followed by the Social Democrats Party (SDP), who targeted only specific areas in two different regions Tirana and Shkodra, and managed to gain, for the first time, three seats in the parliament. Because of the strong accusations received from the American Embassy and the travel ban to the USA, the leader of the SDP resigned as soon as he learned of his victory, giving his seat to one of his successors and declaring full support and cooperation with the winners of Prime Minister Rama.

Concerns have been raised about the alarming number of non-valid ballots, approximately around 83 thousand – numbers 2.5 times higher than in previous elections. Non-winning parties claim that these votes have been purposefully made invalid to damage the opposition and 33 accounts of vote-fraud or manipulation have been reported to the Central Electoral Committee (CEC). Citizens hope for a quick response both from CEC and from the Special Anticorruption structure (SPAK), since condemning electoral fraud is one of the conditions that Albania must fulfil in its journey towards the EU.

**New
parliament,
same
challenges**

The new parliament will have 81 MPs from left-wing parties (74 SP, 4 LSI and 3 SDP), and although the LSI is not planning to ally with Rama, they remain a left-wing party. The DP and its smaller allies of the right wing will have 59 seats in a parliament. They will have to work together for the implementation of the 15 conditions proposed by the EU for the membership. In this regard, one of the conditions is the validity of the local elections which took place in 2019, boycotted by the DP which sentenced the end of its presence in the local governance. It is a challenging issue since, it is not likely that the SP will re-evaluate their positions towards the elections that gave Rama and his party full control and power over the central and local government.

An interesting outcome of the elections, through the preferential vote, is the ranking of candidates per votes received, which does not match the ranking presented by the party leaders. Many candidates who were listed below the secure line (secure seat), proved to have a bigger support, and gained more votes than those who will become MPs. This is a strong indication that the Albanian people will continue to search for a real electoral reform and an opportunity to select the candidates from open lists – another objective of the new parliament which is unlikely to be taken into account. Nevertheless, the Judicial reform, fight against corruption and organised crime as well as a deeper reform of the public administration will, in principle, be the main tasks of the new parliament. However, considering the comfortable majority, it is very likely that Prime Minister Rama will continue the practice of the second mandate, with Council of Ministers Decisions overtaking the number and power of parliament, as most legal initiatives are decided in his cabinet rather than via laws in the parliament. The opposition will again struggle to challenge Rama’s initiatives and agenda.

Figure 2: Parliamentary Elections results 2021

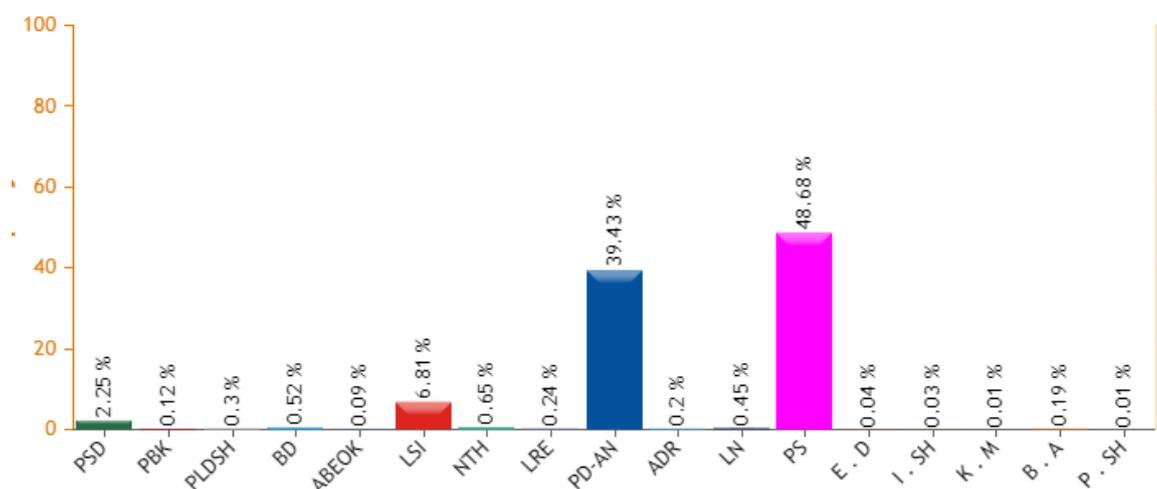
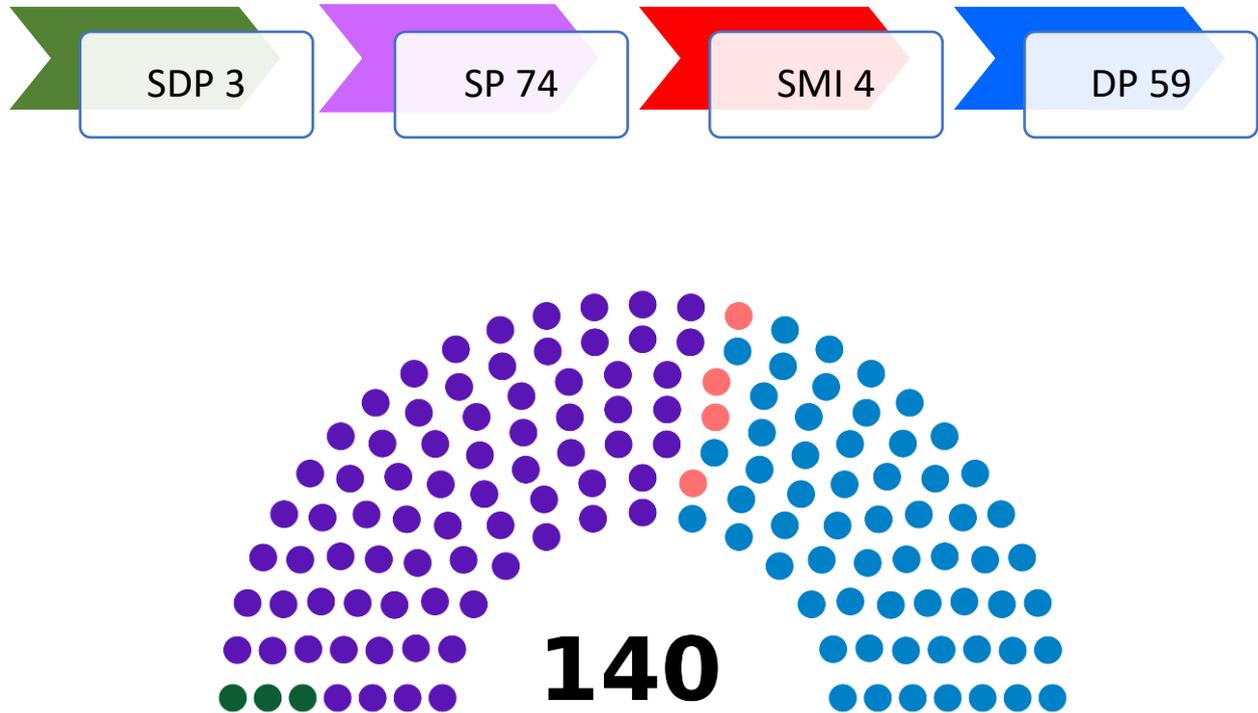


Figure 3: Composition of the parliament



Source: KOMISIONI QËNDROR I ZGJEDHJEVE