

**Election Campaign, Party Strategies, Public Opinion Polls**

**Introduction**

ELIAMEP’s South-East Europe Programme has recently established the Albanian Elections Observatory to closely monitor the political developments in Albania in the lead up to the country’s national elections, which will take place on June 23, 2013. This briefing note analyzes Albania’s election campaign which has entered its final phase in a tense political atmosphere and amidst mutual recriminations by the leaders of the two main parties. This brief will offer an overview of the political parties’ platforms and their respective strategies, while giving special emphasis to their electoral pledges, which are too ambitious to be considered credible. In addition, this brief will deal with Albania’s EU integration, which is high on the electoral agenda, and the political consensus between Socialists and Democrats that recently led to the adoption of three laws linked to the country’s EU membership. Finally, we present an overview of the main findings of the opinion polls on the Albanian elections that were conducted in recent months.

**The Campaign**

**Intensive Campaigning and Deep Polarization**

The 30-day election campaign officially started on May 24 and has been dominated by the two main political parties – the ruling Democratic Party of Sali Berisha and the opposition Socialist Party of Edi Rama. However, Albanians have endured months of campaigning, since political parties started their informal campaigns much earlier than the official pre-election kick-off. The top leaders of the parties campaigned extensively throughout the country to communicate their platform, present their candidates, and meet with citizens. The campaigns have included political rallies and concerts, while campaign posters for leading candidates and parties appear throughout the country. Campaign television spots have been used extensively by the main parties, while social networking media has played a more salient role than ever before. Across the country, the top political issues are the economy, employment and social services. With regards to the content of the political programs, party policies and electoral pledges are often vague or too ambitious to be considered credible. In addition, the programs of PDSH and PSSH remain quite general, without clear references to policies inspired by the different ideological orientations of these key parties.

**Albanian Election 2013 - Summary**

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Election pledges and presentation of achievements are not the only elements in the “battle” between Berisha and Rama. The political atmosphere is tense with the main leaders fuelling polarization, accusations of corruption or other scandals and insults that surpass the limits of what is acceptable in political discourse. For example, the Socialist leader accused Berisha of being corrupt and labeled his government a “corrupt family”. Rama urged Albanians not to vote for Berisha, calling him “a grandfather with a bulletproof vest who tells only fairytales”. Prime Minister Berisha considers every accusation launched by Rama simply a “lie of a failed man” who acts like a communist leader. Berisha accused his political opponent of abusing power for personal enrichment during his mayorship in Tirana, when he allegedly issued building permits without any legal basis. This ongoing political sparring has diverted attention from the real problems present in Albanian society and leaves voters discouraged.

Incidents of Violence

The pre-election period was marred by few incidents of violence. The Albanian police recorded 21 mostly minor incidents. Four more serious incidents of violence were recorded in the Vlora municipality, the Prezë commune in the District of Tirana, the Shtiqen commune in the District of Kukës, and the Roskovec municipality in the District of Fieri.

PDSH: “We are the Change, Forward”

Under the slogan “We are the Change, Forward”, the center-right Democratic Party is using an issue-based strategy for its campaign. Democrats marked the launch of their election campaign with a rally at Mother Teresa Square in Tirana where Prime Minister Sali Berisha asked for a new mandate in order to move the country forward and to fulfill promises he made when he came to power in 2005. Berisha is also holding town-hall meetings with different constituents around the country promoting his record during his term in office and presenting the major points of his platform for the next four years. The Democratic Party claims that, during its tenure, Albania has taken the most significant steps in its history towards democratization and economic development. The party claims among its successes the liberalization of visas, investment in education, healthcare and social policies, implementation of major infrastructure projects such as the Tirana-Elbasan tunnel, the creation of new jobs, the increase of wages for key professions and Albania’s membership in NATO. Sali Berisha is pleased with his party’s economic policies, tax policies and fiscal reforms that have enabled Albania to avoid recession and to maintain growth. One of the main priorities of PDSH’s platform for
the next four years is the creation of 250,000 jobs by attracting more foreign direct investments and by establishing a favorable climate – a 10 percent flat tax on personal income and corporate taxes - for businesses and working towards Albania’s entry into the European Union. Some other major points of PDSh’s platform include investing in different sectors such as industry, agriculture, tourism and technology, while tax and fiscal reforms continue to be priority for the party. Furthermore, Prime Minister Sali Berisha has promised for his next government the abolition of visas to the United States. Finally, PDSh continued its ‘traditional’ anti-communist regime discourse, directly associating the Socialist Party officials with the former regime.

**PSSH: “For an Albanian Renaissance”**

The Socialist Party focused its campaign on the failures of the Berisha government, and on the economic and social challenges Albanians face. The party has positioned itself as the only option for Albania’s “Renaissance”, which is also the party’s official slogan. Edi Rama started the official campaign with a joint convention with other members of his leftist coalition; he continued travelling around the country on a special campaign bus, and organized briefings with journalists.

Three elements of the Socialist Party’s strategy are notable. First, Edi Rama is portraying the current situation in Albania as the worst economic and social crisis ever. Rama claims that Prime Minister Berisha has impoverished the country, while pointing out the problems with tax increases, the corrupt education and health system, price hikes, high unemployment, and the lack of law and order throughout the country. Socialists, in a campaign trick, have given Albanian voters 100 reasons to “say no” to PDSh’s government. The second element of PSSH’s strategy includes the presenting of party’s platform and overview of proposed policies for the next four years. The Socialist Party program focuses on employment, with Rama pledging to create 300,000 new jobs. Rama, among other things, has promised to:

1. lower taxes for low- and middle-income employees at the expense of higher income earners;
2. reform the public administration and judicial system;
3. re-establish the state police to improve safety and public order;
4. remove taxes on basic food products; and
5. increase funding for rural development. The third element of the Socialists’ strategy is having Edi Rama meet with European and American officials in an effort to convince the electorate that he enjoys Western support.

**Smaller Parties inside Coalitions are Campaigning Individually**

Smaller coalition parties have been actively campaigning around the country but do not have the financial resources or media attention on the same scale as the two main parties.

The Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI) - Albania’s third largest party and the Socialists’ main ally - entered the election campaign under the slogan “Let’s Move Faster,” promising to accelerate the country’s EU integration. After LSI’s departure from the ruling coalition and the reconciliation between its leader, Ilir Meta, and Edi Rama of the Socialists, the party has been pushing the governing and opposition parties to adopt the three laws linked to the country’s EU candidate status. The success of this initiative is the among the top campaign priorities of the LSI. EU candidate status is seen by this party as a great opportunity for more financial support by Europe, more projects and
more new jobs for young Albanians. As with the PDSH and PSSH, fighting unemployment is LSI’s main priority. Ilir Meta’s main policy proposals are to open industrial parks and free economic areas, to reduce taxes for a period of 5 years, and to offer concessions for foreign and domestic investors, in order for these businesses to create new job opportunities. Ilir Meta has expressed dissatisfaction with the ambitious pledges made by the main political parties – such as the creation of many new jobs – and asked them to refrain from making populist declarations and to focus on Albanian reality.

The Socialists’ second ally is the Human Rights Union Party (PBDNJ), a political grouping that represents the ethnic Greek minority in Albania. The party has campaigned mainly in the southern municipalities where the Greek minority predominantly lives. Under the slogan “Only Europeans”, PBDNJ is prioritising Albania’s EU integration as the only solution for the minority to maintain its identity. PBDNJ is campaigning issues that affect the lives of the minority, such as education in Greek language, property rights, cultural rights, and pensions from the Greek state. PBDNJ claims that the Albanian government is repressing ethnic Greeks’ rights and is trying to reduce the true size of the Greek population through a manipulated census. The presence of the Greek consul in Gjirokastër in PBDNJ’s election meeting in Përmet caused a strong reaction from some members of the Albanian media, who considered it an intervention in Albania’s internal affairs.

The Democrats’ allies, the Chams’ Party for Justice, Integration and Unity (PDIU) opened its official election campaign under the sound of the national anthem and in a venue adorned with the national flag. Under the slogan “We Love United Albania”, PDIU’s leader, Shpëtim Idrizi, is asking for the votes of Albanians in order to vote for a certain party have been reported to the media.

The Duplication of Voter Lists continues to be a big problem.

The electronic voter verification system in Tirana district and the electronic counting system in Fier district failed. The Central Election Commission decided to replace the method with the manual verification in Tirana and manual counting in Fier, the country’s largest district.

The smooth functioning of the CEC remains the main concern of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). [See Albanian Elections Observatory Brief no. 2]

FRD and AK: Targeting both Government and Opposition

Outside the coalitions, two political parties are actively campaigning in an effort to convince the wider public that they have a solid electoral base and that they will avoid the fate of smaller, marginalized political forces.

The New Democratic Spirit (FRD) started the official campaign in Tirana, where its leader, Bamir Topi, expressed his confidence that FRD will be a key factor in the formation of the new government after the June elections. Under the slogan “End to the Transition, For the state and the Citizens”, FRD is presenting itself as the only political alternative that
will put an end to the “old politics” which have allegedly destroyed the Albanian nation. FRD’s electoral campaign is focusing on an intensive communication with citizens, claiming to refrain from the populism and radicalism of other political parties.

The Red and Black Alliance (AK), which has chosen “God first and Albania above all else” as its motto in these parliamentary elections, is campaigning around the country on an anti-Berisha bent and pushing a pan-Albanian nationalism that expands beyond Albania to Kosovo, FYROM, and other countries with significant Albanian populations. AK’s leader Kreshnik Spahiu has asked for the removal of Berisha from power and his arrest, while his party’s program focuses on the strengthening of state institutions and fighting against corruption. AK has expressed dissatisfaction with the limited media coverage of its electoral events, accusing TV broadcasters of being under the control of the two main parties. The party is extensively using social media, especially Facebook, to promote its program.

**EU Agenda and Election Campaign**

The European Union is traditionally high on the political agenda in Albania and this election campaign was no exception. Albania’s EU candidate status has dominated the speeches of political leaders who promise to advance the country’s EU bid. From the names of the two coalitions to the slogans of most political parties ‘Europe’ is a salient feature of this year’s elections. Furthermore, all significant political parties support the country’s integration into Europe. Even the Red and Black Alliance, widely seen as the most nationalist party, is anything but eurosceptic and agrees that Albania’s national interests will be better served through integration into Europe. However, this widespread support has not been translated into a powerful drive for EU-required reforms. Albania’s European integration can be best characterized as a process filled with setbacks and Albania is a Janus-faced EU aspirant. On the one hand, Albania is not marred by the post-conflict problems of other Western Balkan states and its legislators overwhelmingly accept EU objectives and recommendations. On the other hand, the implementation of policies has remained inadequate, to say the least, and large problems remain with the functioning of democracy. All this leads many to question whether the Albanian political elite genuinely has the political will for reform. All in all, Albania is caught in a vicious circle of failure that has frustrated the country’s dream for becoming an EU candidate country for the third year in a row.

**The Recent Adoption of Three Laws for EU Accession: Political Responsibility or Political Trick?**

After the official start of the campaign, the government and the opposition reached a consensus for adopting three laws which are requirements for Albania’s EU bid to move forward. The three laws – on the judiciary, the public administration, and the regulation of parliamentary procedures – were blocked for years due to lack of consensus between the Democrats and the Socialists. The adoption of the laws was welcomed by the international community.
Foreign diplomats highlighted the importance of consensus and dialogue that should exist among Albania’s main political parties, but which had been missing in previous years. The international community stressed that the adoption of these three laws demonstrates that the main political parties can find common ground and work together for the good of the country as a whole. However, many political analysts in Albania do not share this optimism and maintain that the ratification of these three laws does not reflect genuine responsibility by the Albanian political class or its willingness to work for the good of the country. On the contrary, they view this political consensus as a trick to garner support before every election.

Political developments in Albania in recent years demonstrate that the country’s EU accession process is often treated by politicians as a tool for parties to gain political advantage. Little is done by anyone to build multi-party consensus to make the necessary reforms. Thus, one of the largest obstacles for Albania’s process of democratic consolidation and for joining the EU is the lack of elite motivation for genuine change. In fact, European integration experts argue EU conditionality does not adequately encourage cross-party consensus in Albania to resolve the country’s problems as it had been hoped.

Without a doubt, the political consensus between the two main political parties that led to the adoption of the three laws is a step in the right direction. However, the picture of Albanian democracy that has emerged from recent developments – especially the preparation period for the June parliamentary elections – is still quite problematic, casting doubt on whether the political scene will decisively normalize. Apart from the adoption of the three laws, Albania needs to deliver results in the fight against organized crime and corruption, and it needs to provide evidence that the country’s political institutions are functioning properly. The June parliamentary elections are seen as a test for Tirana’s political elite to advance the country’s EU integration goals. In fact, top EU officials have linked EU candidate status with free and fair elections.

**Public Opinion Polls: the Opposition Ahead**

Two companies, IPR Marketing and Instituto Piepoli, in cooperation with two of the major television studios in Albania, Ora News and Vizion Plus, carried out several surveys which indicate that the opposition led-coalition is set to win the June parliamentary elections. According to the last poll conducted by IPR Marketing and released by Ora News TV, 41.5 percent of respondents would vote for the Socialists on June 23, while 39 percent would back the Democrats. Support for both parties had been increasing since May, with Socialists up 3.5 points and Democrats up by 1 point. The Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI) is third with 5.7 percent, followed by the Chams’ Party with 1.5 percent and two new political parties: the New Democratic Spirit
(FRD) with 2.5 percent, and the Red and Black Alliance (AK) of Kreshnik Spahiu with 1 percent. Despite the delicate balance between Democrats and Socialists, the difference between the right-wing and left-wing coalitions is significant. The PSSH-led Alliance for a European Albania is set to win the June parliamentary elections with 51 percent of the vote, up 2 points since May. The PDSH-led Alliance for Employment, Welfare and Integration is set to win 45 percent of the vote, also up 2 points since May. The leftist opposition is expected to win the elections with a six point lead.

The IPR Marketing poll shows a comfortable majority of 49.5 to 45 percent for the PSSH-led coalition in the electoral district of Tirana. The same poll shows a larger margin for the PSSH-led coalition in the electoral district of Fier: 56.7 for the coalition of the left and 39.3 for the PDSH-led coalition. In the same district, the poll gives the Socialists 46 percent of the vote, 30 percent for the Democrats, 7 percent for the LSI, 4.5 percent for the PDIU and 2.5 percent for the FRD.

Unlike the IPR Marketing poll, the public opinion poll conducted by Euromedia Research on May 31 shows that the PDSH-led coalition is likely to win the June Parliamentary elections with 48.4 percent in the district of Tirana. The Democratic Party is due to win 48.4 percent and its ally, PDIU, will most likely receive 1 percent of the vote. According to the Euromedia Research poll the PSSH-led coalition is 2.9 points behind the PDSH-led coalition. While, the Democratic Party is leading the polls with 5.5 percent over the opposition Socialist Party.

Public Opinion Polls - Political Coalitions and Political Parties in the District of Tirana
Another major poll was conducted by the Instituto Piepoli on behalf of the Albanian TV channel Vizion Plus and was published in June 13, 2013. This poll shows a comfortable majority of more than 7 points (51 to 42.5 percent) for the PSSH coalition. When it comes to individual parties, the poll shows the Socialist Party leading by 42.5 percent and the Democratic Party trailing second with 38 percent. Both parties are up 2.5 percent since the previous poll from the same company, published in April 2013. LSI, FRD, and AK were lagging behind with weakened support compared to the April 2013 poll.

Comparison Results of the last opinion polls conducted by IPR Marketing and Instituto Piepoli

Some of the main findings of the pre-election public opinion polls conducted by different companies include the following:

- The level of satisfaction with the work of the government in the economic sector is low. According to the IPR Marketing poll, 33.9 percent of the respondents positively evaluated the work done by the government, while 48.2 percent viewed it negatively. The results are disappointing for the opposition, with 31.5 percent rating the work done by the opposition leader positively and 37.2 percent rating negatively.

- According to the IPR Marketing poll, the majority of Albanian citizens, 82.1 percent, are following the election campaign, with 45.9 following it with great interest and 36.2 percent with little interest. 17.9 percent of Albanians are not following the election campaign.

- 38.7 percent of respondents in the IPR Marketing poll believe that none of the political leaders are running the election campaign in a convincing way. The percentage for Edi Rama and the Socialist Party is 36.3 percent, while for Sali Berisha and the Democratic Party 25 percent.
In the same IPR Marketing poll, 39.4 percent of respondents said they consider party programs in deciding for which party to vote. 20.3 percent said they will vote for a party regardless of the program, while 11.3 will consider the candidates included in the party lists. 9.5 percent will vote based on the coalitions’ leaders.

74.6 percent of Albanian citizens polled in the IPR Marketing study found unemployment to be the number one problem in Albania and thought that parties should address it in order to win the elections. The economic crisis is ranked as the second most important problem with 52.4 percent, while the fight against corruption is ranked third with 36.9. European Integration follows with 30.4 percent.

According to the Instituto Piepoli poll, 73 percent of respondents intend to vote in the upcoming elections, while only 16 percent do not intend to do so.

In the same poll by the Instituto Piepoli, 51 percent of respondents trust Edi Rama, 45 percent trust Sali Berisha and 43 percent trust the leader of FRD and ex-President Bamir Topi.

### Public Opinion Polls - Results

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<th>Institute</th>
<th>Release Date</th>
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<th>PDSH</th>
<th>LSI</th>
<th>FRD</th>
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### Conclusion

Currently, Albania is under pressure to satisfy key EU conditions, particularly the organization of free and fair elections. The lack of constructive dialogue, the confrontational political culture and the deep polarization of the main political coalitions do not leave much room for optimism. Despite the last minute adoption of three key EU-required laws, it is still uncertain to what extent the main Albanian parties will be ready to go beyond factionalism in order to mend the tarnished image of their democracy. The elections of June 23rd will be a crucial test of whether Albania can follow the path of European integration. If politics fail once more, the country’s EU aspirations will flounder and the real losers will be the Albanian citizens.
Sources

- "Raporti i Ndërmjetëm II: Zgjedhjet për Kuvendin e Shqipërisë 2013", Koalicioni i Vëzhguesve Vendor, May 27, 2013
- ELIAMEP’s Briefing Notes
- In addition, ELIAMEP’s Albanian Elections Observatory is regularly monitoring the official websites of the Central Elections Commission and the political parties, and has also benefited from analyses in Albanian electronic and print media.

Check related analysis:

- Signaling Change in Albanian Politics: Edi Rama’s visit to South Serbia’s Presevo Valley, available at: http://www.eliamep.gr/?p=10566
- Τα νέα Πολιτικά Κόμματα στην Αλβανία και η Αναδιάταξη της Αλβανικής Πολιτικής Σκηνής, available at: http://www.eliamep.gr/?p=11453