

BULLETIN

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The Political Crisis in Albania in Light of Recent Local Elections

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On 8 May 2011, local elections were held in Albania, but final results were not announced by the Central Election Commission until 15 days later. The conduct of elections in accordance with democratic principles, which has not been the case in this country, was a condition for further progress in Albania's integration with the European Union. Meanwhile, international observers point to weaknesses in the voting and to an unclear vote counting process. The election deepened the political crisis, which has lasted since 2009.

The Election Results. In local elections in Albania we observed the participation of two electoral coalitions. The Alliance for the Citizens was co-created by the ruling Democratic Party of Albania (DPA), which is the party of Prime Minister Sali Berisha. The Alliance for the Future, in turn, was led by the Socialist Party of Albania (SPA), the largest opposition party and headed by the mayor of Tirana, Edi Rama, since 2000. The opposition candidates will govern in eight of the 12 capital cities of the Albanian counties.

The counting of votes for the mayor of the Albanian capital (about 250 thousand votes) ended after a week with the SPA opposition candidate receiving 10 more votes than his DPA counterpart. Thus, the ruling party demanded a count of mayoral votes that were found in the ballot boxes for elections to the city council. This situation led to both anti-government protests and clashes between police and the opposition. Consequently, the election has deepened the political crisis in Albania. After the additional votes had been taken into account, the ruling party candidate eventually had an advantage of several dozen votes.

Findings of International Observers. This year's elections in Albania were supervised by a record number of more than five thousand local and international observers—including OSCE, Council of Europe and the European Parliament—the highest number since the early parliamentary elections in 1997 when the country was plunged into anarchy. There was such a large number of observers there because, according to the OSCE, no elections have been held according to democratic principles in the 20 years since the fall of communism in Albania.

A preliminary report published jointly two days after the elections by the OSCE and the CoE found the elections were competitive and transparent, but noted several shortcomings. The document also pointed to the very slow vote-counting process. Within two months after the election, the OSCE was due to publish its final report with recommendations for the next elections. However, because of both the protracted vote-counting process and the late announcement of the elections' final outcomes—which resulted in a tense political situation in the country—the document probably will be announced within the next few days.

In addition, the OSCE and the CoE criticized Albania for the course of the month-long electoral campaign during which incidents occurred almost on a daily basis. Among them were threats and minor scuffles as well as an exchange of fire and bomb attacks on property belonging to the candidates or parties. Similar incidents also had occurred during previous election campaigns in Albania; and, in 2009, one of the SPA Members of Parliament was shot just two months before the parliamentary elections.

Internal Conditions. The course of the electoral campaign, the shortcomings in conducting the elections and, above all, the unclear rules for counting the votes reflect clearly the overall condi-

tion of the Albanian state. Since the last parliamentary elections in June 2009, a political crisis in Albania has been observed. At that time, the DPA defeated the SPA by one and a half percent of the votes and received 70 seats in the 140-seat parliament. The socialist party, which had nearly half the seats in parliament, accused Prime Minister Berisha's party of electoral fraud. Ever since, the opposition has not participated in voting in the parliament and announced it would maintain the status quo until there is a clarification of the irregularities that took place during the parliamentary elections.

The conflict between the two largest parties was aggravated in mid-January 2011 by a corruption scandal involving a video recording of Ilir Meta, who was the Deputy Prime Minister and a member of the Socialist Movement for Integration. This party of four Members of Parliament became part of the coalition government after the elections in 2009. It is the only party in the Albanian parliament besides the DPA and the SPA. The revealing of the recording soon led to numerous anti-government demonstrations. During one of the protests in Tirana, four demonstrators were killed and members of the Republican Guard were later accused of murder by use of a firearm.

The political crisis caused the European Commission in November 2010 to respond negatively to Albania's April 2009 application for EU membership, recommending the EU Council not grant candidate status to the country. In its justification, the Commission pointed to, among other things, shortcomings in the last parliamentary elections, a weak and politicized public administration and the lack of a judicial reform strategy. Nonetheless, in December 2010 the European Union lifted visa requirements for citizens of Albania.

A lack of commitment by political elites to reforms to modernize the country is one of the main reasons why Albania remains one of the poorest countries in Europe—the GDP per capita in 2010 amounted to less than 7.5 thousand dollars (ppp), ahead of only Kosovo, Moldova and Ukraine. Moreover, the level of corruption perceived in the country is among the highest in Europe. Only in Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova is corruption more widespread. Such a situation makes it difficult for foreign investment in Albania and means that in its economic development the country does not make use of its potential, including its attractive geographical location.

Prospects. The conflict between the two main parties on the Albanian political scene makes many of the country's state institutions, including parliament, operate inefficiently. Meanwhile, in order to conduct many reforms, including improving the judiciary system, there is a need for a qualified majority in parliament. The opposition probably will continue to boycott the work of parliament, calling for early parliamentary elections. Such a solution will be unlikely since it is opposed by the ruling party, which still enjoys considerable popular support.

In recent months, the European Union has more visibly than before signalled its interest in Albania accelerating its democratic transition. Recently, Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy Štefan Füle met in Tirana with key Albanian officials and the largest parties' representatives. He sought to motivate Albania to work for political cooperation in the country and to accelerate the process of European integration. European Commission President José Barroso had plans to go to Tirana this month on a similar mission. However, Barroso cancelled his visit and expressed disapproval of the politicization of the vote-counting process. Also, High Representative Catherine Ashton called off her visit to Tirana, calling on the Albanian political parties to start a dialogue.

If this level of political culture in Albania is maintained, the European Commission again is likely to point in the next annual report to the need for fundamental basic principles of democracy. This in turn will reveal a lack of progress toward European integration of the country, a situation that may last up to parliamentary elections scheduled for mid-2013. The EC is likely to give a positive opinion to grant Albania EU candidate status only after elections are conducted in accordance with OSCE standards and when the parliament will not only function efficiently but also will proceed with implementation of the necessary reforms.

The EU's capacity to influence change in the current political situation in Albania is hampered because of both a weak political pluralism in the country and because the conflict for power between the two main parties pushes issues relating to EU integration to the background. However, during its presidency of the EU Council, Poland should clearly indicate that elsewhere on the continent the political elites' commitment to democratization of their countries results in not only more dynamic economic growth, which improves the living standards of their inhabitants, but also facilitates integration with the EU. Taking measures to bring about political dialogue in Albania—even to a limited extent—would at the same time confirm that one of the priorities of Poland's foreign policy are actions aimed at democratization in one of the EU's closest neighbourhoods.