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## Promoting Democracy by Means of International Election Observation: The ODIHR Election Observation Mission to Albania<sup>1</sup>

The parliamentary elections held in Albania on 3 July 2005 were observed by the international monitors of the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). The aim in observing the poll was to examine – as far as possible across the whole country – Albania's compliance with the international standards for free, fair, and democratic elections to which it had committed itself within the framework of the OSCE (then CSCE) by signing the Copenhagen Document of 1990.<sup>2</sup> By sending an election observation mission, ODIHR made a further contribution to the democratization process in Albania's starkly polarized political culture, which is dominated by long-lasting and intense power struggles between the two largest parties. In the past, Albania's development into a democracy under the rule of law has regularly been interrupted by political and social turmoil that periodically brought the country to the brink of collapse.

### *Albania's Precarious Democratization Process*

Following the end, in 1991, of the Communist one-party rule of the Albanian Party of Labour, Albania embarked upon a turbulent transformation process. The Socialist Party of Albania (SP), the successor party to the Albanian Party of Labour, did succeed in winning the country's first free elections in 1991 and provided Albania with both its President, Ramiz Alia, and its government under Prime Minister Fatos Nano. However, against a background of mass anti-Communist demonstrations, the flight of large numbers of refugees to Italy, and nationwide looting of food, it was not long before an all-party government was formed with the involvement of the opposition parties, and, above all, the Democratic Party (DP) under Sali Berisha. Parliamentary elections were brought forward to 1992, which enabled the DP to form a new government.

The newly elected President Berisha instigated a wave of arrests and trials of former Communist officials, which lasted from 1992 until 1996.

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1 The following contribution reflects solely the opinions of its authors and is not intended to reflect the positions of any of the organizations and missions discussed in the text.

2 Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE, Document of the Copenhagen Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE, Copenhagen, 29 June 1990, in: Arie Bloed (ed.), *The Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe. Analysis and Basic Documents, 1972-1993*, Dordrecht 1993, pp. 438-465, sections 6-8.

These increasingly took on the character of a political cleansing operation targeting the SP, which saw both Nano and Alia receive long prison sentences. The repressive policies of the ruling DP and the failure of Berisha's attempt to have his Presidential powers extended by constitutional referendum led to several splits within the DP and a number of cabinet reshuffles. In the run-up to the 1996 parliamentary elections, a total of 50 opposition candidates were denied the right to stand. In addition, a new electoral code was passed that greatly disadvantaged the smaller opposition parties. ODIHR expressed its doubts as to the fairness of the 1996 parliamentary elections, which were boycotted by the opposition parties and from which the DP under Berisha again emerged victorious. A joint request by the OSCE and the Council of Europe to have the elections rerun under the oversight of international observers was rejected by Berisha.

The last vestiges of the Berisha administration's political credibility evaporated in 1997 in the wake of a national scandal involving fraudulent investment schemes. The collapse of the so-called pyramid schemes saw a third of Albania's population, attracted by the high interest rates promised by, among others, members of the government, lose the bulk of their wealth. The Berisha government was suspected of having enriched itself as well as of involvement in numerous money laundering operations.<sup>3</sup>

Following the collapse of the pyramid schemes, Albania found itself on the brink of civil war: Rioting citizens had looted weapons arsenals of the military and the government had lost control of large parts of the country, including parts of the capital, Tirana. To re-establish the state's authority, Berisha turned to the international community, requesting a military and police presence with a mandate from the UN Security Council. This led to the stationing of up to 7,000 personnel in the country. In this chaotic social and political situation (including an assassination attempt on Berisha), the OSCE – and ODIHR in particular – assumed in 1997 the difficult task of monitoring the parliamentary elections with a body of 500 international election observers. These elections brought the opposition SP to power, under their leader Fatos Nano, who had been freed from prison by supporters shortly before the poll and granted amnesty by Berisha. A coalition of the SP and several smaller parties controlled some two-thirds of parliamentary seats. Political oppression continued undiminished under Nano in 1998. In a simple reversal of positions, it was now directed at members of the DP, who largely boycotted parliamentary activities. Following the arrest of leading DP officials and the assassination of the party's vice president, Azem Hajdari, Berisha called for the overthrow of the government and the occupation of Parliament. In the aftermath of the crisis, Nano's government was forced to dissolve it-

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3 On the issue of money laundering and the possible involvement of the government as an endemic problem in Albania, see Helen Santiago Fink/Sebastian Baumeister/Ledia Muco, Money Laundering: The Case of Albania, in: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg/IFSH (ed.), *OSCE Yearbook 2004*, Baden-Baden 2005, pp. 415-428, here: pp. 421ff.

self. Pandeli Majko was chosen from the ranks of the SP to be the new Prime Minister. A referendum was also held on a new constitution, which took effect in November 1998.

In 1998-99, during the Kosovo conflict, support for the DP grew in the north of the country. This was the base of operations of the Kosovar UÇK/KLA, which was suspected of having received weapons from military arsenals plundered in 1997 with the collusion of DP party officials. The war created around half a million Kosovar refugees, further intensifying the already tense internal situation in Albania.

In 1999, Majko stood down as Prime Minister after losing to Fatos Nano in an election for the position of party chairman. He was replaced by his former deputy, Ilir Meta. ODIHR described the elections held in 2001 as an improvement on earlier polls, noting, however, that they did not comply with international standards in all respects.<sup>4</sup> The result was that Meta's SP-led coalition government retained power. In 2002, an internal struggle within the SP led to Meta, who was known to favour reform, being unseated through the efforts of Nano and his traditionalist wing. Majko made a brief return to office as a compromise candidate acceptable to both wings of the party. Nano's longer-term return to power was finally achieved by means of an agreement with his longstanding political rival, Berisha. In July 2002, Parliament elected former General Alfred Moisiu to the presidency. He was a close associate of Berisha's, but officially unaligned. In return, the votes of the DP helped Fatos Nano secure the position of Prime Minister. These increasingly co-operative relations between the SP and the DP now enabled Albania to enter into negotiations with the EU, within the scope of the Stabilization and Association Process. However, the local elections of October 2003 were the cause of renewed tensions when the DP accused the governing party of ballot-rigging and successfully demanded that the results of many counts be reviewed. Nonetheless, Nano's government was successful in consolidating its position in Parliament and remained in power until the 2005 elections. Ilir Meta and several other SP members split from the party in 2004 and founded a new party, the Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI), which was the third largest parliamentary party until the elections of July 2005.

The 2005 parliamentary elections must thus be judged not just against the background of Albania's turbulent political development and the continuing polarization in the positions of the SP and the DP, but also in terms of the protracted inner-party conflicts, especially those within the Socialist Party.

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4 Cf. OSCE/ODIHR (eds), *Republic of Albania, Parliamentary Elections, Final Report*, Warsaw, 11 October 2001.

*New Electoral Code and Voter Registration*

Following the grave irregularities in the parliamentary elections of 2001, a new electoral code was passed by the Albanian Parliament in 2003, replacing the previous version, whose defects were obvious.<sup>5</sup> By April 2005, this too had been amended in line with the recommendations of an expert team from ODIHR and the Council of Europe.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, it continued to be criticized for not complying with the stipulation in the Albanian constitution that the distribution of seats in Parliament match as closely as possible the national share of the vote won by each party.<sup>7</sup> To achieve this, the 40 “additional member” seats of the 140-member Albanian Parliament would need to be distributed in a way that takes account of losing votes cast in the contests for the 100 seats decided using the first-past-the-post system (i.e. according to the mixed member system). However, under Albania’s Electoral Code, the additional member seats are merely shared out according to the proportion of second votes received by each party, and the proportion of votes received by defeated candidates in first-past-the-post contests is disregarded (i.e. the parallel voting or supplementary member system is used).<sup>8</sup> In addition, the larger parties can make strategic use of the voting system by calling on their supporters to split their first and second votes between themselves and their smaller allies, thus increasing the number of seats of the electoral alliance as a whole. The availability of this trick, known as the “Dushk strategy”,<sup>9</sup> disadvantages smaller parties that have not entered into alliances with the larger parties, i.e. the SP and the DP. Its only benefit is to the larger parties, making it easier for them to win a majority of seats. Although this strategy is perfectly legitimate in formal legal terms, it amounts to a *de facto* perversion of both voter intentions and the constitutional requirement for proportionality.

Problems with electoral registration were a further issue during the 2005 parliamentary elections. Shortly before the election, responsibility for voter registration and the creation of new electoral registers was passed from the Central Elections Commission (CEC) to the local authorities, who had the task of updating the electoral registers with the help of their registers of residents. The electoral registers were then to be verified by means of house-calls made by employees of the local registration offices. These, however, faced

5 Cf. Assembly of the Republic of Albania (ed.), *The Electoral Code of the Republic of Albania*, approved by Law no. 9087, amended by Laws nos. 9297, 9341, and 9371, Tirana 2005.

6 Cf. ODIHR/Council of Europe, Joint Recommendations on the Electoral Law and the Electoral Administration in Albania, 20 November 2004, *Opinion no. 273/94*, CDL-AD (2004)017, Warsaw/Strasbourg.

7 Cf. *Albanian Constitution*. Approved by the Albanian Parliament on 21 October 1998, Article 64.2, at: <http://www.president.al/english/pub/doc/Albanian%20Constitution.pdf>.

8 Cf. *The Electoral Code of the Republic of Albania*, cited above (Note 5), Articles 65-68.

9 The strategy is named after the constituency of Dushk, where this method was used to secure the SP its majority in the parliamentary elections of 2001. On the Dushk phenomenon, see, for example, Altin Raxhimi, A Democratic Upset, in: *Albanian Daily News*, 9-10 July 2005, pp. 2 and 11.

nearly insurmountable logistical difficulties in terms both of the time available and the staff requirements, especially since many voters were not properly registered or were not at home when the officials called at their houses. Over the last decade, Albania's larger cities, in particular, have seen rapid growth in the number of informal residents as people have moved away from the countryside. Furthermore, large numbers of Albanian citizens have emigrated to EU countries without informing the Albanian authorities. As a result, Albania's local registry offices were unable to perform the difficult but vital task of producing accurate electoral registers. In many cases, they had not even received appropriate training. The most common errors included adding names to the register although the necessary personal documentation was not provided, or simply making mistakes in data entry. The lack of authoritative information on street names and house numbers (and, indeed, the fact that many streets do not have names, nor houses numbers) was an additional obstacle to the creation of comprehensive, accurate electoral registers. Yet another problem concerned voter registration in illegally built housing blocks and peripheral urban districts, as all voters resident in these areas were given the same code, which enabled manipulation of the poll.<sup>10</sup> There were also complaints that over 1,400 Tirana-based students had not been allowed to vote in the capital but rather required to vote in their towns of origin or removed entirely from the electoral rolls.<sup>11</sup> As a result, voter registration was a highly contentious issue in the entire period leading up to the elections. This was not least a result of the fact that so many potential voters remained unregistered, especially in cities, where they amounted to a significant proportion of those eligible to vote. There were also fears that the large number of double entries on the electoral roll would enable some to vote more than once.

The final criticism of the way the new electoral code had been implemented concerned the creation of constituencies of unequal size. As a rule, constituencies were not supposed to contain more than 25,000 voters. In practice, however, some contained over 45,000, others hardly more than 20,000.<sup>12</sup> However, comparability of constituency size is essential to ensure that each vote has an equal weight, especially in the first-past-the-post competitions, and this is necessary to ensure that the universal principle of equal suffrage is upheld – a general principle of Albania's electoral code.<sup>13</sup> In addi-

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10 Cf. OSCE Parliamentary Assembly/OSCE/ODIHR/European Parliament/Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (eds), *International Election Observation Mission, Parliamentary Election, Republic of Albania, 3 July 2005, Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions*, Tirana, 4 July 2005, p. 6 (hereafter cited as *Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions*).

11 This occurred despite the fact that the rights of individual students to register to vote in the town in which they were studying had been upheld by the courts. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 12.

12 Cf. OSCE/ODIHR (ed.), *Guide for Short-Term Observers. Republic of Albania, Parliamentary Elections 2005*, Tirana, Annex C, p. 86.

13 Cf. *Electoral Code of the Republic of Albania*, cited above (Note 5), Article 3.5.

tion, the recommended maximum number of 1,000 eligible voters per polling station was often exceeded.

*Phases, Organization, and Activities of the ODIHR Election Observation Mission*

ODIHR's observation of the Albanian parliamentary elections was instigated on the invitation of the Albanian government. In April 2005, ODIHR sent a needs assessment mission, consisting of four experts, to Tirana for a week. This mission's task was to gather as much information as possible on the progress that had been made in preparing for the elections – including the identification of problem areas – to act as a basis for recommendations on sending an international ODIHR observation mission. The members of the needs assessment mission held discussions with the President, the Prime Minister, the President of the Parliament, ministry representatives, members of the CEC, and representatives of political parties and the international community in Albania. The results of these discussions and the progress report on preparations for the election were reflected in the mission's final report.<sup>14</sup> The report describes the Albanian electoral system as overly complex and open to manipulation, despite the reforms introduced by the government in its amendment of the Electoral Code of 10 January 2005. The ongoing incompleteness of voter lists, which contained a number of duplications and inaccuracies, was also criticized. The findings and recommendations of the needs assessment mission's report determined the key focal points of the ODIHR Election Observation Mission (EOM).

The EOM proper was established at the start of the pre-election period in May 2005. It consisted of a Core Team with 14 members, and a total of 26 long-term observers (LTOs), who were to work in pairs in twelve regions of Albania. The Observation Mission received comprehensive support from the OSCE Presence in Albania in the form of information. The key tasks of the LTOs, each of which was responsible for a number of constituencies, included observing and assessing the work of the Zone Election Commissions (ZECs), campaigning, and looking out for infringements of the Electoral Code. The LTOs were also charged with establishing and maintaining contacts with local and regional election commissions, local authorities, political parties and their candidates, and local media and civil society organizations. The EOM published two interim reports during the pre-election period detailing the findings and assessments of the LTOs and the Core Team. They also spent much of their time co-ordinating the more than 400 short-term ob-

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14 Cf. OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, *Republic of Albania, Parliamentary Elections 2005, OSCE/ODIHR Needs Assessment Mission Report, 12-16 April 2005*, Warsaw, 29 April 2005, and OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), *Election Observation Mission to Albania, Parliamentary Elections 2005, Interim Report 1, 17-30 May 2005*, Tirana, 6 June 2005.

servers (STOs)<sup>15</sup> that joined the Mission in the immediate run-up to the election and on polling day itself.<sup>16</sup> Both the statement given by the EOM at a press conference the day after the election, at which it gave its initial impressions of the conduct of the poll, and the Mission's formal preliminary statement<sup>17</sup> were based in part upon extensive observation activities and the vote-counting work of the STOs. Further observations of vote-counting and an overview of complaints received by the CEC were contained in a third interim report, published some ten days after the election.<sup>18</sup> The final report of the EOM was drawn up following the announcement of the final election results and published in November 2005. As well as an overall analysis, it contains concrete recommendations for improving future elections in a number of areas, including the electoral system and voter registration.<sup>19</sup>

### *Observing Campaigning*

Official campaigning in Albania's parliamentary elections began 30 days before polling day. The two largest parties in particular – the SP and the DP – used rallies and adverts to gain popular support. The campaigning profile of even the third largest party, the SMI, was significantly lower than that of the big two. The smaller parties were virtually invisible, and generally relied on campaign posters rather than public meetings to get their message across. During this phase, it became clear that the DP, in particular, was going to actively include its smaller allies – especially the Republican Party (RP) – in its election campaign. At events organized by the DP and its allies, in particular, voters were frequently encouraged to vote for the DP candidate in their constituency and to give their second (additional member) vote to the DP's smaller ally. Election posters also openly encouraged voters to make use of vote splitting. It became even clearer that the big two parties were using the “Dushk strategy” when, for example, the names of several members of the DP were found on the party lists of allied parties, especially that of the RP.<sup>20</sup>

On the whole, organized campaign events remained peaceful, though there were a few violent confrontations between DP and SP supporters away

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15 STOs were sent by 36 OSCE participating States and were joined by observers from the Parliamentary Assemblies of the OSCE and the Council of Europe (PACE) and from the European Parliament.

16 For details of the overall structure of ODIHR Election Observation Missions and their tasks before, during, and after an election, see OSCE/ODIHR (eds), *Election Observation Handbook*, Warsaw 2005, pp. 25ff.

17 *Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions*, cited above (Note 10).

18 OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), *Election Observation Mission to Albania, Parliamentary Election 2005, Interim Report 3, 4-14 July 2005*, Tirana.

19 OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), *Republic of Albania, Parliamentary Elections, 3 July 2005, OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Report*, 7 November 2005, Warsaw. The report can be accessed at: [http://www.osce.org/documents/odihr/2005/11/16905\\_en.pdf](http://www.osce.org/documents/odihr/2005/11/16905_en.pdf).

20 Cf. OSCE/ODIHR, *Election Observation Mission to Albania, Parliamentary Elections 2005, Interim Report 2, 31 May-16 June 2005*, Tirana, p. 5.

from the main election events. There was little to separate the two main parties in terms of policies, which focused, in the main, on regional or local concerns such as water and electricity provision, road building, and improving opportunities for education and training. There was criticism of the fact that, in some constituencies, the SP used public buildings and vehicles to distribute advertising materials and posters, which was considered an abuse of public money for party-political ends. There was also evidence that the SP had pressurized public employees, such as teachers, to participate in campaign events. A further problem during the campaign phase concerned the widespread practice of destroying or covering up campaign posters. It is interesting that most of the parties and candidates affected by such activities did not turn to the CEC, which was officially responsible for such matters, but rather approached the OSCE Presence or the ODIHR Election Observation Mission. This was often explained as the result of a lack of trust in the CEC's procedures. There were occasional allegations of police officers attempting to influence or intimidate supporters of a political party. The way the election was reported in the media, and particularly on the main television channels and radio stations, provided the ODIHR Mission with little cause for criticism.<sup>21</sup> Coverage was generally balanced and fair, at least with regard to the main parties. ODIHR's only complaint was that so much airtime was given over to the SP and the DP that information about the other parties tended to fall off the radar, despite the fact that the Electoral Code provides for them to receive half of the screen-time enjoyed by the major parties.<sup>22</sup> On the whole, the key political rights – the rights of assembly, freedom of opinion, and freedom of speech – were respected during the entire campaign phase.

#### *Observing Polling and Vote-Counting*

Working in pairs, STOs monitored voting and vote-counting by carrying out spot checks on polling day. On average, four observers were assigned to each of Albania's one-hundred constituencies.<sup>23</sup> In accordance with the Albanian Electoral Code, most polling stations were located within public buildings – mostly schools and nurseries. In rural areas, in particular, some were found in private houses, bars, restaurants, or shops, as no suitable public building existed. Each polling station was managed by an eight-strong Voting Centre Commission (VCC), whose members had been nominated by the parties and were responsible for ensuring that all proceeded smoothly. Just prior to the election, in many constituencies, a majority of the members of the VCCs

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21 Cf. *Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions*, cited above (Note 10), pp. 10f.

22 Four independent local organizations comprehensively monitored Albanian television, radio, and newspapers, led by the Albanian Coalition Against Corruption (ACAC). See ACAC (ed.), *Media Monitoring, Parliamentary Elections in Albania 2005*, Reports Nos. 1-3, Tirana 2005.

23 On average, a constituency contained between 40 and 60 polling stations; one had as many as 104. See Note 12.



were replaced by their parties, mostly out of fear that they would be bribed. These changes, which were often made at the last minute, meant that many Commission members had not attended training courses and were ill-informed as to what their duties entailed.

Differences could frequently be observed between the way the VCCs in rural areas and those in cities performed their tasks. The latter generally went about things more professionally and properly. Nonetheless, in many polling stations, insufficient care was taken to check the identity of voters by means of official identity papers. Many instances were observed where technical equipment such as ultraviolet-sensitive ink and UV lamps for marking the fingertips of voters and checking that no one attempted to cast a second ballot were incorrectly used.<sup>24</sup> There was considerable evidence of “family voting”, particularly in rural areas.

In these elections, for the first time, a single location had been designated the counting centre for each constituency. This created major logistical and staffing difficulties, as it meant extra counters would need to be found. In practice, however, what generally happened was that members of the VCCs – many of whom were already tired after supervising the election – were deployed to count the votes. The individuals given this double responsibility were placed under enormous stress and many could barely cope with the physical demands of a counting procedure that officially did not even allow for breaks. As a result, the counting teams frequently took several days to complete the count. The same factors also led to irregularities in the counting and recording of votes. In addition, because members of the counting teams could be appointed up to two hours before the end of polling, they also tended to lack adequate training. With only five counting teams per constituency, there was such a delay in getting regional results to the CEC that virtually no contests were declared as planned on the day after the election.<sup>25</sup> Average voter participation was around 50 per cent, which reflects widespread indifference with regard to the parliamentary elections and suggests a high degree of frustration with the political system.

When incumbent Prime Minister Nano stated his acceptance of the results declared by the CEC,<sup>26</sup> it demonstrated that, despite the numerous difficulties, Albania was growing more mature in terms of both civil society and political parties. After decisions were reached on the numerous complaints lodged by virtually every political party, the CEC announced in early September that the DP under Berisha’s leadership had won in 56 constituencies, the SP in 42, and that a single SMI candidate and a single independent candi-

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24 Evidence also emerged of the existence of blank birth certificates, which were being used to forge voter identities. Cf. *Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions*, cited above (Note 10), p. 12.

25 Prior to the election, centralized counting had been welcomed by all political parties as a means of preventing manipulation.

26 Statement by Prime Minister Nano at a press conference in Tirana, 7 July 2005.

date had each won their contests.<sup>27</sup> Once the second (additional member) votes had been counted, it was clear that the electoral alliance led by the Democratic Party had won 74 of the 140 seats and thus controlled an absolute majority in the new Parliament. This then cleared the way for Sali Berisha to be chosen by Parliament to be Albania's new Prime Minister.

### *Assessing the Conduct of the Elections*

Overall, the ODIHR Election Observation Mission found no serious or systematic infringements of the Albanian Electoral Code or general principles of free and fair elections in Albania's 2005 parliamentary elections. Nonetheless, according to the Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions produced by the ODIHR Mission and the observers of the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the European Parliament, the poll only partly complied with international standards for democratic elections. The main points of criticism concerned administrative failures in voter registration and the voting process itself and the electoral strategies of the parties.<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, it can be assumed that the results of the election were an adequate reflection of both the will of the electorate and the balance of support for the two main parties, although the use of alliances was seriously detrimental to the parliamentary representation of smaller, independent parties.

Subject to these reservations, Albania's 2005 parliamentary elections, which were generally untroubled by the violent clashes between political camps that had characterized previous polls, can be considered to mark a step forward in the country's democratic development. Fears expressed prior to the elections of systematic manipulation were not confirmed to any great extent. There is, however, a need for improvement in the area of electoral administration, particularly with regard to the creation of accurate voter lists, the appointment and training of VCCs and counting teams, improving counting procedures, and the need for the ZECs to comply with deadlines. The professional and non-partisan co-operation that characterized the work of the CEC and most of the ZECs can be viewed as a positive development, although their performance is certainly in need of improvement. The widespread acceptance of the results by the losing side at both local and national levels is encouraging, as is the willingness of the DP in particular to accept young, well educated politicians into its ranks.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, comprehensive

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27 The final results and the distribution of seats in the new Parliament are contained in ODIHR's *Election Observation Mission Report*, cited above (Note 19), p. 30.

28 The statement on the preliminary results of the Observation Mission concluded that Albania's current electoral system remained open to party political abuse and called for a further reform of the Electoral Code. Cf. *Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions*, cited above (Note 10), p. 4.

29 Cf. Raxhimi, cited above (Note 9).

reform of the electoral register based on an improved citizen registration system and changes to the Electoral Code to rule out the “Dushk strategy” are prerequisites for improving future elections in Albania. All in all, however, the generally calm and non-violent course that these elections took encourages optimism with regard to the ongoing democratization of the political system.<sup>30</sup> To improve the electoral process, Albania’s political system requires both time and experience of democracy in action, as well as willingness on the part of civil society actors to insist upon democratic processes.

#### *Findings of the International Election Observation Mission*

Thanks to the presence of the ODIHR Election Observation Mission and the actions of ODIHR observers, the 2005 parliamentary elections in Albania were held in the full glare of international publicity. This had a disciplining effect on the parties and the members they had appointed to the elections commissions. With its team of 400 short-term observers, the Mission managed to visit 1,200 of Albania’s ca. 4,750 polling stations and 80 of the 100 counting centres, ensuring a representative analysis of the electoral process as a whole and apparently preventing any large-scale infringements of the Electoral Code. International election observation in Albania also brought a degree of transparency to electoral procedures, enabling a certain amount of compliance with international standards. The crucial thing here is that an opportunity was provided to promote a stabilizing culture of electoral law and to root it in the minds of Albanian citizens. Not only was this significant for the development of Albanian civil society, the ODIHR EOM also lent the national result a high degree of credibility, facilitating its widespread acceptance by the country’s political parties. All too often in Albania’s past, a lack of trust in the results of an election has been the trigger for violent clashes.

In general, by generating publicity international election monitoring helps to create transparency and prevent electoral manipulation and is hence conducive to democracy. This certainly applies to the 2005 ODIHR Mission to Albania. At the same time, it is necessary to bear in mind that international election observation can do no more than document technical procedures, qualitative criteria, and quantifiable results. The possibility of detecting hidden forms of manipulation prior to the election, such as secret agreements between political parties, are limited. Given Albania’s internal polarization, however, the contribution of international election monitoring to promoting democratization in Albania, as delivered by the ODIHR Mission, can hardly be overestimated in terms of its effects on both civil society and politics. Albania’s political culture requires just this sort of support from the international community if it is to continue down the path of stabilization. In the

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30 This despite the death of one person on polling day in the vicinity of a polling station in Tirana. Cf. *Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions*, cited above (Note 10), p. 12.

last instance, however, the political will and willingness of the government and Albania's political parties to observe democratic norms and international electoral standards as they are required to do by their country's status as an OSCE participating State are decisive for ensuring free and fair elections.