

Open Season – Elections during Pandemic in Albania

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Abstract

The parliamentary elections in Albania took place on 25th March 2021 and they were won by the Socialist Party. Even though elections took place during the pandemic, the pandemic itself had a minor impact on the process. With the exception of making compulsory a two-week quarantine for those entering the country and thus making it impossible for the Albanian emigrants to cast their vote, the election campaign was organized similarly with the preceding campaigns without concerns for social distancing. The real change which eventually influenced the campaign was the change in the electoral law from closed to open list. For the first time, the party and the party candidates pursued different strategies. In addition to the official campaign, there was an underground campaign with vote buying and exercise of influence which aimed and achieved to transfer vote from the top of the top of the list to candidates in the middle or even lower part of the list. This made possible to observe and understand the internal conflicts within the parties.

Keywords: *political party, electoral system, pandemics, vote buying, glass cliff.*

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I. Introduction

The general elections of 25th April 2021 took place amidst of the global COVID-19 pandemic. The Socialist Party overwhelmingly won this election with 74 seats (the same result of the elections of 2017) out of a parliament of 140 seats. The Democratic Party “Alliance for Change” got 59 seats (a huge improvement compering with the 43 seats of 2017) and the Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI) got only 4 seats which is a very poor result comparing with the 18 seats it won in the 2017 elections. Other small parties such as Republic Party (RP) and Party for Justice and Unity (PJU) managed to secure seats as part of the coalition with DP. These elections provided SP with its third mandate to govern the country, to the great disappointment of the opposition parties. Elections were contested by all opposition parties and SP was accused of vote buying.

The elections were considered as very important due to the special circumstances in which they took place. Albania was hit by an earthquake in November 2019 and suffered great loss in people and materials. The country was still in an emergency when the pandemic hit. However, what made these elections of particular importance was that in February 2019, the opposition parties, both DP and SMI have rescinded all their parliamentary mandates won in the elections of 2017. Likewise in 2021, in 2017 both DP and SMI have accused SP of vote buying and corruption. After SP, which had the majority in parliament, voted down the initiative of DP and SMI on vetting the politicians, in one of the many rallies organized by the opposition parties against the government, the two main opposition parties rescinded all their mandates. The Central Elections Commission (CEC) attempted to fill the vacant seats with the remaining registered candidates, but it was not possible to fill all the vacant seats. In the last two years preceding the elections of 2021, the parliament had functioned with only 122 deputies out of the required 140. The opposition parties requested snap elections, but SP didn't agree with this. Because of unmet demands, both DP and SMI didn't participate in the 2019 local elections and as result SP won 60 out of 61 mayoral positions and municipality councils. Thus, SP gained absolute control over the central and local government.

Nonetheless, in June 2020, the SP and the extra-parliamentary parties reached a political agreement on the necessary changes to the electoral code. The debate for the right electoral law in Albania has been a permanent topic in the heated discussions on elections in Albania. Electoral reform has been a constant in all the political debates among politicians, political analysts, and civil society. The elections results have always been contested and the electoral law is blamed for the distortion of the results. The existing electoral law is approved by law No.10019,



dated 29 Dec.2008. Since then, it is amended several times. It was amended by Law No.74/2012 dated 12 July 2012, by Law No.31/2015 dated 2 April 2015 and two times in 2020 (law no.101/2020 dated 23 July 2020 and law no.118/2020 dated 5 October 2020). The amendments were made in almost all aspect of the code such as structure of the CEC, public and private funding of the campaign, misuse of public resources, gender balance on candidate lists, campaign coverage in the media, election dispute and resolution, electronic voting, voting from abroad and voting and counting technologies. However, the most significant one was the change in the electoral system, from closed list regional proportional to open list regional proportional. Consequently, the ranking of candidates in party lists was important for as long as the candidates in the lower part of the list didn't ensure enough preferential votes to surpass relevant list's quotient.²

II. The Electoral System – Open List Regional Proportional

II.1. Changes in the Electoral System

Electoral systems are considered as one of main institutional choices that highly influences and has fundamental consequences on the political system (Norris, 2004: 4). Albania has applied different electoral systems since its first democratic elections in 1991. In 1991 it applied a single member constituency (Krasniqi, 2008: 31) for a parliament with 250 seats. Those of 1992 have been a mix of double-ballot majoritarian with proportional, with the proportional part aiming to correct the final results of the elections so that the result could be as proportional as possible (Edgeworth and Soares, 1992: 39). Those of 1996 and 1997 were a mix of double-ballot majoritarian with proportional, but this time without its proportional aspect (De Gregorio *et al*, 1996: 4; Kaplan and Knapp, 1997: 30). The system changed again in 2001 and in 2005. It was again a mix of majoritarian and proportional, but in 2001 it remained a double-ballot majoritarian with re-taking the compensatory aspect of the proportional and in 2005 it was made simpler by making the majoritarian part a single-ballot and keeping un-changed the compensatory aspect of the proportional (OSCE, 2001: 4; OSCE, 2005: 4). The system changed again in 2009 to closed list regional proportional (OSCE, 2009: 6) and in 2020 in open list regional proportional. Thus, the system has been subject of changes and rather than framing the party system it was framed by the political parties. In the words of Diamond and Platner 'among the many structural and historical variables that affect democracy, few are more open to rapid and intentionally designed changed than the electoral system' (2006: ix).

² The quotient is established by diving the number of votes received by the number of mandates won by the list in the respective district (OSCE, 2021: 7).

Even though the change from mix to regional proportional was made upon recommendations to ensure proportionality (OSCE, 2005:25), with the adoption of the regional proportional in 2009, the small parties were the ones which lost their seats and relevance in the party system. Exception are the elections of 2017, where SMI got 18 seats, which was an unprecedented number for a small party until that moment. Indeed, the regional proportional with high thresholds in small constituencies works to the detriment of small parties whose electorate is not concentrated in one or few constituencies but rather dispersed throughout the country (Sartori 2001: 93-94). The electoral system is 'the most specific manipulative instrument of politics' (1968: 273). As such it can be changed to reflect the needs of those who designed it. The choice of manipulation is wide indeed. It varies from the type of the system such as proportional, majoritarian or a mix of them to the specific rules for each system. Even the much-praised proportional system does not necessarily produce a multiparty system. The outcome depends a lot on the size of the representative body, the district magnitude, the threshold (Lijphart, 1994: 10-12; Shugart and Wattenberg, 2001: 10). The outcomes of the elections depend a lot on the rules and rules are determined by the political actors to protect their interests.

In Albania, like elsewhere, the electoral system *per se* does not influence the party system. The political parties designed the constituencies' borders, the number of mandates per constituency, the threshold, the number of seats and the electoral formula. Parties created and dissolved coalitions, at times based on ideological affinities and sometimes despite of that. Indeed 'each electoral system contains a different array of biases (...) and those who decide among such systems can chose in effect, to prefer a set of biases over another. And to prefer one over another is to make a policy choice' (Nohlen, 1998: 28). Elections after all are a political and not a technical process.

The recent changes in the system from closed list to open ones aimed at bringing the MPs closer to the electorate, strengthen their position and voice within the parliamentary group and the party and decrease the control of the leader over the party. Furthermore, with open list it was thought that parties would include candidates with better biography, people with no criminal records as it has been the case with the lists of 2017 and the lists of the mayors in 2019. However, the change in the system meant that the candidate could not receive automatically his/her seat in parliament based on the ranking in the list, because the seat was conditional to the performance of the candidate in terms of votes received. That highly influenced the strategy of the candidates in the 2021 elections.

In an interview with Deutsche Welle, the Head of the Electoral Commission of Albania, Mr. Ilirjan Celibashi commented that the new electoral law would permit voters to choose their preferred candidate and not accept with closed eyes

the candidate ranking made in an arbitrary way by the head of the party as it has been the case in the previous elections. Nonetheless in less than two months before the elections it was not clear whether the voters could cast one or more votes for their preferred candidates, or whether they could vote across party lists. In March, one month before elections, the Central election Commission started an education program for voters providing guidelines on the voting process including activities aimed at first-time voters and vulnerable groups. Topics included the concept of new electronic voter identification, new design of the ballot paper, voting procedures and vote-buying. Nonetheless the rules and regulations were not clear until one month before elections which made it difficult for the voters to understand the process. Information on the electronic voter identification and the layout of the ballot paper were especially un-clear leading to confusion among voters on the day of elections and a high number of invalid ballots (OSCE, 2021:8). In this confusing situation the candidates had to start the “open season” to find supporters in a situation where the competition was across party lines and within the party. The expectation was that the party structures would support the candidates at the top of the list, and when the party leader were at the top of the list, votes would be cast for him and the party.

The change of the electoral system made possible the resurfacing of the old problems of majoritarian system which was vote – buying. Candidates draw lines within each ‘imagined’ constituency to create dedicated areas or mini constituencies where only one candidate was allowed to conduct a political campaign. Candidates in 2021 would attempt to preserve the same behaviour pattern as before and link the “mini” constituencies with their names. Easier said than done. The ballot paper made it difficult for the candidates to run their “personal” campaign.

The new Electoral law divided Albania in 12 constituencies corresponding to 12 administrative regions. The size of the constituency varied upon criteria such as the number of citizens registered in the respective district and the request to ensure the equality of the vote. The largest constituency was Tirana with 36 and the smallest was Kukës with three MPs. The new electoral law stipulates that “the number of candidates in the multi-name list many not be less than the number of seats to be elected in the respective electoral zone, plus two” (Article 67.4). This change was introduced on 5 October 2021 and it was considered as discriminatory to small political parties who had to provide candidates for all seats to be elected in a given electoral zone (OSCE, 2021: 6).

The design of the ballots with number and names of the candidates was approved by the Commissioner on 01 April. The design of the ballot paper was especially difficult in Tirana, the largest constituency with 36 seats. Since it was an obligation to provide candidates equal to the number of seats, it became difficult to fit all the names in the ballot paper. The political parties and coalitions which contested the

elections in Tirana were the SP, DP, SMI, Social Democratic Party (SDP), Albanian National Front (NF), Albanian Democratic Movement (ADM), Democratic Politics, Popular Unity Alliance, Hashtag Initiative, New Movement Party, New Democracy Alliance, and Movement for Change plus an independent candidate, for a total of 433 candidates. In this situation, the Socialist Party proposed to remove the names from the lists and replace them with numbers. Amid heated discussions and objections from the opposition parties, the Complaints and Sanctions Commission (CSC) of the Central Election Commission changed the content of the ballots excluding the names of the candidates and on 4 April this decision was upheld by the court (OSCE, 2021: 8). This heavily undermined the process. One of the main reasons for changing the electoral law was to provide voters with the opportunity to choose themselves the preferred candidate. However, the ballot paper without the names of the candidates made it difficult for voters to get to know the candidates in the list and for the candidates themselves to introduce themselves to the whole constituency.

II.2. Vote buying

The parties' official narrative during the elections was to guide people to vote for the party, without specifications for the number of the candidates. Thus "the burden" of establishing links with the electorate and making known their respective number fell on the candidates' shoulders. The burden was especially heavy for the new candidates. Even though the entry of new names, people with clean past, remarkable achievements in life and no links with criminal activities, was one of the most proclaimed achievements of the amended electoral code, the ballot paper made it almost impossible to introduce themselves to the electorate. The new candidates without an established infrastructure, without the support of the party, with poor connection with the constituency and no access to media had it impossible to make themselves known to the voters, let alone attract their support. Out of the 19 candidates who surpassed the relevant quotient, 4 candidates got a seat due to the change in their original position on the list. In the constituency of Tirana (CEC, Lista e Kandidatëve (Candidate List) Tirana)³ results were such that reveal some of the most important aspects of the campaign strategy of the Socialist Party and candidates. At first sight the greatest part of those in the top list and mainly those who had a position in government like the Minister of Infrastructure, Energy and Telecommunication, Minister for Relations with Parliament, Minister of Health and Social Welfare, State Minister for the Reconstruction, Minister of Justice, provided for themselves enough votes to get elected. They were among those for whom the ballots were casted the most and this was

³ <https://kqz.gov.al/results/results2021/results2021.htm#>



expected. Even though Decision no.9⁴ of the Regulator of the Central Election Commission stipulates that in the four months prior to the election day it was not allowed for the party in public office to conduct activities such as distribution of permits validating illegal construction, registration of property titles, employment or dismissal of staff of public institutions, increase of wages, pensions, provision of financial or social support, reduction or abolition of taxes, waving of fines/taxes, or privatization all these happened (OSCE, 2021:16). Ministers continued with official engagements throughout the campaign. They regularly appeared at vaccination centers, wearing facemasks and t-shirts with “No.12” (the SP ballot number), inauguration of several major infrastructure projects such as the new Pediatric Hospital in Durrës on 18 November 2020⁵, the opening of the first regional hospital for coronavirus in Elbasan on 15 December 2020⁶, increased budget for tumoral medicines on 4 Feb 2021⁷, increase in the number of ambulances on 5 January 2021⁸, inauguration of the opening works for the construction of the new regional hospital in Fier on 22 January 2021⁹, opening of the new health center in quarter 13 in Tirana on 30 January 2021¹⁰, construction of the new homes for those who lost them during the earthquake of 2019¹¹, inauguration of roads

⁴ Vendim_Nr.009_210309-_Procedurat-e-funksionimit-dhe-mirembajtjes-se-portalit-procedurat-dhe-afatet-e-hetimit-administrativ-te-denoncimeve-dhe-vendimin..pdf (kqz.gov.al): https://kqz.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Vendim_

⁵ Manastirliu: Pediatria e re në Durrës do të shërbejë edhe për trajtimin e pacientëve të vegjël me COVID, në rast fluksi në QSUT: <https://www.balkanweb.com/manastirliu-pediatria-e-re-ne-durres-do-te-sherbeje-edhe-per-trajtimin-e-pacienteve-te-vegjel-me-covid-ne-rast-fluksi-ne-qsut/>

⁶ Hapet spitali i parë rajonal për koronavirusin, Manastirliu: Covid-5 në Elbasan, ka 81 shtretër <https://kohajone.com/hapet-spitali-i-pare-rajonal-per-koronavirusin-manastirliu-covid-5-ne-elbasan-ka-81-shtreter/>

⁷ Dita Botërore e Kancerit, Manastirliu në Spitalin Onkologjik: Do të zgjerojmë llojshmërinë e barnave tumorale falas: <https://ntv.al/dita-botero-re-e-kancerit-manastirliu-ne-spitalin-onkologjik-do-te-zgjerjome-llojshmerine-e-barnave-tumorale-falas/>

⁸ Manastirliu: Me shtimin e ambulancave, kemi dyfishuar edhe ekipin e Urgjencës Kombëtare: <https://www.vizionplus.tv/36-ambulancat-e-reja-manastirliu-kemi-dyfishuar-edhe-ekipin-e-urgjences-kombetare/> ; 36 ambulanca të reja/ Rama: Lemeria e çerekshekullit është pas krahëve: <https://www.vizionplus.tv/36-ambulanca-te-reja-rama-lemeria-e-çerekshekullit-eshte-pas-kraheve/> ; 36 autoambulanca, me sirena ndezur në qendër të Tiranës, Rama: Shpëtuam nga karakatinat e PD-LSI: <https://abcnews.al/36-autoambulanca-futen-me-sirena-ndezur-ne-qender-te-tiranes-rama-shpetuam-nga-karakatinat-e-pd-lsi/> ; “Hata kombëtare”/ Rama prezanton flotën e re të autoambulancave dhe ‘sulmon’ opozitën: Imagjinoni sikur pandemia ta kishte gjetur Shqipërinë me katërrrotakët e...: <http://www.panorama.com.al/hata-kombetare-rama-ne-prezantimin-e-flotes-se-autoambulancave-sulmon-opoziten-imagjinoni-sikur-pandemia-ta-kishte-gjetur-shqiperine-me-katerrrotaket-e/>

⁹ Hapet kantieri i Spitalit Rajonal në Fier: <https://www.infrastruktura.gov.al/hapet-kantieri-i-spitalit-rajonal-ne-fier/>

¹⁰ Hapet qendra e re shëndetësore në lagjen 13, Veliaj: Ofrrohet i njëjti shërbim, si në qendër, edhe në periferi: <https://www.balkanweb.com/hapet-qendra-e-re-shendetesore-ne-lagjen-13-veliaj-ofrohet-i-njejti-sherbim-si-ne-qender-edhe-ne-periferi/#:~:text=Hapet%20qendra%20e,2021%2011%3A41>

¹¹ Rama iu dorëzon çelësat e shtëpive të reja banorëve/ Ironizon Bashën nga Thumana: <https://www.cna.al/2021/12/24/rama-iu-dorezon-celesat-e-shtepive-te-reja-banoreve-ironizon-bashen-nga-thumana/>

on 26 March 2021¹², inauguration of the airport of Kukës on 18 April 2021¹³, improvements of works in the hydropower of Koman on 05 February 2021¹⁴.

This strategy provided SP and particularly the candidates involved in the activities with a significant advantage. Furthermore, even though it was prohibited, “public employment increased significantly in the lead up to the elections, in the period immediately preceding the moratorium on authorization of new employment in the public administration” (OSCE, 2021: 16). Media reported the distribution of municipal grants approved in the week prior to elections under the reconstruction program. Thus, local administration controlled fully by SP provided all its support to enforce the vote buying strategy of the party in office. An increased number of new employments in the public administration was also observed despite the moratorium to do so (*Ibid*). According to INSTAT between the third and fourth quarters of 2020, employment in the public sector increased by 6 per cent (from 171,975 to 182,547), which is indeed very high if compared with the same period of 2018 and 2019 when it has been 1 and 0 per cent respectively. On 24 December, government authorized an additional of 2,472 positions (*Ibid*).

Last but not least, during the campaign, a database with personal information, contact information and voting preferences of around 900,000 Albanian citizens was leaked. The scandal was called the scandal of “patrons”. SP didn’t dismiss the veracity of the information. On the contrary Prime Minister Rama and subsequently other SP figures included the term in their vocabulary and used it as an indicator of the strength and well organization of the party¹⁵. He even thanked them and compared with the door-to door activists. However, in a time where distribution of incentives, jobs, tax cancellations are used to hook undecided electorate the role of the “patrons” reporting on the party preferences of citizens is far from being admirable.

Rindërtimi, Rama dhe Ahmetaj në Fushë-Krujë: 128 shtëpi përfundojnë brenda dy muajsh, 15 pallate do të jenë gati në vjeshtë: <https://www.gazetatema.net/2021/03/14/rindertimi-rama-dhe-ahmetaj-ne-fushe-kruje-128-shtepi-perfundojne-brenda-dy-muajsh-15-pallate-do-te-jene-gati-ne-vjeshte/> ; Veliaj i dorëzon çelësat e shtëpisë familjes në Pëllumbas: Asnjë parti nuk i imponohet qytetit dhe...: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kd5SoTEkUQY> ; Të dëmtuar nga tërmeti, Veliaj i dorëzon çelësat e shtëpisë së re familjes Kasa në Bërzhitë, ‘Do të dalim faqebardhë nga rindërtimi’: <https://report-tv.al/lajm/te-demtuar-nga-termeti-veliaj-i-dorezon-celesat-e-shtepise-se-re-familjes-kasa-ne-bezhitte-do-te-dalim-faqebardhe-nga-rindertimi>

¹² SKANDALI/ Belinda Balluku inaguron rrugën TEG – Farkë, në 2017 e përuroi Damian Gjikhuri: <https://joq-albania.com/artikull/848649.html>

¹³ Sot fluturimi i pare ne aeroportin e Kukesit | Lajme-News: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mem0mduysM>

¹⁴ Balluku në Koman: Mirëmenaxhuam kaskadën e Drinit: <https://www.infrastruktura.gov.al/balluku-ne-koman-mirenaxhuam-kaskaden-e-drinit-per-te-mos-krijuar-permbytje/>

¹⁵ Rama flet për patronazhistët: Shkojnë derë më derë për të fituar zemrat, u jam mirënjohës: <https://abcnews.al/rama-flet-per-patronazhistet-ps-eshte-nje-familje-e-madhe-me-te-angazhuar-u-jam-mirenjohes/>; Belinda Balluku: Ne jemi patronazhistët më të mirë të Ballkanit, patronizhojmë edhe ata që kanë humbur rrugën: <https://www.gazetatema.net/2021/04/22/belinda-balluku-ne-jemi-patronazhistet-me-te-mire-te-ballkanit-patronizhojme-edhe-ata-qe-kane-humbur-rrugen/>.

Nonetheless while this explains the victory of the predominant figures of SP, it fails to offer an explanation of the full picture of the results.

II. 3. The underground campaign of SP

With the approaching of the elections of 25th of April, the candidates started their 'open season' of votes and voters. It took the form of a door-to-door campaign where young people would ask voters whether they knew the MP of their constituency and what were the problems that needed to be addressed by the said MP. The question posed by to the potential voters was problematic in the way it was build. With the changes in the electoral code of 2008, since 2009, the electoral system changed from mix member electoral system to closed regional proportional and thus constituencies didn't have any longer only one MP but rather a list of MPs from all political parties. In Tirana the list was 33 MP and the likelihood that the simple citizen would know all "his" MPs was very small. Nonetheless, the candidates and their teams employed the same electoral campaign strategy they or the party had employed when only one MP would win in the majoritarian electoral system. Candidates were assigned the role of increasing the number of voters and every candidate was assigned an "area" proposed to the electorate as a constituency, even when it was not. It is a strategy of the party for a better management of its human resources where each candidate is assigned an area to manage. It goes without saying that candidates do not interfere in the areas of each other, or at least it is expected that they should not interfere. The constituency is not divided equal the number of the MPs it produces but rather equal the number of the MPs that the party believes it would produce and thus candidates listed in the lower part of the party list support those at the top of the list. The changes in the electoral law though made it possible to vote for the candidate in addition to the party. This change of the electoral system from closed list regional proportional to open list changed the game. As an abundant amount of theoretical literature and ample evidence from the ground indicate, the open list electoral system opened the door to those placed below the "line", those who otherwise would have never had the opportunity to win had the law not been changed.

While the "big names" managed to conduct their campaign in their mini constituencies with the help of media coverage, support of the public administration and party structures, others managed to do so without all these. To the biggest surprise those how received most of the votes in Tirana were two names far from the safe list. Fatmir Xhafaj, former Minister of Internal Affairs 2017-2018, involved in a scandal at the time and forced to resign, won more than everybody else, an overwhelming of 16,737 votes, more than the Minister of Infrastructure,

or Minister of Health and that of Reconstruction whose presence in media had been the most pronounced of all. Even though he was at the 23rd place in the list he managed to be an MP. The second surprise, and perhaps the biggest are the 15,697 casted ballots for the completely unknown Orlando Rakipi, originally placed as number 30 in the 36 candidates list. Rakipi managed as well to collect more than all the ministers and Vice Ministers present in the list. Son of a former MP from the Party for Justice, Integration and Unity, who was forced to resign as MP in 2018 for criminal activities not declared, Orlando who have never been member of SP and didn't receive any support from the party structures is one of the most voted MPs in the newly elected parliament. The irony is that he took the place of Ervin Bushati, the head of the SP electoral campaign in Tirana, who even though placed as no.3 in the list, with his very poor performance of only 2,990 votes couldn't manage to retain his place in parliament. Other candidates in the list who didn't perform well are Najada Çomo (placed 2nd in the list) who won only 1,583, Ermonela Valikaj with 2,310 votes (also in the safe list as number 13) and Fidel Ylli with 2,715 votes even though a former MP and placed at number 15 in the list. Prime Minister Rama didn't contest in Tirana. He chose to be in the lists of constituencies of Durrës and Vlora.

The results indicate that there have been two campaigns: the shining one with lights, music and fanfares and the underground one. The head of the electoral campaign in Tirana, Ervin Bushati considered the victory of SP as his own success as well despite the fact that he didn't win himself. This means that even though he was the head of the electoral campaign, of the official one, he couldn't manage the real one, the underground one. At the moment it is difficult to understand whether the underground campaign is 'second vocal part' of the choir or the 'lead singer's main melody' (Xhaferaj, 2021). It is difficult to understand whether the underground strategy has the blessings of SP Chairmain Rama, or the candidates have used other networks to 'catch' votes, networks outside of the control of the centre. According to Rama, the leading members of the party, those with more experience had to stay in the 'grey area' of the lists, because they had to stay in the head of the "battle"¹⁶. This was proposed also as a strategy to force candidates with long experience in party and government to increase their efforts for attracting more voters. By working to increase the number of the votes casted for them, they would bring more votes to the party. However, the socialist party has received pretty much the same number of votes comparing with 2017. In 2017 SP received 764,750 votes and in 2021 it got 768,251 votes. It is clear that the experienced candidates didn't bring new votes but rather divided among them the existing electorate of the party.

¹⁶ Zgjedhjet në Shqipëri: Çfarë risish sjellin listat e PS e PD?: <https://www.dw.com/sq/zgjedhjet-n%C3%AB-shqip%C3%ABri-%C3%A7far%C3%AB-risish-sjellin-listat-e-ps-e-pd/a-56813141>



III. Uses and Abuses of Pandemic

Even though the amended Electoral law stipulates that Albanian citizen living abroad has the right to vote and can vote out-of-country (Article 24), the service was not offered to citizens living abroad. In the previous elections, citizens living abroad have returned and voted in their respective Voting Center (VC). However this didn't happen in the 2021 elections. Even though the electoral code was amended twice during 2020, more than one year after the start of the pandemic, no efforts were made to adjust to the new circumstances. While it was the first time for Albania to held elections in a situation of pandemic, examples from other countries could have been followed and applied. From data gathered from electoral management bodies, state institutions, media, and election observation reports Asplund *et al.* calculated that 52 national elections were held in 2020. Therefore, examples of elections in times of pandemic were ample and could have been taken, adapted to the country situation and applied.

Article 108 of the Electoral code foresee special voting arrangements for those who cannot vote themselves. According to the article “a voter who, for physical reasons, is unable to perform the voting procedures him/herself, may request the assistance of a family member or another voter, who is on the voter list for that polling unit”. Persons unable to vote are defined as people with disabilities who should declare their inability to the mayor of the local government unit who prepares the voter list for the respective voting center, to register them se voters who cannot vote themselves (point 6). In cases of blind voters, special voting devices that allow voters to read or understand the ballot paper and vote independently are to be distributed to the voting centers. Even though the amendments to the electoral code were made in 2020, months after the pandemic and with plenty of examples from other countries, no efforts were made to expand the special voting arrangements in order to mitigate against Covid-19 transmission.

Examples extended special voting arrangements included early voting, postal voting, proxy voting, home and institutional-based voting by mobile ballot box, and Covid-19 arrangements in polling station (Asplund *et al.*, 2021). Following is a summary of the neighboring or regional countries who made use of special voting arrangements to mitigate against Covid-19 transmission. North Macedonia has used early voting arrangements to accommodate Covid-19 infected voters and those in self-isolation at their home. Poland expanded postal votes during pandemic and made use of proxy voting as well. Croatia, Czech Republic, Montenegro and North-Macedonia made use of home and institutional-based voting by mobile ballot box. Special voting arrangements at the polling station were made in Czech Republic. Therefore, the examples were ample indeed. However, in Albania no efforts were

made to apply any of this voting arrangements. As mentioned above, out of country voting even though recognized was not organized and, in this regard, Albania is pretty much similar with other countries (Asplund *et al.*, 2021, Covid-19 Impact on Arrangements in Polling Stations Abroad). However, in Albania there is a very good tradition of Albanian living abroad who come back during elections to cast their vote. While this added frustration and confusion to the already confused situation caused by the ballot paper and the new electoral system, it also placed barriers to those coming from abroad to vote.

On 19 April 2021, the Technical Committee of Experts for the management of the pandemic, issued an order that those coming for the Orthodox Easter (one week after elections) would have to quarantine themselves for two weeks (OSCE, 2021: 12). While the Committee of Experts didn't address specifically those coming to vote, the decision nonetheless influenced them, regardless of whether they were infected or not, vaccinated or not. Thus, the lack of efforts to address special arrangements for voters amidst of a pandemic had a negative impact on the voting of those coming from abroad and intending to vote. This has also influenced on a low voter turnout at 46.3 per cent. According to the Ministry of Health, the number of persons hospitalized or in self-isolation due to COVID-19 infections on election day was around 22,000.

The decision was contested by the opposition parties and civil society organizations and was considered as a breach of human rights and the right to vote, especially in a situation when anti-covid measures of social distancing were not being respected in the many rallies organized by both socialist party and especially the opposition parties¹⁷. In a event of SP, even the vice Minister of Health, Mira Rakacolli is not respecting the social distancing and is not wearing a mask¹⁸.

The COVID-19 preventive measures, including social distancing, were not always respected, especially in the overcrowded VCs observed and voters often did not remove their face mask for the purpose of identification, and the inking procedure was not strictly adhered to (OSCE, 2021: 25).

While pandemic didn't influence traditional campaign in terms of meeting and social distancing it took a great place in the political discourse¹⁹ (OSCE, 2021:14).

¹⁷ PS mbyll fushaten nga Vlora, Rama: Nuk keni pare gje akoma : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TJ4wnlGRSOk> ; 'Ligj me dy standarde': Tubimet politike në fushatë rrisin riskun e përhapjes së COVID-19: <https://www.reporter.al/2021/03/26/ligj-me-dy-standarde-tubimet-politike-ne-fushate-rrisin-riskun-e-perhapjes-se-covid-19/> ; Election 2021 Tirana Municipality Violated Law on Run Up to Elections: <https://exit.al/en/category/election-2021/> ; PS dhe LSI përmbyllin sot fushatën elektorale: <https://exit.al/ps-dhe-lsi-permbyllin-sot-fushaten-elektorale/>

¹⁸ "Ishte një incident"- Spahia i përgjigjet Rakacolli: Shkele masat anti-Covid për hir të partisë, papërgjegjshmëri epike!: <http://www.panorama.com.al/ishte-nje-incident-spahia-i-pergjigjet-rakacolli-shkele-masat-anti-covid-per-hir-te-partise-papergjegjshmeri-epike/>;

¹⁹ Databaza e PS-së/ Vëzhguesit vendor ngrejnë shqetësimin: Pandemia dhe tërmeti po përdoren për fushatë: <https://www.standard.al/2021/04/15/databaza-e-ps-se-vezhguesit-vendor-ngrejne-shqetesimin-pandemia-dhe-termeti-po-perdoren-per-fushate/>



The party list in Tirana was headed by one among the most prominent figures in the fight against the pandemic: the head of the Infective Hospital Najada Ccomo. Chosen as a symbol of success in the fight against the pandemic, in her introduction as a candidate for MP, Prime Minister Rama said “You have my word that we don’t want you to become like us, but we want to become like you”²⁰.

Last but not least, Prime Minister Rama used social distancing rules to stand alone in front of the public as the lonely trooper²¹. Scenes where he alone introduced candidates for MPs appearing in the TV screens became famous and rather than respecting social distancing rules with the electorate were used as social distancing between him and his ‘comrades’ of the party.

IV. Glass Ceiling or Glass Cliff

In the elections of 2021 out of the 1871 registered candidates, 732 or 40% were women (CEC). In the SP campaign launch, 11 out of 14 speeches were delivered by female candidates. There was prominent campaigning by female ministers. The leader of the DP presented a program on gender equality. Women made up approximately half of the SMI candidate lists, which also included a strong youth element (OSCE, 2021: 14). The main parties all attempted to increase the visibility of women as candidates in the campaign, and the mandatory quota for women was exceeded in most candidate lists. Women received over one third of the seats in the new parliament. In the outgoing parliament, women were underrepresented with 26 per cent of seats (36 MPs). However, in the government they held more than half of ministerial posts. In the last elections, women received 48 seats (34 per cent). At a first glance all looked perfect. However, this is not the complete story. The list of the Socialist Party in Tirana was headed by two complete new figures, who have never been part of the politics. One of them, the granny Luljeta Bozdo became famous after the earthquake of 2019 when in different opinion and talk shows gave her expertise with regard to the quality of construction and upon this was included in the team of reconstruction by Prime Minister Rama. She was considered the epitome of expertise and having a clean past made her a perfect candidate to run. The second in the list was Najada Ccomo, the Director of Infective Hospital who had been in the frontline in the fight against the COVID-19. The logic behind this was similar with the one applied for Luljeta Bozo. At first sight it

²⁰ Najada Çomo kandidate për deputete e PS-së në zgjedhjet e 25 prillit/ Rama: Komandantja e vijës së zjarrit. Nuk duam të bëhesh si ne, ne duam të bëhemi si ty: <https://ata.gov.al/2021/03/04/najada-como-kandidate-per-deputete-e-ps-se-ne-zgjedhjet-e-25-prillit-rama-komandantja-e-vijes-se-zjarrit-nuk-duam-te-behesh-si-ne-ne-duam-te-behemi-si-ty/>

²¹ Rama prezanton skuadrën, e nis me Bozon dhe Çomon: Të gjithë në sulm për Shqipërinë e së ardhmes: <https://a2news.com/2021/03/10/rama-prezanton-skuadren-e-nis-me-bozon-dhe-comon-nisim-vrapimin-drejt-se-ardhmes/>

seems good news. However, both women were exposed to harsh attack from the opposition. From being respectable women, all of a sudden, a great deal of attacks were directed towards them. A declaration of Bozo on communism received widespread criticism. Similarly, Najada Çomo received a lot of critiques for poor management of the pandemic. The problem is that the three main ministers who dealt with the pandemic and the reconstruction after the earthquake were part of the same list. If they have been successful their names should have been at the top of the list, holding thus the responsibility for the successes or failures. Regardless of their involvement in the management of the pandemic and the reconstruction both Çomo and Bozo were not responsible for the perceived successes or failures. Those responsible were a little bit down the list and as such they were the ones to hold the pressure of the public. If the Minister of Infrastructure and that of Health (both women) are in the same list, then placing two other women at the top should not be served as an attempt to achieving gender equality. Rather than women trying to break the glass ceiling they looked like walking on a glass cliff and what makes things worse they were there to protect other women with longer career and greater responsibilities who continued un-disturbed by the pressure of media their individual electoral campaign.

V. Conclusions

The parliamentary elections in Albania took place on 25th March 2021 and they were won by the Socialist Party. Even though elections took place in the midst of the pandemic, the pandemic itself had a minor impact on the process. With the exception of making compulsory a two weeks quarantine for those entering the country and thus making it impossible for the Albanian emigrants to cast their, the election campaign was organized similarly with the preceding campaigns without concerns for social distancing. Breaches of the social distancing rules were very rarely penalized. However, the pandemic itself took a central role in the discourse of the campaign and the fight against it was portrayed as a success by SP. The real change which eventually influenced the campaign was the change in the electoral law from closed to open list. For the first time, the party and the party candidates pursued different strategies. In addition to the official campaign there was an underground campaign with vote buying and exercise of influence which aimed and actually achieved to transfer the vote from the top of the list to candidates in the middle or even lower, who have “fallen from the grace” of the party leader.



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