

# What is hindering Albania's free and fair elections?

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The Albanian National Assembly in Tirana

One week ago, on the verge of Albania's parliamentary elections, the EU's High Representative Catherine Ashton and Commissioner Stefan Fule encouraged Albanian political leaders to reinforce trust in the electoral process among the public and make everything possible for the election results to be accepted by all parties. This statement is a logical follow up of the 2009 elections where a series of incidents beleaguered the process and the Socialist Party (PS) refused to accept the Democratic Party's (PD) victory by boycotting the Parliament for about two straight years. Regrettably, Albania still falls short of conducting sound elections, which [for Ashton and Fule reportedly](#) 'represent a crucial test for the country's democratic institutions and its progress towards the European Union'. Yesterday's elections have once again shown to be problematic and far from being considered free

and fair. This will make it more difficult for Albania to claim progress in the fulfillment the other EU criteria, and hence it will make it harder for the country to move beyond the current status of "potential candidate" any time soon.

An activist of the Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI), the party that ran in a coalition with PS, was shot dead yesterday morning in the city of Lac, a few kilometers away from Tirana, while another candidate from the ruling party, as well as one other citizen, have been wounded. The news spread across various agencies within minutes and a number of them reported about the likely effects this will have. [Reuters stated](#) the shooting 'raised fears of confrontation' among the deeply polarized Democrats and Socialists. The nature of their confrontation [as stated by the Guardian](#) 'does not sit easy with Brussels or Albania's NATO allies'. Similarly, the Associated Press reported that the violence 'added to the already existing uncertainty' about when [the vote results will be announced](#) and hence how acceptable these will be. In fact, yesterday's elections, as [reported by BIRN](#), were afflicted by a number of other incidents such as delayed opening of some polling stations, irregularities with handling election material, unauthorized persons close to polling stations trying to influence voters, and a number of other irregularities for which ZALART, a local platform, [reported continuously](#).

Albania's [Central Election Commission \(CEC\) reports](#) that there has been a turnout of almost 53% out of a total of 3.2 million eligible voters. Beyond this, it is still early to speak about who has won, since the counting will continue also today. Over 8,000 local and international observers have watched over these elections including observers from the OSCE's (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) [Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights](#) (ODIHR) and they will soon issue a report on the overall conduct of the elections. This report will serve as a point of reference for the EU and the international community in assessing Albania's electoral conduct, but the above mentioned incidents already give an idea about where the country stands in meeting internationally accepted standards. Moreover, a number political and civil society representatives cautioned about the lack of police patrolling and observers in some polling stations, which they said was the main reason behind vote manipulations. This shows that in the absence of



tight control at local level the future attainment of a truly democratic electoral process remains questionable.

Regardless of the official results that Albania's Central Election Commission (CEC) will confirm, it is important that the country's politicians accept the results and continue to support each other, as Albania continues to work faithfully towards joining the EU. [ODIHR's first recommendation](#) for Albania in 2009 was that 'the parties should demonstrate the political will for the conduct of democratic elections'. Yet, even before the ballots started being counted yesterday, representatives of each of the three main parties PD, PS, and LSI claimed victory in the afternoon of the elections, asserting that this was what 'their sources' told them. Moreover, parties continue to accuse each other of electoral fraud and address each other with harsh rhetoric. However, the citizens are left in the worst state, as they struggle to grasp, amid confusion, how their vote influences the political landscape. Political parties should respect the citizens' will and continue to work together to bring the country closer to the EU. Both the parties in power and those in the opposition have an important part to play in the process, but so far they have lacked constructive relations in the pursuit of this goal.

Yesterday's elections have been Albania's eighth elections after the fall of communism two decades ago, and they too were plagued with irregularities just as most previous elections have. Actually, a comparison with the 2009 elections shows that the electoral process has even worsened. Indeed, despite the irregularities that marked those past elections, [there was no violence in 2009](#). At a time when the country should move forward, moving backwards in a crucial aspect of democracy is problematic. So far Albania has not been able to show that it can comply with the international standards and this will probably have repercussions on its EU accession path, but most importantly this is worrying the wellbeing of its own citizens.

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