

## **Albanian Parliamentary Election: The Source of Rama's Landslide Victory**

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### **Abstract**

The May elections were a critical test for Albania's progress on the road to EU membership. Albania's political landscape is dominated by two major parties, the Democratic Party (DP) led by Sali Berisha and the Socialist Party (SP) led by Edi Rama. For the first time, three new parties gained ground and made it into Parliament. This article explores what were the parties strategies for May election. Although the new parties won a large proportion of the vote, they are not in a position to influence policy or reforms. The SP secured an absolute majority with 52% of overall votes, in seats (83 out of 140), falling just one vote short of the majority required for Constitutional amendments. However, the OSCE highlighted a number of irregularities: voter intimidation, vote-buying, misuse of state funds, involvement of civil servants in the election campaign, and unbalanced media coverage. The article addresses four questions: First, how can Rama's landslide victory be explained? Second, what was wrong with the opposition parties' strategy? Third, what are the prospects for the next four years under Rama's government? Finally, can the competitiveness of elections in Albania be perceived as a facade?

**Keywords:** Albania, elections, parties, electoral system, integration in EU

### **Introduction: The 11 May election and the EU integration context**

Albania became a candidate country in 2014, accession negotiations began in 2020, and two years later, in 2022, the first intergovernmental conference took place. In the larger picture, Albania is quite late; it took Croatia 8 years from application for EU membership in 2003 to full

membership in 2011. Albania has 16 years a candidate country, since its application in 2009, making Albania one of the longest countries stuck in the process. In October 2024, Albania marked a milestone with the opening of three of six clusters, referred to as “Foundations,” which focus on strengthening the rule of law, respect for human rights, and functioning democracy, in addition to “External Relations”, and “Internal Market”.<sup>1</sup> Since then, Tirana has been negotiating the opening of more clusters. Rama promised during the May election campaign to complete all six clusters by 2027 and become a full member by 2030. Even though it is quite unrealistic as a time schedule, during this visit in Albania on 12 May the EU Council President confirmed that Albania and Montenegro have the chance to be the newest EU member hopefully by 2030.<sup>2</sup> The best chance for Albania and the region to have a quick membership into EU is likely due to the geopolitical situation change with Russian war in Ukraine, Middle East wars, return of Trump in White House and rising competition from China, Brussels and the EU capitals might want to secure the WB from external actors interventions by bringing into EU. The EU enlargement has always been as much about meritocracy and geopolitical relevance.

Albania has a mixed electoral system that combines open and closed lists of representative candidates. The political landscape has been dominated by two parties Socialist Party a continuation of Albanian Communist Party which was reformed in 1990-1992 and the Democratic Party which was the first party in Pluralist system since the fall of communism in 1990s, it was founded in 1991 since then the main voice has been the current chairman Sali Berisha.<sup>3</sup> The parliament has 140 members, and the country is divided into twelve electoral districts, each of which is allocated a certain number of representatives based on its population. The largest electoral district is the capital city, Tirana (37), and the smallest is Kukes (three). Party lists are split into two parts: the first part is closed, with candidates chosen by the party leadership, mostly personally by the Chairman, while the rest are open lists voted by the constituencies. The electoral law has a gender quota: one in three elected candidates must be a female, and this applies to both closed and open lists. In the elections on 11 May, members of the diaspora were eligible to vote for the first time. They were registered in one of the twelve electoral districts depending on where they last lived before emigrating. The diaspora votes were cast by postal ballot.<sup>4</sup>

### **Justice Reform: Breaking the Status Quo of 'Above the Law' Politicians**

Justice reform passed in 2016 had seen the first success, with high-ranking members of the country's political leadership either being imprisoned or facing serious investigation. The most prominent cases are Saimir Tahiri (former Minister of the Interior), Lefter Koka (former Minister of the Environment), Vangjush Daku (former Mayor of Durrës), Ilir Beqja (former Minister of

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<sup>1</sup> EU Commission. *EU Directorate General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood: Accession Conference with Albania* (accessed: 17 June 2025).

<sup>2</sup> Cantone, Sergio. 2025. *Albania and Montenegro could join the EU before the others, Costa tells Euronews*. *Euronews*, 12 May 2025.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the political landscape of Albania from 1990 onwards, see: Krasniqi, Afrim, and Amy E. Lori. 2024. *Reconsidering 'transition': Albania 1990–2020 and the promise of democracy*. Tirana: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung; Krasniqi, Afrim, and Adrian Hackaj. 2014 *Albanians and the European social model: Internal democracy in Albanian political parties*. Tirana: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung; Vickers, Miranda. 2011. *The Albanians: A Modern History*. London, Bloomsbury Academy.

<sup>4</sup> Ministria e Drejtësisë [Albanian Justice Ministry]. *Kodi Zgjedhor i Republikës së Shqipërisë*. [Albanian Elector Code] (accessed: 17 June 2025).

Health), and Jurgis Curbja (former member of Parliament), and dozens mayors of smaller town or high ranking state officials. The highest-profile case is that of Erjon Velaj, who is accused of corruption and abuse of public office. Velaj was the mayor of Tirana and a long-time associate of Rama.<sup>5</sup> He was seen by many as a likely heir to Rama. Rama initially blamed the new system for the overreaching by arresting Velaj in his words “the investigators Republic”<sup>6</sup>, but later distances himself from Velaj by shifting the blame as a matter of individual responsibility.

Arben Ahmetaj, former deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister, was accused of corruption and evaded arrest for over two years by fleeing into self-exile. The above list includes politicians from the ruling SP who were long-time political associates and even close friends of Rama. The new judicial system has not spared the opposition either: Ilir Meta, former President, Speaker of Parliament, and Prime Minister, is currently arrested and under investigation for money laundering and corruption.

Sali Berisha and his son-in-law Jamarber Malltezi were under house arrest for ten months (December 2023 until November 2024) after being accused of corruption during Berisha’s second term as PM from 2009 to 2013.<sup>7</sup> Although judicial reform was jointly sponsored by the EU and the US, it is questionable whether the new Rama supermajority will change the law to protect itself or other members of its party, especially in light of the US withdrawal from promoting democracy under the Trump administration, as evidenced by cuts to USAID. In addition, Albania continues to face challenges related to organized crime, economic development, and the rule of law.

### **An Unusual Election Campaign**

Normally, an election in a country the size of Albania, with no pro-Russian parties, would hardly be noticeable to the outside world. However, that wasn't the case with the May election. This was mainly due in part to the recent international fame of one of the candidates, Prime Minister Edi Rama.<sup>8</sup> From his excelsior sneakers in international summits to bowing before Italian PM Meloni, to hosting a series of international conferences in Tirana and the proclamation of a new Bektashi state inside the capital, Rama has become a high-profile figure in Europe. In addition, the opposition also gained attention. Berisha hired Chris LaCivita, Trump's top campaign strategist, who got him into the White House for the second time, as campaign advisor.<sup>9</sup> Media reported an eye-catching contract of six million USD.<sup>10</sup> DP dubbed its own coalition “Make Albania Great,<sup>11</sup>” thereby replacing Trump’s main campaign slogan.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Bogdani, Aleksandra. 2025. Kryebashkiaku i Tiranës, Erjon Velaj arrestohet për një skemë korrupsioni [Mayor of Tirana, Velaj, accused for a corruption affair]. *Reporter.al*, 10 February 2025.

<sup>6</sup> Report.al. 2025. Fjalimi i Plote - Rama Mesazh në mbledhjen e grupit të PS: Nga arrestimi Veliajt tek akuzat e forta ndaj SPAK [Full Speech – Rama’s message at the SP group meeting: From Velaj’s arrest to strong accusations against SPAK]. *Report.al*, 12 February 2025.

<sup>7</sup> Transparency International. Corruption cases with social impact in the Western Balkans and Turkey (accessed: 17 June 2025).

<sup>8</sup> For Rama’s foreign Policy, see: Lenja Rigels. 2025. Rama’s foreign policy paradox. *BiEPAG*, 6 June 2025.

<sup>9</sup> Hajdari, Una. 2025. Rama trounces MAGA-linked opponents to secure historic 4th term in Albania. *Politico.EU*, 13 May 2025.

<sup>10</sup> The U.S. Department of Justice. 2025. Engagement Agreement for the Democratic Party of Albania with Continental Strategy LLC under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (accessed: 30 June 2025).

<sup>11</sup> NOA Reporting. “Shqipëria madhështore”! Berisha flet për sloganin e PD-së në zgjedhjet e 11 Majit [“Great Albania”! Berisha speaks about the DP’s slogan in the May 11 election] (accessed: 30 June 2025).

<sup>12</sup> Gjoka, Blerina. 2025. “Shqipëria Madhështore”: A do të mbledhë vota trumpizmi në Tiranë? [“Great Albania great”: Will Trumpism win election in Tirana? *Reporter.al*, 28 March 2025.

Initially, there was no doubt as to who would win the election. Rama was favored, but the question was at what point would the victory margin be? Albania is in an important position at the moment regarding economic development: since the end of the pandemic in 2022, the country has been enjoying a tourism boom with reports up to 6 million visitors. Political crisis could damage the tourist season, which is one of the main economic promoters in Albania.

Table 1: The seven main political parties' votes and percentage in the 11 May election.

	General Vote	Percent	Diaspora vote	Percent
Socialist Party (SP)	856,177	53.27%	122,255	61.14%
Democratic Party (DP)	529,354	32.93%	47,075	23.54%
Levizja Bashke (Together Movement)	24,616	1.53%	4,346	2.17%
Mundesia Party (Opportunity)	48,995	3.06%	5,925	2.96%
Shqiperia Behet (Albania Can)	64,264	4%	14,800	7.40%
Socialist-Democrat Party (SDP)	49,890	3.10%	2,329	1.16%
EuroAtlantik Party (KEA)	20,863	1.30%	1,301	0.65%

Source: Komisioni Qendrorë Zgjedhor. *KQZ website* (accessed: 30 June 2025).

Furthermore, Berisha had to spend part of the campaign to address ongoing corruption charges. On the other hand, he has adopted a style reminiscent of Trump, speaking of a “witch hunt”<sup>13</sup> Pland peddling Orbán-like conspiracy theories that his house arrest and US non-grata status as the work of liberal billionaire George Soros.<sup>14</sup>

The OSCE observation mission for the Albanian election listed a series of problems regarding the 11 May election. The ruling party utilized state resources for its election campaign. On 9 May, the government announced the waiver of fines and penalties and pressured state employees to campaign or vote for SP candidates. There was a lack of transparency regarding campaign financing, especially from the SP, DP, and SDP. Some of the media outlets operated as almost ‘spokespersons’ for the SP and DP, despite the ruling party having greater, and larger influence. There was also the long-standing issue of vote-buying, followed by compromising the secrecy of the vote, and voters were pressured or intimidated.

The electoral law has been crucial in maintaining the SP and DP’s 35-year political domination. Due to the electoral law and the traditional voting for the SP and the DP, especially regarding the list of candidates which is drawn up by Berisha and Rama. Rama and Berisha were able to be selected as members of Parliament directly for 100 out of 140 seats. This measure not only ensures the domination of two political parties, but also an unchallenged position for the party chairman.

Unlike other countries in the region, Albania has not seen a successful emergence of new political parties and anti-establishment political movements. The electoral law, followed by a lack of

<sup>13</sup> Top Channel-Albania. 2025. *Gjueti shtrigash. Qesharake. Malltezi per SPAK*. [Witch Hunt, Ridiculous, Malltezi for SPAK]. *Top Channel-Albania*, 30 June 2025.

<sup>14</sup> Top Channel Albania. 2024. *‘Financoi diktaturën më të keqe’, Berisha akuza Xhorxh Soros dhe kundërshtarëve të Trump* [‘He financed the worst dictatorship’, Berisha accuses George Soros and Trump’s opponents]. *Top Channel*, 8 December 2024.

proper and sustainable financing, and media overwhelmingly controlled mainly by Rama's SP, had made it almost impossible to open the political landscape for new political parties.

### **Berisha vs Rama: The 2013 Rematch**

There were two major parties and two candidates in this election. The SP was led by Edi Rama, who was seeking a fourth term in office. At the end of this term, Rama would be 16 years as PM, making him the longest Albanian PM in office, only second to Mehmet Shehu (1953-1981- the communist long-time PM). Edi Rama has been prime minister since 2013 and SP leader since 2005. Before becoming PM, he was mayor of Tirana from 2001 to 2012. For the first time, the opposition had three significant parties, but the most significant opposition party was the DP, led by Sali Berisha. Like Rama, Berisha is no political novice, having dominated the DP since its founding in 1991. From 1991 to 1997, he was the country's first democratically elected president. He returned to power in 2005 and remained in office until 2013, when he was defeated by Rama.

### **Socialist Party Strategy: Old Idea, but New Faces**

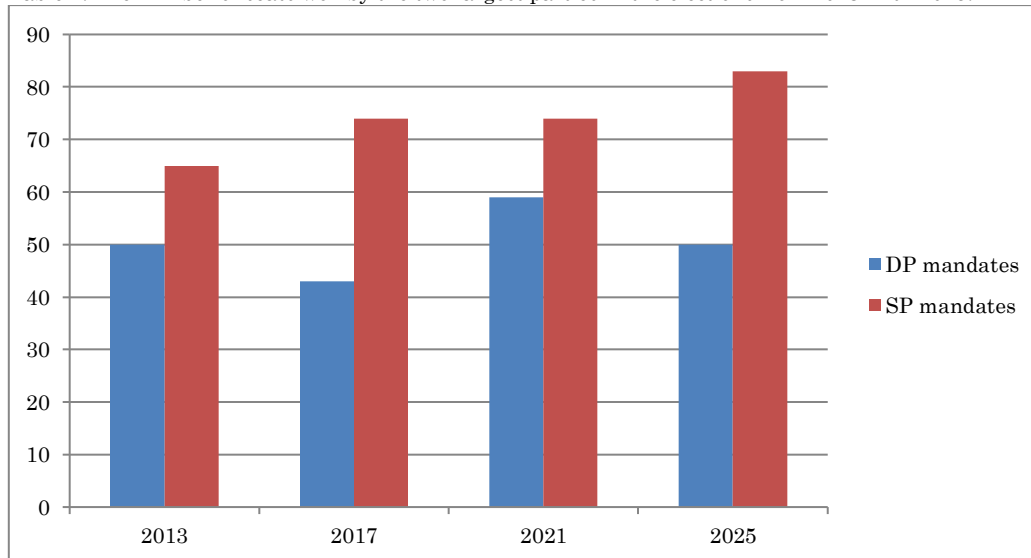
The elections on 11 May were a rematch between two politicians who have dominated the country for the past 30 years. Rama won by a landslide, the likes of which have not been witnessed since 1990. First, Rama ran a campaign that was entirely personality-driven and had a clear message: "With Me: Albania in the EU by 2030".<sup>15</sup> He built a candidates list on claims of opening the party, by including a number of university professor and civil society activists, with names like Iris Luarasi (Journalist Professor, political commentator), Ardit Bido (serious historian and director of Albanian National Archive) and Erjon Malaj (International Relationship Professor, and Director of Confucius Institute). Even though the integration of new faces is a positive development for SP, none of them possess alternative or critical voices regarding reformation or the ability to criticize Rama's personal ruling style. Secondly, Rama left most of the long-time deputies and some of the ministers in the open list while providing the closed list mainly for the new faces.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Partisë Socialiste të Shqipërisë. *Programi i Partisë Socialiste të Shqipërisë 2024-2030* [Electoral program of Albanian SP 2024-2030] (accessed: 17 June 2025).

<sup>16</sup> Erbera, Gjergj. 2025. *Loja me Listat Pritet të Testojë edhe një Herë Fuqinë e Makinerive Elektorale* [The Game with party candidate lists is expected to once again test the electoral power of parties]. *Reporter.al*, 13 March 2025.

Table 2: The number of seats won by the two largest parties in the elections from 2013 until 2025.



Source: Komisioni Qendrorë Zgjedhor. *Rezultate Zgjedhore 2013-2025 [Election Results 2013-2025]* (accessed: 30 June 2025).

Rama slogan was “We are not perfect, but we are better than Berisha”, followed by a calling Berisha regularly as marsh owl (buf kenete).<sup>17</sup> Albanian voters are very predictably; the SP and DP dominate the political landscape due to the country’s traditional voting behavior, in which voters regularly vote for one of the two major parties.

Concerning is the SP had developed a sophisticated system of cronyism (known as ‘Patronazhist’) that requires civil service employees in central authority or municipality controlled by SP to report monthly on the political orientation of their friends or relatives. Although political party activists in every democracy work regularly to get a sense of the political orientation of their area of operation, Patronazhist system is a format of state-capture.

The patronage system typically involves civil servants who are tasked with enforcing such measures. Additionally, those seeking civil service positions or promotions must boost the number of votes they ‘control’ or ‘report’. The system has even been expanded to the diaspora, mainly through family members who work for the state, which compels their relatives to vote for the ruling party. Traditionally, each civil servant is required to secure 5 to 10 votes as a guarantee. Albania has around 150,000 civil servants at the central and local levels.<sup>18</sup>

Rama, who has been in power since 2013, made extensive use of state assets just two weeks before the election by waiving penalties or fines. This measure was harshly criticized by the OSCE. Rama, who possesses charisma and a sense of humor, ran a campaign that was less about politics and more about entertainment. He often criticized first-time voters for bad behavior

<sup>17</sup> Elezi, Elona. 2025. *Shqipëri: Retorika politike heq vëmendjen nga programet* [Albania: Political Rhetoric distracts the voters from party programs]. *DW*, 11 May 2025.

<sup>18</sup> Erebara, Gjergj. 2021. *Nëpunës, Policë dhe Ushtarakë në listën me mbi 9.000 “patronazhistë” socialistë* [Civil servants, police and military on the list of over 9,000 socialist “Patronazhist”]. *Reporter.al*, 19 April 2021.

during his town halls or got into public criticism with a mayor from his own party to demonstrate that he holds his own party representatives to strict scrutiny.

Another problematic issue has to do with SP candidate with dubious past, often seen as a connection of ruling SP with the underworld figures (known locally as “Te Fortet”), that led between 2015-2019 to dozens of MPs, mayors and state officials losing their offices after Parliament passed the so-called de-criminalization law, which forced anyone convicted of drug trafficking, illegal weapons trade, or organized crime to step down. In 2017, the Central Elector Commissioner requested the removal of 57 candidates for the parliamentary elections due to their criminal past.<sup>19</sup>

Some of those banned from running remained active in the party base. One prominent case was Aqif Rakip, who lost his seat in 2018 after it emerged that he had been detained in Italy for possessing stolen goods. In 2022, the US Treasury Department declared him persona non grata for involvement in organized crime.<sup>20</sup> His son, Orlando Rakipi, has been a Member of Parliament since 2021, although he was virtually unknown prior to this and rarely speaks in Parliament or promotes any reforms or draft laws. In 2021, he achieved the best results with 16,000 votes, defeating Ervin Bushati, the former SP chairman for Tirana, an economist educated at DePaul University in Chicago, and current Albanian Ambassador to the USA. In 2025, Orlando Rakipi received 11,000 votes, beating ex-PM Pandeli Majko, regarded as one of the few remaining old school socialists and a well-respected politician by even his political opponents. Elvis Roshi lost his mayor position because of the decriminalization law, but was put under investigation a few days after the 11 May election when the Special Prosecutor claimed he had illegally interfered in the election process.<sup>21</sup>

Another reason for Rama’s win is his international profile, having recently met or welcomed in Tirana some of the world’s leading politicians, including Blinken, Macron, von der Leyen, Erdogan, Starmer, Zelenskyy, and Meloni. This has earned him a lot of sympathy among the younger generation, who may criticize the government, but consider it a positive development to have a Prime Minister who enjoys international recognition. While all the aforementioned factors did play a role in Rama’s victory, the most crucial factor was the main opposition party, the DP, the front-running candidate for PM, and the representative candidates list.

### **Democratic Party Strategy: New Idea with Old Faces**

Berisha, who returned to the DP helm in 2022 after a bitter internal party dispute with Lulzim Basha, whom Berisha had handpicked as party leader in 2013, suffered his massive defeat. In this election, the Democrats lost more than 10% of their share of the vote and 9 parliamentary seats compared to the last election in 2021. Berisha opted for a loyalty strategy, drew up a very promising program, but compiled a list of candidates that would ensure him the leadership of the DP, rather than a proper chance to win the election.

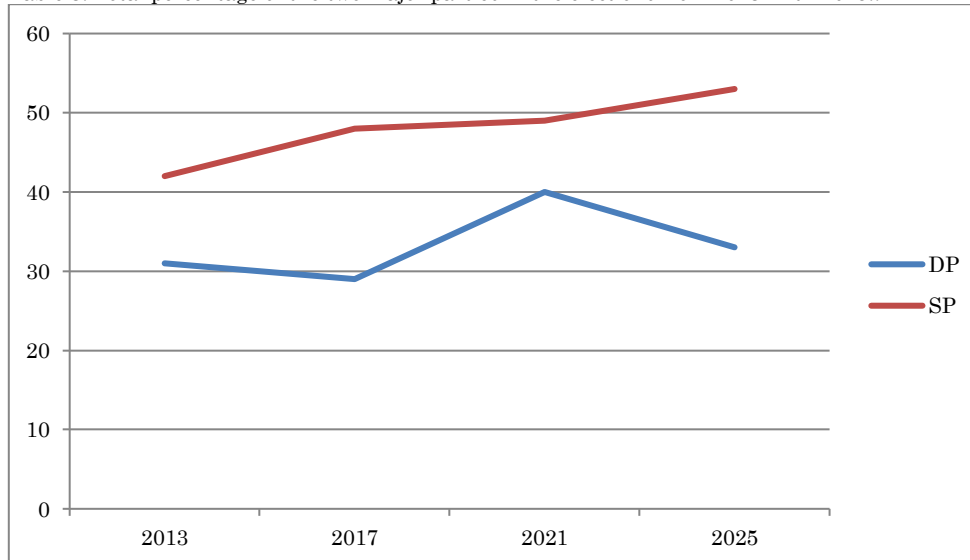
<sup>19</sup> Picari, Mimoza. 2019. “Dekriminalizimi” në Shqipëri. Fenomeni që vazhdon të prodhojë Debate. *Voice of America* [“Decriminalization” Albania, a phenomenon that continues to generate Debate]. VOA, 12 October 2019.

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Embassy Tirana. Treasury targets Actors for destabilizing behavior throughout the Western Balkans (accessed: 30 June 2025).

<sup>21</sup> Çelmeta, Igli. 2025. SPAK i sekuestron telefonin Elvis Roshit, dyshohet për krime zgjedhore [SPAK seizes Elvis Roshi’s Phone, suspected of Electoral Crimes]. *Balkanweb.al*, 17 May 2025.

First, he appointed LaCivita, Trump's top campaign advisor in the 2024 elections, as his campaign advisor. The question arose as to how the Democrats could raise \$6 million to fund the campaign consultancy contract for Lacivita. Senior DP officials expected some kind of miracles from LaCivita. However, this did not happen. The DP formed a coalition of opposition forces that were largely regarded as not bringing any significant number of voters, while excluding all new political opposition forces.

Table 3: Total percentage of the two major parties in the elections from 2013 until 2025..



Source: Komisioni Qendrore Zgjedhor, *Rezultate Zgjedhore 2013-2025*.

The list of candidates put forward by DP had two fundamental problems. Berisha selected the candidates solely on the basis of their loyalty to him, favoring close associates, some even known as seasoned politicians: Jozefina Topalli (former Speaker of Parliament), Gazmend Bardhi, Flamur Noka, Oerd Bylykbashi, and Klevis Badhiu. Some of the aforementioned leading candidates did not hold any electoral campaign events or town hall rallies at all. The second group of nominees were individuals who had lost previous elections: Belind Kellici (lost in 2023 with over 57,000 of the vote in the race for Mayor of Tirana against Veliaj), Luciano Boci (lost the race for Elbasan, the third largest city in 2023, by 13%), and Igli Cara (lost the race in 2023 for Mayor of Durrës-second largest city by roughly 10,000 votes). All of them never conceded the election defeat, but rather endorsed the claim either the election was stolen or manipulated.<sup>22</sup> They were put on the top of the running list, seen as the opposition's upcoming government.

A few weeks before the official start of the campaign, the DP decided to hold so-called primaries, in which party members were to vote for their preferred candidate, who would then be assured a place on the candidate list. What happened was that those who received the most votes were

<sup>22</sup> Top Channel Albania. 2023. *Këllici: Nuk është shprehje e vullnetit të lirë të qytetarëve* [Këllici: Election was not an Expression of the free Will of Citizens], *Top Channel Albania*, 16 May 2023; Lapsi.al. 2023. *Luciano Boci reagon pas humbjes në Elbasan* [Luciano Boci reacts after the defeat in Elbasan]. *Lapsi.al*, 14 May 2023; ABC News.Albania. 2023. *Humbi në Durrës, reagon Igli Cara: Një rezultat i ndikuar nga shumë faktorë* [Defeated in Durrës, Igli Cara reacts: A Result Influenced by Many factors]. *ABC News Albania*, 17 May 2023.

either not included on the list or were placed at the very bottom of the open list, as in the cases of Dashnor Sula in Elbasan, Jorida Tabaku in Tirana (who received on 11 May election more than 21,000 votes, making her one of the most popular candidates in the country), and Hysen Kadiu.<sup>23</sup> It was clear that Berisha had set one criterion: loyalty to him. Many analysts saw the lack of a proper candidate-winning list as more of a preparation for the post-election period than for electoral victory. It tended to include candidates who owed their position and career to Berisha, who are unlikely to ask him to step down. It is what exactly the DP statute require after an election defeat. And that is exactly what happened.

This leads us to the question: Why did Berisha decide to run again at the age of 81? He had resigned from DP leadership in 2013 voluntarily after facing a defeat to Rama. He was well aware that he lacked momentum and had been declared *persona non grata* in the US and the UK for corruption and promoting undemocratic elements during his time as Prime Minister.<sup>24</sup> For many DP and undecided voters, Berisha's campaign was not about defeating Rama, but about protecting himself from a corruption trial and getting his name off the US and the UK list of *persona non grata*. There is consensus within the Albanian judiciary that the head of the largest opposition party enjoyed immunity from prosecution and judicial investigation.

In this context, Berisha was accused of corruption in 2021, along with his son-in-law, which led to several months of house arrest.<sup>25</sup> It appears that the main goal of the 11 May campaign was to prevent further trials, investigation, or even imprisonment. Through his connection to LaCivita, Berisha hoped to be removed from the list of persons non-grata in the US, which is removable by the Secretary of State. What Berisha did not anticipate was Rama's landslide victory and the fact that his status as *persona non grata* would remain unchanged at least for the time. LaCivita knew that removing Berisha from the non-grata list would raise questions in the USA Congress of 'quid pro quo'. Trump has been in this situation once in 2019 when he was impeached for coercing Ukraine to quid pro quo.<sup>26</sup> Although Trump 2.0 has broken a series of long-standing traditions in the US justice system and foreign policy, removing Berisha from the list of *persona non grata* would not be politically beneficial to him or the Republican Party.

### **The Newcomers: Herculean Task**

In addition to the two major political parties, there were a series of new parties, most of which emerged from civil society, such as Levizja Bashke (*Movement Together*, LB), Mundesia (*The Opportunity*), and Shqiperia Behet (*Albania Can*). Partia Socialiste-Demokrate (*The Socialist Democrat Party*, SDP), led by Tom Doshi, a former SP deputy, was also declared a *persona non grata* by the USA, who has a shady past as a businessman.<sup>27</sup> SDP is merely an offshoot of the SP, lacking any platform, ideology, and likely secures support through financial promises. SDP managed to receive 3 seats.

<sup>23</sup> Shqiptarja.com. 2025. Berisha shpërblen Besnikët në Lista, i Ikin 12 Deputetë [Berisha rewards his loyalists on the candidate list, 12 MPs withdraw]. *Shqiptarja*, 13 March 2025.

<sup>24</sup> Tirana Post. 2022. Berisha del në deklaratë për mediat: Po, më ka shpallur non grata edhe Britania e Madhe [Berisha issues Statement for the Media: Yes, Great Britain has also declared me non grata]. *Tirana Post*, 22 July 2022.

<sup>25</sup> Transparency International, *Corruption cases*.

<sup>26</sup> Zachary B. Wolf. 2019. Quick timeline of Trump-Ukraine events that led to impeachment hearings. CNN, 13 November 2019.

<sup>27</sup> U.S. Department of State. Public designation of Tom Doshi under Section 7031(c) of the FY 2017 Consolidated Appropriations Act (accessed: 17 June 2025).

Levizja Bashke won one seat. The party's main candidate is Arlind Qori, a professor of philosophy at the University of Tirana. The party is ideology-driven, leaning toward Marxism, and relies on a young generation born after 1990. Before becoming a political party, it was a movement that gained prominence through anti-education law protests, support for the syndicalist and labor protection<sup>28</sup>, and protests against Samir Mane (Forbes listed him as the Balkan richest man, worth \$ 1.5 billion<sup>29</sup>), accusing him of being a key player in state capture.<sup>30</sup> Most LB supporters came from the left, were first-time voters, or voters disappointed with the SP and DP. The LB is a sort of German Left Party (*Die Linke*). It has struggled to establish itself among the voters due to the negative reputation of communism and Marxism, which brought the country into extreme poverty during 40 years of communism.<sup>31</sup>

Mundesia was a center-right party led by two prominent figures: former DP MP and reputable businessman Agron Shehaj and distinguished historian and political scientist Erald Kapri. It stands for pro-business and low taxation, a smaller state, and a similar Albanian version of the German Free Democratic Party (*Freie Demokratische Partei*). Shehaj conducted a door-to-door campaign, devoting many hours to campaigning on the streets, shops, and in supermarkets. Almost all of his voters would normally have voted for the DP, but they did not agree with Berisha as front running candidate. Mundesia was completely funded by Shehaj, who was the only politician to make his financial contributions public, even though this meant that the party was officially financed by one individual, which brings back to the point of lack of proper party financing.<sup>32</sup>

Shqiperia Behet, who came second in the country with 70,000 votes, is a major success for the new party, even though it received one seat, due to the disfavored electoral code. The party is mainly anti-establishment and ideologically centrist, attracting votes from those who considered neither Rama nor Berisha a viable option. Among the party's most prominent figures were political scientist, civil rights activist, and lawyer Adriatik Lapaj and Oxford University graduate and Professor Endri Shabani. The party's main message to the younger generation was not to leave the country in massive numbers, but to stay and fight for the future.<sup>33</sup>

All of the above-mentioned parties, Mundesia, Shqiperia Behet, and Levizja Bashke, performed well as they did the first time together they representing eleven percent, roughly 140,000 votes. Despite gaining a higher share of the vote, they only have four seats in parliament. However, it might have proven strategically productive if the parties could have run on a joint list in some of the electoral districts. It was not the case as the ideological differences between them are unbridgeable. In at least six electoral areas (Fier, Berat, Vlore, Korce, Durres, and Elbasan), the French style could have been followed, which saw less likely winning candidates being withdrawn from certain constituencies, to prevent Le Pen from winning.<sup>34</sup> In this scenario, the opposition forces would have gained at least seven more seats, leaving Rama with around 74

<sup>28</sup> Levizja Bashke *Kauza E Minatorëve Të Bulqizës [The battle of Bulqiza Miners]* (accessed: 17 June 2025).

<sup>29</sup> Forbes. 2025. *Samir Mane*. *Forbes*, 17 June 2015.

<sup>30</sup> Levizja Bashke. *Arlind Qori: Të gjithë po heshtin për kapjen e shtetit nga Samir Mane*. [Arlind Qori: Everyone is silent about the state capture by Samir Mane] (accessed: 17 June 2025).

<sup>31</sup> Levizja Bashke. *2025 Electoral Program* (accessed: 17 June 2025).

<sup>32</sup> Mundesia. *Electoral program 2025* (accessed: 30 June 2025).

<sup>33</sup> Shqiperia Behet. *2025 Electoral Program* (accessed: 30 June 2025).

<sup>34</sup> Euronews. 2024. *French left and centrist parties unite to block far-right National Rally*. *Euronews*, 2 July 2024.

seats, far from the comfortable majority he currently enjoys. On a positive note, however, the new parties have made it into Parliament; four years of tough opposition could prepare them for better results in the future, introduce them to a larger public, and offer them a chance for a platform to speak. This is the first time in 30 years of democracy that new parties have truly challenged the 35-year domination of the DP and SP. While the Levizja Socialist per Integrim (Socialist Integration Movement), once the kingmaker in the 2009 and 2013 elections, is now a shadow of its self with only three MPs from the DP safe list, with the party founder Ilir Meta, who is also in prison accused on corruption and abuse of power sitting in jail. Meta ran as part of the DP open list, but he was unable to win the seat. It is likely that the days of the SMI are over, it is reported to have built a system of nepotism and cronyism with vote buying, and the allocation of state jobs in exchange for votes, a prior system of 'Patronazhist' which is crafted further by SP.

### **What to Expect for the Future?**

The 11 May election brought four key developments. First, Rama's landslide victory made him the most powerful Prime Minister in 35 years of Albanian democracy. There are few obstacles he cannot overcome, it must be mentioned Rama is not part of 'illiberal authoritarian camp' represented by Orban, Vucic, or Erdogan, mainly because he is anti-Russian, and pro-Ukraine. Rama has turned the country into a major tourist destination, but as in many parts of the region, this has not led to more job creation, higher living standards, or the growth of the middle class, but only to the enrichment of a few businesses. Under Rama's leadership, Tirana has hosted a series of international summits, the EU-WB Summit 2022, the Berlin Process Summit 2023, and the European Political Community Summit 2025, joined the Balkan Mini-Schengen, and is a staunch supporter of Ukraine. It offered a refugee agreement to Meloni, which has been ruled illegal and in violation of international refugee law by the Italian Court of Appeal on several occasions. Despite all this international attention, including hosting numerous entertainment events such as the 2022 UEFA Europa Conference League Final, Giro d'Italia in 2025, and Albania hosting ITB Fair Berlin 2025, the country has not become more democratic. All areas of a healthy democratic system, from media freedom, social, and health security, labor rights, and environmental protection, are in continuous decline. Since 2011, more than 400,000 people have emigrated to the West in search of better economic opportunities.<sup>35</sup>

One of the key elements of a healthy functioning democracy is media freedom, which, according to Reporters Without Borders, Albania, during Rama's third term, between 2021 and 2024, ranked between 80 and 103 places, quite low for the EU standard.<sup>36</sup>

Rama will continue his style of governance, with the only danger being the suspension of judicial reform, as the US no longer has any interest in it and the EU appears unwilling to promote aggressively further democratization. Rama is a long-time politician, who knows very well how the EU operates, and he will not challenge the EU on any of its requirements, in addition to it being easier for Brussels to put restraints on candidate countries than member states.

For Berisha, he has spent the days after the election either accusing Rama of stealing the election, which is usually the cry of every Albanian party every time it loses an election. While

<sup>35</sup> INSTAT. *Censi i Popullsisë dhe Banesave në Shqipëri 2023* [Population and Housing Census in Albania-2023] (accessed: 30 June 2025), 16.

<sup>36</sup> Reporter Ohne Grenzen. *Rangliste der Pressefreiheit* (accessed: 30 June 2025).

he is unlikely to resign or reform the party, he has pushed for vote recounting to reduce the number of the voters received by new parties, and to display some kind of evidence for massive vote fraud, which is essentially a battle to cement the DP and himself the right as a sole representative of the opposition front.

With Rama's landslide victory, the public displays Rama's autocratic tendencies, the best-case scenario is opposition forces unable to defeat the ruling party, which is often the case in Serbia, Hungary, and Turkey. This is a system of one dominant party and many smaller opposition parties, which can produce a healthy opposition but are unable to defeat the ruling party in the general election. Furthermore, the risk of the withdrawal of the USA as a worldwide promoter of democracy, in addition to a lack of interest of Brussels toward criticizing undemocratic elements in candidate countries, as displayed by a lack of support for the student movement in Serbia, is a major risk to further Albanian democratic backsliding.

The new party will have a voice in Parliament, which is likely to be reformist and liberal. However, it would not be enough to push through reforms or significant change in the country. As for further integration into the EU, the process will be smoother than ever under Rama. He will not challenge Brussels on the so-called red lines, and with little effort, Rama could make serious progress and potentially lead Albania into the EU by 2030.

#### Notes on Author

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