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REPRESENTATION STANDARDS: INCLUSION OF PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN ELECTIONS AND POLITICAL LIFE

(Working paper)

The political context

Albania will hold parliamentary elections in the spring of 2025. In July 2024, following decisions of the Constitutional Court, the Assembly of the Republic of Albania approved significant changes to the electoral system's application formula and the inclusion of the diaspora. Electoral reform is still ongoing in the upcoming parliamentary session, while reforms regarding legislation on political parties have yet to begin. According to INSTAT data (2024), Albania has 149,866 citizens with disabilities, including over 99,000 with mobility issues, over 38,000 with hearing impairments, and over 52,000 with visual impairments. Several thousand other citizens will be receiving hospital or family healthcare treatment during the election period, including on election day.

The electoral administration system has yet to provide the necessary technical and legal conditions to enable all citizens from various categories to actively participate in voting. While opportunities were created for diaspora participation, the inability for certain citizens within the country to vote is paradoxical. In the last parliamentary elections, the CEC reported that over 20,000 voters were unable to vote due to mobility challenges. By expanding the voter list to include people with disabilities and others, such as those hospitalized on election day, the number of citizens deprived of the right to vote is very high, estimated between 30,000 and 40,000.

Although the participation of persons with disabilities and other categories in elections, a constitutional right, is guaranteed in principle by the Electoral Code, it is hindered by problems within the electoral infrastructure and system. The ODIHR report (2023) recommended ensuring accessibility to voting centres for persons with disabilities, improving their independent access to the electoral process, and adapting informational programs to meet the needs of voters with disabilities.

The Assembly of the Republic of Albania has not yet completed the electoral reform and has not addressed the ODIHR's recommendations, as well as other recommendations, including those from civil society or the CEC. The current session represents the last opportunity to address these recommendations, particularly those concerning the participation and representation of persons with disabilities (PWDs).

Furthermore, among approximately 500 high-ranking elected or appointed officials (ministers, MPs, the President, mayors, heads of constitutional and independent institutions, etc.), none belong to the PWD category. This lack of representation in politics and decision-making is also mirrored in the leadership structures of political parties, the main source of political careers. None of the parliamentary parties include persons with disabilities in their leadership structures. ISP experts have analysed the political programs of these parties and their approach to issues concerning persons with disabilities, providing concrete recommendations.

Addressing the standards of representation and inclusion of persons with special needs in elections and political life is linked to Albania's main challenge: maintaining a participatory, functional, and high-quality democracy, and upholding the rule of law. It also plays a role in Albania's progress toward EU membership negotiations.

The Institute for Political Studies (ISP), in collaboration with the Center for the Study of Democracy and Governance (CSDG) and the Albanian Helsinki Committee (KSHH), is implementing the project **“Improving Policy Debate and Accountability in Fulfillment of the Criteria of the First Group of Negotiating Chapters,”** supported by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Tirana. ISP, together with ASP, is engaged through the same donor to promote debate on electoral reform and related issues. As part of this commitment, the working document prepared by ISP experts offers a detailed analysis of the current situation and challenges, examines models followed in regional countries (Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and EU countries), and provides short-term recommendations (for the 2025 elections) and long-term suggestions regarding representation in political life.

Among the main recommendations are:

PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR 2025

- I. The Assembly should prioritize electoral reform to ensure the full electoral rights of persons with disabilities (PWDs).
- II. The central government, through the Ministry of Local Government and the CEC, must provide suitable voting environments for all categories of PWDs.
- III. Any form of exclusion of PWDs from voting in elections should be considered an election crime, with responsible officials facing legal consequences.



- IV. Parties and PWD candidates should be given the opportunity to run for all levels of electoral and political representation
- V. The Anti-Discrimination Commissioner, the Ombudsman, and the CEC should encourage parties to include dedicated platforms for PWDs in their electoral programs
- VI. All meetings and decisions, including government and parliamentary sessions, must be accompanied by sign language interpretation
- VII. The CEC should be more active in informing and raising awareness among PWDs about their electoral rights through educational materials and campaigns in accessible formats.
- VIII. The official CEC website should provide information and access for PWD voters who cannot see or hear.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLITICAL PARTIES REGARDING PWD (IN PROGRAMS)

- I. Article 4 of the CRPD stipulates that political parties must seek input from persons with disabilities on matters concerning their community. The issues affecting this community differ from those affecting other social groups.
- II. As recommended by the OSCE/ODIHR, political party staff should be trained to better understand the specific issues related to this community. Training can help staff work more effectively with people with special needs and understand how to make necessary accommodations.
- III. Political parties should establish mentoring systems to support people with disabilities in becoming active in political life and to ensure their inclusion in consultations organized during the development of political programs, especially in pre-election campaign periods.
- IV. Political parties should also involve representatives from the community of persons with disabilities in commissions responsible for drafting social and economic programs.
- V. Political parties should revise their statutes and internal regulations to guarantee the inclusion of persons with disabilities in leadership, administrative structures, and decision-making processes. They should ensure that persons with disabilities are encouraged to engage in party administration, policy development, campaigns, and the distribution of campaign materials.
- VI. Political parties should learn from the use of gender quotas and quotas for persons with disabilities in other regions. Establishing quotas for persons with disabilities would be a significant step toward realizing their political participation. Quotas must have multi-stakeholder support, including from various political parties, associations that advocate for

the rights of persons with disabilities, and other groups that must agree on the rules and purpose of the quotas.

- VII. Quotas can be more effective when combined with civic education. Quotas are not about selecting people with disabilities merely because they have special needs. Instead, quotas provide an opportunity for qualified candidates with disabilities to have an equal chance to run for leadership and representative positions like everyone else. Disability rights experts suggest that pairing quotas with civic education programs creates a stronger impact than implementing quotas alone.
- VIII. The membership registration department of political parties should develop a database of members with disabilities to promote democratic practices that accommodate PWDs within their parties.
- IX. Political parties should facilitate the inclusion of persons with disabilities in multi-member lists for general and local elections. Parties that are more inclusive are likely to attract more votes. People with disabilities bring unique perspectives that are currently missing in Albanian political parties, and successful experiences from other countries highlight this.
- X. Political parties must distribute their platforms in accessible formats and hold meetings, speeches, announcements, and debates in accessible locations, including providing sign language interpreters. This ensures that persons with disabilities have equal access to information and are well-informed to make the right voting decisions. Information provided by political parties should be available in both audio and visual formats.
- XI. Political parties should develop voter education initiatives that specifically target people with disabilities in their messages to the general public. This approach will ensure that information is accessible to persons with disabilities and will integrate the concept of persons with disabilities as part of the electorate and candidates, thus helping to reduce the stereotyping and labelling that often affect this community.
- XII. Organizers of political activities should carefully consider the locations where Town Halls, speeches, and citizen engagements take place. In some cases, political parties may need to work closely with PWDs to select suitable venues for these events.

As part of a concrete action strategy, and based on the best practices of existing EU member countries, we present below some **technical criteria** that must be considered when organizing such an activity:

- The location should be within a 5-minute walk from public transport.
- The entrance should feature a ramp with handrails or be at ground level.
- The venue for speeches, or debates should be on the first floor or, if on a higher floor, there must be an elevator that can accommodate a wheelchair or scooter.
- A reserved seating area with good visibility should be provided for individuals using mobility devices.



- Websites should use clear and simple language.
- Web pages and articles should include headings and subheadings.
- High-contrast color schemes should be used.
- Avoid using colors as the sole indicator of important information.
- Avoid using terms like "click here" or "more" as link titles.
- Include alternative text (alt-text) for illustrations, graphics, and photographs.
- Provide subtitles for videos.
- Add audio descriptions to videos.
- Include transcripts for audio recordings, such as radio spots or podcasts.

