INSTITUTE FOR POLITICAL STUDIES
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THE EU INTEGRATION PROCESS AND ELECTORAL STANDARDS:

Addressing needs, commitments, and priorities[1]

Summary / Position Paper

The European Union's enlargement process **has regained momentum** primarily due to geopolitical developments, and continues to enjoy widespread support. Albania lacks Eurosceptic or parties that contest EU integration, as the latter is widely considered as both a priority and as a matter of national interest. All parliamentary political parties in Albania have declared their commitment to reform and their **unconditional support for the integration process**. Based on this distinctive characteristic, which favours Albania compared to other Western Balkan countries, there is a historic opportunity for the country to capitalize on the favourable moment by advancing reforms and meeting the criteria that enable its swift approach to the EU.

The standards of a functional democracy and the rule of law are **key prerequisites for successful and sustainable reforms**. The EU has repeatedly emphasized that integration is not a technical process but one of societal transformation, where every institution, actor, and stakeholder has a voice and a role. Civil society should be an important part of this transformation, instead of being relegated to a side note to it. Based on its current commitments and past experiences, the Institute for Political Studies (ISP) has drafted a ***Position Paper***, a **summary of which is presented in this document**. Its content and focus are not conditioned by the recent parliamentary elections, but rather by a broader framework of developments and priority assessments related **to political, state, and institutional**

[1] *The Institute of Political Studies (ISP) in collaboration with several civil society organizations, under the leadership of the Center for the Study of Democracy and Governance (CSDG), is implementing the project "Improving Policy Debate and Accountability in Fulfilling the Criteria of the First Group of Negotiating Chapters", supported by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Tirana.*

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responsibilities in relation to the country's efforts towards achieving the qualitative standards of *Cluster One*.

Albania held its latest parliamentary elections on May 11, 2025. The process has not officially concluded, but it is clear that the Socialist Party (PS) has emerged victorious, with EU membership by 2030 as its central electoral slogan. Over the past 10 months (2024-2025), several negotiation chapters for EU membership have been opened, including the key chapter -Cluster One (Fundamentals). Albania's political aim is to close all chapters by 2027, one year after the next local elections and within the mandate of the new parliamentary legislature.

The Parliament is Albania's primary decision-making institution. With the start of the new parliamentary legislature, there will be approximately **10 parliamentary parties** directly represented, with several others indirectly represented, accounting for a broad political and social spectrum, including new entries. Parliamentary parties enjoy multiple rights and mechanisms of influence, both in addressing reforms and in strengthening the link between the legislative process, citizen sovereignty, and political power.

UPCOMING DEVELOPMENTS

The new parliamentary legislature shall convene in September 2025. By then, the new government will be established. Local by-elections are expected to take place in autumn in three municipalities. In the early months of autumn, the **EU will publish its annual report** on Albania. By the same time, the **U.S. Department of State** shall release its human rights report. In parallel, several other important reports measuring democracy and rule of law standards are regularly published each year, such as *Freedom House* (FH), *WJP Rule of Law Index*, *BTI Index*, etc. Additionally, within the coming months, the final ODIHR/OSCE report is expected to be published, as its preliminary report has already been made public.

In considering strategic reforms and integration as vital interests for the country and addressing them as a national priority, we believe Albania has a vital need for a more effective approach towards achieving the standards of functional democracy and the rule of law. The institution of elections is central to this. In previous legislatures, the parliament has initiated reforms in the Electoral Code and supplementary legislation; the outgoing legislature made only emergency changes in compliance with Constitutional Court decisions V-28/2021 and V-38/2022.

COMMITMENTS: ROADMAP FOR THE FUNCTIONING OF DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

The strategic document "**Roadmap for the Functioning of Democratic Institutions**", adopted in 2024, outlines concrete measures, timelines, and official commitments for the Parliament, government, and other institutions regarding various electoral issues[2].

The most significant commitment is the agreement that all relevant pending decisions of the Constitutional Court and unresolved recommendations from OSCE/ODIHR and the Venice

Commission will be adopted **through cross-party consensus in an open, inclusive and consultative process by 2026**. This includes most importantly tackling following key issues:

- The implementation of the principle of equal opportunities and equal treatment before the law, as well as a professional system for the administration of elections;
- Ensuring the depoliticization of lower-level electoral commissions;
- Voting for Albanian citizens permanently residing abroad;
- Allegations of vote-buying, misuse, and abuse of central and local administrative resources.

It is envisaged that the pertinent legislative changes **to strengthen the effectiveness and independence** of the audiovisual media regulator will be adopted in line with Council of Europe standards and Venice Commission recommendations by 2026. The regulatory framework for other bodies monitoring online media during elections will be adopted starting as of 2026.

More accurate rules and restrictions on donations and expenditures for third parties, as well as the **publication by contestants of their campaign revenues and expenditures** before **election day** and legislative amendments on political party financing are expected to be adopted by 2027.

EU ASSESSMENTS ON ELECTORAL ISSUES

The EU's 2024 report on Albania emphasized the need to fully address OSCE/ODIHR and Venice Commission recommendations on Albania.

[2] *VKM 611/2024. See more https://www.drejtesia.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/VKM-nr.-611-date-2.10.2024-Per-miratimin-e-Udherrefyesit-per-Funksionimin-e-Institucioneve-Demokratike.pdf*

- *The document prioritizes ensuring the secrecy of the vote; the implementation of effective measures against vote-buying and misuse of administrative resources at national and local levels; security for independent media coverage of the campaign; protection of personal data; and oversight of campaign financing*[3].

The preliminary report of the OSCE/ODIHR mission (2025) highlighted key findings and priority recommendations.

- The final report will provide a more concrete and comprehensive approach, but the core message remains: *"Concern over the ongoing lack of political will to address longstanding deficiencies in the electoral legal framework and highlights the need for comprehensive reform through a broad consultation process."*

- Specifically, the report notes that many longstanding recommendations remain unaddressed, including those related to the composition of lower-level electoral commissions, the voting rights of persons with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities, criminal liability for defamation, independent media coverage during campaigns, interim reporting on campaign financing, and extending financing rules to include third parties[4].

- The report also emphasizes that unaddressed deficiencies and ambiguities reduce the clarity of the legal framework and create uncertainty in applying the spirit and letter of the law.

The European Parliament (Foreign Affairs Committee) recently adopted a document on Albania, addressing key findings and assessments of the latest electoral process and fundamentally recommending that Albanian political parties should commit to **comprehensive electoral reform** in line with OSCE/ODIHR and Venice Commission recommendations[5].

There is a discrepancy between the way Albanian political actors read the coverage of the situation in Albania as reported and the actual European Commission's assessments on it. This discrepancy originates from the longstanding Albanian practice of reading different meanings out of the same document, resulting in a mismatch between the "Tirana takes" of the assessments made in Brussels about what is going on in Albania and what the official assessments actually mean.

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[3] *Albania 2024 Report. European Commission, Brussels, 30.10.2024 SWD(2024). See link: https://cluster1albania.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Albania-Report-2024.pdf*

[4] *OSCE/ODIHR (2025). Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions. See more https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/albania/590598*

[5] *The Foreign Affairs Committee. June 4, 2025. Link https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20250602IPR28710/call-on-albania-to-accelerate-reforms-and-strengthen-democratic-institutions*

- **The recent political misinterpretation** of the approval of the report on Albania by the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee is another example of a strained attempt to look at the reflection of "**two Albanias**" **out of the same mirror**. Individuals and politicians may have a certain leeway in interpreting assessments and acts, but public institutions can and should adopt a more realistic and institutional approach in constructively reading and addressing the issues raised in reports concerning Albania.

- Official documents should also reflect a more realistic approach towards facts. For example, in the screening report for Cluster One – Fundamentals, the Albanian side considers laws related to elections, the regulatory framework, etc., without citing deficiencies or unfulfilled commitments. Meanwhile, the European Commission's assessment highlights that priority recommendations from ODIHR/OSCE and the Venice Commission remain unaddressed, specifying issues such as vote-buying, misuse of state resources at local and national levels, pressure on voters and the public sector, depoliticization of lower-level electoral commissions, ensuring rights for persons with disabilities, the legal framework for media, etc.

The European Commission's **"Non-paper regarding the Fundamentals for Albania"** (May 2025), includes critical unaddressed issues such the implementation of many priority recommendations from OSCE/ODIHR and the Venice Commission, deficiencies in legislation on media during election campaigns, etc.

- The document emphasizes that *"further concrete actions are still needed to complete the legislative framework on political party financing and electoral campaign financing in line with European standards and to consolidate its implementation."*

POLITICAL CONTEXT AND OPPORTUNITIES

In its post-communist electoral tradition, Albania **has experimented with several electoral systems,** including the three classic combined forms (majoritarian, proportional, and mixed), and has conducted over 22 local and parliamentary electoral processes, creating a rich archive of experiments, achievements, and shortcomings, which should be sufficient to understand long-term challenges and priority directions.

The term "**electoral reform**" is both overused and ambiguous in its scope and content. Nevertheless, the need for legal solutions of certain issues and recommendations remains clear, as does the need for finding mechanisms to align the legal framework with the political consensus on implementing free and fair elections. Albania will hold local by-elections in 2025 and regular local elections in spring 2027. According to Venice Commission best practices, the legal framework should be finalized one year before elections, i.e., **within the next 12 months.**

FUNDAMENTAL SYSTEM REFORM VS GRADUAL IMPROVEMENTS

Among experts, the main debate is whether Albania needs to undergo a qualitative change with regard to shaping its institutions of representative democracy through comprehensive reform or whether only periodic minor interventions in the current legal framework would be needed. The latter approach has proven ineffective, yet a solid reform would require a package of substantial changes, which could include:

- New and effective legislation on political parties;
- Comprehensive and effective legislation on electoral/political financing;
- Completing the legal framework on direct democracy;
- Redefining the relationship between parties and the state/Constitution;
- Redefining the relationship between other institutions and elections;
- Revising the electoral system / depoliticizing electoral administration;
- Decriminalizing politics/campaigns for "clean politics/politicians."

ISP has analyzed the legislation of **Italy, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Spain, Kosovo, Greece, Austria and Bulgaria** regarding concerns about informal influences and criminally sourced financing in elections.

- Each of these countries has adopted legislation that **includes prohibitive provisions and penalties ranging from financial fines and imprisonment to loss of public funding, confiscation of campaign funds, deregistration of entities, suspension of activities, or even permanent bans from political participation.**

Our take on the matter does not suggest the implementation of a wide-ranging "policy" concept for everything related to elections, but a real confrontation with the problem geared to the need for **finding effective, sustainable, and long-term solutions to longstanding** Albanian problems.

- Constitutional Courts in **Bulgaria (2025) and Greece (2025)** have made concrete decisions on informal/criminal financing resulting in electoral distortion, invalidating 16 and 3 parliamentary mandates, respectively, for involved/beneficiary MPs.

- Both countries are EU members, and Albania can refer to good and effective practices within the Eurozone.

NEW PHENOMENA VS NEW THREATS

- During recent electoral processes, there has been an increasing role of online media in election campaigns, coupled with the emerging negative influences from external actors, with lobbying applied outside the campaign framework, and an extensive and abusive patronage system accompanied by misuse of citizens' personal data and state-controlled databases. Albania lacks a solid legal framework to tackle most of these phenomena and does not have an effective and reliable preventive mechanism to counter them.

- As a NATO member and EU candidate, Albania has constitutional obligations that transcend momentary electoral interests and preferences of specific political parties. Addressing these issues constitutes a challenge beyond the mandate of a reform commission and requires broader institutional contributions alongside the legislative process in Parliament.

THE POLITICAL TIPPING POINT

Developments in recent years in the Euro-Atlantic space and beyond, including the Russian attack on Ukraine and **new security/insecurity situations** in various regions, greatly impact countries like Albania.

The world is changing, the approach to priorities is shifting, the concept of democracy is under threat, and individual states **must think more about solving their own problems** by finally abandoning the comfortable practice of delegating to other countries (EU, USA in Albania's case) the effort to produce externally-crafted solutions to its very own problems. The adoption of **Albania's National Security Strategy** (2024) reflects on this situation and on the need to use the lessons learned from the transition, for the purpose of enhancing the country's capacity to face new challenges and threats.

The Albanian tradition of **permanent political conflict** between ruling party and opposition poses a serious risk to these efforts, but if mechanisms to mediate between the political players are found, an effective challenge of the status quo could be possible. On the positive note:

- Most political actors in Albania have experience with state administration, combined with expertise, and access in governance affairs, an ability to positively influence decision-making.

- They have the right and moral **obligation to pinpoint bottlenecks and offer concrete alternative approaches for their resolution**. An effort geared toward this end could create bridges of communication and cross-party mechanisms for short- and long-term decision-making on electoral reform.

The new parliament consists of **a broader spectrum** of political representatives, including politicians with experience since 1991 and **co-leaders of several electoral reforms** over the years. Their expertise can be tapped onto as a positive value and as a driving force for initiating a new and inclusive reform process.

Thirty-five years after the establishment of the pluralist system, Albania ought to have stronger, effective, and functional leadership with the right vision, and with the right institutions capable of fully addressing electoral reform, by preventing and resolving electoral disputes, and ensuring respect for constitutional rights, human rights, and a higher standard of the rule of law and functional democracy.

ANNEX 1: THE UNFULFILLED POLITICAL PACT OF JUNE 2020

On June 5, 2020, the main parties participating in Albania's Political Council agreed on several important elements related to improving electoral legislation and political representation issues. The parties could not reach consensus on the electoral system as such, but did agree on other topics, some of which have not yet been implemented.

Specifically, there were three main issues on which consensus was possible:

- **Electronic Identification**: Parties committed to support the implementation of electronic identification covering 100% of voters in the next elections.
- **Counting Groups**: Two non-political individuals, one counting while the other assists, switching roles with each ballot box.
- **Depoliticization**: No changes will be made to the electoral administration for the next elections (parliamentary and local). Public administration reform in Albania will emphasize the depoliticization of the civil administration.

Above all, another key commitment remains crucial: the agreement to continue discussions to address key ODIHR recommendations regarding:

(1) Vote-buying;
(2) Pressure on voters and public administration;
(3) Misuse and abuse of administrative, state, and financial resources;
(4) Cooperation with criminal groups;
(5) Freedom and secrecy of the vote;
(6) Manipulation and falsification of election results.

Consensus-based political dialogue on these issues was interrupted in July 2020 when unilateral changes were made to the Constitution of the Republic of Albania, followed by further amendments to the Electoral Code in October 2020.

The 2021 Parliament did **not succeed in implementing an electoral reform**; partial changes to the Electoral Code occurred in July 2024 and February 2025.

ANNEX 2: OSCE/ODIHR RECOMMENDATIONS

The final ODIHR reports for the 2021 parliamentary elections and the 2023 local government elections provided **50 recommendations in total, 13 of which are considered as priority recommendations,** whilst the rest as secondary recommendations. Some recommendations have remained the same or have been expanded over the years due to shortcomings noted in their implementation. The following table lists the 2021 and 2023 recommendations and an informal assessment by ISP of their current status.

YEAR	OSCE/ODIHR RECOMMENDATIONS 2021 AND 2023	PRIORITY / SECONDARY RECOMMENDATION	STATUS AS OF MAY 2025
2023 and 2021	For the purpose of ensuring an inclusive and sustainable electoral framework, all decision-making bodies should commit to meaningful electoral reform and address all ODIHR recommendations. (To be adopted before the next elections – 2021)	PRIORITY RECOMMENDATION	Not implemented

2023 and 2021	Law enforcement bodies must make every effort to identify and investigate all allegations of electoral violations, including vote-buying, voter pressure, and misuse of administrative resources, thoroughly, timely, and transparently.	PRIORITY RECOMMENDATION	Not implemented
2023	Voters should be systematically informed about available mechanisms for reporting violations, including early detections of vote-buying, with protections for whistleblowers and safeguards against repercussions.	PRIORITY RECOMMENDATION	Not implemented
2021	Albania must guarantee the security of citizens' personal data. Relevant institutions must fully investigate and sanction any violations.		Not implemented
2023	To ensure vote secrecy and prevent voter pressure, effective procedural safeguards must be implemented against group voting and voting on behalf of others.	PRIORITY RECOMMENDATION	Partially implemented
2023 and 2021	The state must guarantee the right to a free and secret vote. Any pressure to disclose whether or how someone voted must be prevented.	PRIORITY RECOMMENDATION	Not implemented
2023	Legal provisions on electoral campaigns, including those against misuse of administrative resources, should be revised to remove ambiguities and ensure a level playing field.	PRIORITY RECOMMENDATION	Not implemented
2023	Authorities must ensure proper implementation of the Right to Information Law, decriminalize defamation, and support independent journalism.	PRIORITY RECOMMENDATION	Not implemented
2023	Attention should be given to revising the appointment system for lower-level electoral administration members and secretaries. Measures should prevent arbitrary replacements of electoral administration members.	PRIORITY RECOMMENDATION	Not implemented
2023 and 2021	Use of ready-made materials produced by parties or state authorities in news and information programs should be avoided or limited to exceptional cases, especially during election campaigns.	PRIORITY RECOMMENDATION	Not implemented

2023	Sublegal acts regulating the electoral process should be adopted in a timely manner to ensure legal certainty, effective preparation, and public awareness.	SECONDARY RECOMMENDATION	Not implemented
2023	Voter education programs should be provided, especially at the district level. Attention should be paid towards tailoring such programs to the needs of national minorities, particularly Roma and Egyptians, and voters with disabilities.	SECONDARY RECOMMENDATION	Implemented
2023 and 2021	Sufficient resources and independent, meaningful public monitoring of electoral technologies should be provided. If electronic voting is used more widely, consider applying verification methods like risk-limiting audits (2021).	SECONDARY RECOMMENDATION	Partially implemented
2023	The CEC should consider conducting an independent audit of equipment and software before election day.		Implemented
2023	Measures should enable voters using new technologies to vote independently and in complete secrecy.	SECONDARY RECOMMENDATION	Partially Implemented
2023 and 2021	Ensuring polling station accessibility for persons with disabilities and improving their independent access to the electoral process.	SECONDARY RECOMMENDATION	Partially implemented
2023	Authorities should inform all voters of their respective polling station locations and notify voters.	SECONDARY RECOMMENDATION	Partially implemented
2023	To guarantee universal suffrage and equal treatment before the law, restrictions based on intellectual and psychosocial disabilities should be removed.	SECONDARY RECOMMENDATION	Not implemented
2023 and 2021	Restrictions on the right to stand for election for individuals whose guilt for a criminal offense has not been proven by a final court decision should be removed.	SECONDARY RECOMMENDATION	Not implemented
2023 and 2021	Attention should be given to revising the electoral threshold for independent candidates and parties.	SECONDARY RECOMMENDATION	Not implemented
2023	Comprehensive legal, institutional, and educational efforts to overcome existing gender stereotypes. Political parties should identify and limit any potential gender-based barriers for female candidates.	SECONDARY RECOMMENDATION	Partially implemented

2023	Decisions on the allocation and transfer of public funds to beneficiary political parties should be made in a timely manner. Consideration could be given to extending public campaign financing to independent candidates.	SECONDARY RECOMMENDATION	Partially / Not implemented
2023 and 2021	To increase transparency, there should be periodic publications of financial contributions and campaign expenditures before election day.	SECONDARY RECOMMENDATION	Not implemented
2023	State authorities should promote an independent and truly diverse media environment, free from political and business influences. Parliament should amend the Audiovisual Media Law to limit ownership concentration and undue influence of media owners on editorial policies.	SECONDARY RECOMMENDATION	Not implemented
2023	Rules for allocating airtime to electoral contestants should be changed to ensure a fairer distribution of time for all competing parties.	SECONDARY RECOMMENDATION	Not implemented
2023	AMA should be provided with sufficient material and technical resources to enhance its media monitoring and reporting capacity.	SECONDARY RECOMMENDATION	Implemented
2023	The Complaints and Sanctions Commission should ensure consistent decision-making, avoiding inconsistent legal reasoning.	SECONDARY RECOMMENDATION	Not implemented
2023	The CEC should review all complaints and appeals in a timely manner. All decisions on electoral disputes should be published immediately.	SECONDARY RECOMMENDATION	Partially implemented
2023	All observers should have the right to receive copies of voting result protocols.	SECONDARY RECOMMENDATION	Implemented
2021	The CEC should publish a comprehensive electoral calendar with relevant deadlines, including the adoption of subordinate acts, training, and logistical tasks.	SECONDARY RECOMMENDATION	Implemented
2021	Restrictions due to disabilities should be removed, and the obligation to register voters over 100 years old should be the state's responsibility.	SECONDARY RECOMMENDATION	Not implemented

2021	The possibility of party leaders running in multiple electoral zones should be reviewed to preserve the principle of equality.	SECONDARY RECOMMENDATION	Implemented
2021	Legal changes to extend donation and expenditure regulations and limits, as set for political parties, to also apply to third parties.	SECONDARY RECOMMENDATION	Not implemented
2021	Additional efforts could be made by authorities to facilitate the application or renewal of identity cards for voters in need.	SECONDARY RECOMMENDATION	Partially implemented
2021	Consideration should be given to revising the law to eliminate unjust restrictions on standing for appeal.	SECONDARY RECOMMENDATION	Not implemented
2021	All relevant election-related decisions, including those on sanctions, should be reviewed by the Commission for Appeals and Sanctions (KAS) and the Electoral College of the Central Elections Commission	SECONDARY RECOMMENDATION	Not implemented