

Empowering

Women

in Politics



Empowering Women in Politics



This publication was supported by:



Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the OSCE Presence in Albania.

Foreword

Ambassador Florian Raunig, *Head of OSCE Presence in Albania*

Interviews

1. Ms Mimi Kodheli
2. Ms Voltana Ademi
3. Ms Albana Vokshi
4. Ms Rajmonda Balili
5. Ms Evis Kushi
6. Ms Nushe Hoxhaj
7. Ms Felek Ibrahim
8. Ms Arjana Pupa
9. Ms Sanije Batku

Empowering Women in Politics

Foreword

This is the second edition of the OSCE Presence in Albania's publication "*Women in Politics*". It contains interviews with some of the most distinguished Albanian women in politics including Ms Mimi Kodheli, the first female Albanian Minister of Defence and Ms Voltana Ademi, the first female mayor of Shkodra. Both Minister Kodheli and Mayor Ademi made their leap into politics from successful professional careers. Two distinguished women parliamentarians, Ms Evis Kushi and Ms Albana Vokshi, are also given the chance to talk about their experiences and the challenges of gender equality.

The mayor of Patos, Ms Rajmonda Balili, who won her second mandate in 2015, talks about her achievements and future plans. Ms Nushe Hoxhaj, Ms Felek Ibrahimimi, Ms Sanije Batku and Ms Arjana Pupa, strong women from different regions of the country who have been part of local government, civil society and political life share their experiences also on how the National Platform for Women changed their lives. The National Platform is an informal network established under the framework of the OSCE Presence's "Women in Governance" project in 2010 bringing together women from across the political spectrum and from civil society.

This publication aims to increase awareness about the role of women in political life in Albania; women who are key stakeholders and actors; women who want a better life for women and a better future for their country. All of the women portrayed in this book have faced challenges and obstacles in attempting to enter the world of politics, as well as in the course of their political careers. With the challenges have come remarkable successes, however, thanks to their dedication, perseverance, and in many cases timely

support from others. Their experiences will hopefully encourage other women to see that they can make a valuable contribution to improving life in Albania; to trust in their abilities; and to stand as candidates in the upcoming elections.

These women's stories are worth reading and remembering.

Ambassador Florian Raunig

Head of Presence

OSCE Presence in Albania

MIMI KODHELI

by Irena Shabani

She is Albania's first female Defence Minister - a tall lady with sharp eyes and quick wits. Her experience in politics dates back to 2000, when she started out as the Deputy Mayor of Tirana. She believes that Albania will continuously change for the better. She believes in women's power and she promotes it every time she has a chance. Children are her weak point, not just her son - but all children, wherever they are.

How did you get involved in politics? What are your challenges? Who are your supporters, who are your opponents?

The day I got involved in politics seems so far away now. By now it might come to seem like a day out of the ordinary. Yet in fact there comes a day in the life of every future politician when she or he is asked to jump in by someone already involved in politics. That was my case. A political career was not at all in my plans of that time, because I was a well-paid professional, and I was doing the kind of job I had envisaged for myself, and it had taken me many years of hard work to make it till there.

Yet I got involved in politics with the good will to change the city I was born and grew up in, our capital city. I had just returned from abroad, and I found out my city had actually changed – sadly for the worse. There were a lot of issues to grapple with; no services were provided, the city was dirty, the facades were falling apart, the urban tissue was being violated. This was the driving force for me because all of my loved ones lived inside this city.

I believed in the person who invited me to be part of this effort. Back then he was Mayor of Tirana; today he is the Prime Minister of Albania. I sincerely believed in my power of will when it came to the transformation my city. I have said it before, and I will always repeat it - I saw it as a challenge. I went at it with all I had in me, and that's the way I handle challenges. I remember that in 2004 Edi Rama was chosen as the best

mayor in the world, Tirana was transformed and I was the right hand of such a prominent man in the local government. That was my way over the last 15 years. I can frankly say I couldn't have possibly predicted it would go so far.

How challenging was it working with a man like Edi Rama?

I think I am not the right person to answer this question for the simple fact that I did not get to know Edi Rama when I entered politics; I knew him from before. I do think that helped me have with him a relationship that differed from that of many of our colleagues who got to know him through work relations or simply made their acquaintance to him later than me.

Ours was a close relationship. Today as 15 years ago I am still one of his colleagues - this shows that it has all worked out well in the absence of any extraordinary feat of endurance; in fact, the opposite holds true. If you go through such a long road, you are sure to infringe upon certain interests, because you have to take decisions that can potentially have a significant impact on other people's lives. You can choose to be generic or specific about this, but at the end of the day I do think that the overall outcome in my case was positive. Producing outcomes was the most important thing to me; the positive result of what we wanted to achieve and the capacity to make it happen without too much pain. I believe our endeavour enabled me to come closer to my aims for the period that marks my involvement with politics.

How did you feel about your opponents' attacks? How did it feel at the beginning and how does it feel now?

I come from a career in the banking sector. I was not an absolute beginner when I entered politics. When I did, I had 15 years of professional experience to rely on. To that, I can add up my working years before the '90s. I had knowledge of the previous system on the top of the new economy after the '90s. I had also some working experience abroad, so it all helped when I entered politics. I did not have to face unbearable blows or big surprises of the sort I had not run into before. Politics is much harder than a life spent

outside of it for a number of sound reasons. Yet if you have a goal, then it makes you stick to the price you set to yourself, and to the target you aim at. This enables you to stand up to all malignancies, negative passions and prejudices. It helps you to remain on track.

What do you think of the political developments in Albania? Is there progress in sight?

It is hard to summarize the extent of political developments in Albania in just a couple of words, but certainly I can share my thoughts on the political momentum, in view of my public position as a protagonist in the political life.

My overall opinion about our political development is positive. I believe Albania makes a step forward every day. Sometimes it stops and stumbles, but barriers help because they make you reflect. Sometimes we rush forward and this is also good because so we can catch up with the pace of others. Sometimes we bounce back to where we were, and this is not good, but nonetheless I believe that these steps help us learn from our mistakes, so they are not repeated. The dialectics of political development in Albania is unstoppable. Albania is on its way towards the EU integration. It is on the right path toward a full democratic development and it advances towards it every day. Albania is on its path towards the rule of law. Rule of law is certainly a big word, but at the end of the day we will walk down that path.

Even though our society falls short of developmental standards compared to the rest of Europe, it remains on the right track. We live in a society that tries to be fair and honest towards its vulnerable groups. We look towards an overall increase of social awareness, which still remains a difficult thing to achieve. It is easier to build a whole edifice than to educate a new generation with the necessary self-esteem that enables respect towards others, towards the country's institutions and towards the environment. No society has ever achieved this within a short time span, nor will Albania make it very soon, yet I believe in myself and in the joint efforts of my colleagues.

As the saying goes: A single swallow doesn't make summer. It is impossible to steer the country onto the right path if we fail to win the trust of the Albanians; trust is earned, and we should continue to build on what we have earned. We cannot go on forever with the old nihilistic sayings according to which *"This country can't get any better; it is all the fault of politics; we should all leave as soon as possible"*.

Quite to the contrary! I have a strong faith in a positive turn of the events. As the rest of the common citizens, I also live through the problems we face every day. Because of my public duty I am even more sensitive towards them because I have more information, which comes with more duties and responsibilities. I simply don't accept to say every time that the glass is empty. I say the glass is half full and I will continue to be an optimist. I will be an optimist even when I will not be doing my current job, as I will leave politics one day, because surely I hope so much to have the chance to do other things in my life.

What are Albania's priorities on the international stage and what are its challenges?

We face big challenges. They look even bigger to a small country. I believe Albania should move forward with small but secure steps, rather than with big, but uncertain ones. I think our biggest challenge is to establish an honest and transparent judiciary. I believe this is our most difficult challenge - system reform and the rule of law. The system is imbued with abuse, corruption, lack of professionalism, defamation, but surely this situation does not rule out that there are professional and honest people in the justice sector. To me, another major challenge is to preserve the good Albanian traditions. Nowadays there is much talk yet little is done about them. Our traditions are lovable, noble and I believe we should preserve, within parentheses, our "primitivism", because it helps us not just to respect ourselves more, but it helps our society to place the human being, the human family at the centre of its attention. These values are no longer considered as sacred, they are considered only as slogans and dogmas, empty of positive meaning.

How to preserve traditions if the loss of traditions is closely connected to poverty? In my last trip to Vermosh, I found Albanians without Albania; by this I mean the presence of the state that was wholly missing there.

Your point touches in fact upon many topics; what I mean with traditions is the following: people used to be poorer but more traditional. Nowadays people might come to think that degeneration is considered as modern, emancipated, which is not true at all, and surely I think that the state should be present everywhere. Yet we should not forget one thing: we have chosen a system where everyone has to succeed by oneself. The state is just a regulator of the market. Certainly as a left wing economist I believe in the initiative of the state in order to support the growth of the industry and of the economy. I believe in fair taxation, but in parallel to this I also believe that the ones who are more capable will move further ahead compared to those who are less capable. I believe that we should not expect all of our needs to be fulfilled by the state.

If we have a piece of land we should toil it. Some days ago I went to Velipoja with a friend of mine. We spent half a day there. On our way, we saw whole pieces of uncultivated farming land from the turn of Berdica up to the sea shore. Yes, the state has to provide jobs for the citizens, because work gives dignity to human beings, and it is also a constitutional right, and a human right, but the people should not stand still and wait for someone to offer them a job. We, and I mean the government, should treat jobs for the people as a priority. All sides should agree on one thing, that the focus of all our policies, regardless whether they are right or left wing-oriented, progressive or less progressive policies, should place the individual at the centre of their attention.

Over the course of my career, I visited every single remote corner of this country, and you are right to say that there are forgotten people in this country, there are places where there is little presence of the state, and there are places where the state should provide for the conditions of free competition, that places the freedom of choice onto the shoulders of the individual.

What do you think of gender quality and of the 50% quota for women in politics? Do you think that positive discrimination may prove to promote unfair competition?

I have been part of the discussions and debates on quotas. It is true that there is positive discrimination. I have often referred to an example from far-away Pakistan, because at the foundations of this country there is an interesting and outstanding electoral system that resembles to a certain extent the Anglo-Saxon system. The Pakistani electoral system stipulates a 30% gender quota. If the political parties are not able to fill the quota, the reserved places remain empty until the right person comes. Consequently the political parties are very much interested to find capable women to take these places. As I mentioned earlier this has been a long discussion, and I cannot say that my position in favour of quotas was 100% right and those who were against it were totally wrong, but out of my modest experience I can state the following: I was part of the majoritarian electoral system and I have been part of the proportional electoral system. There are places in Albania that challenge you, in order to be elected, to show only your masculine side even when you don't have it, and to come up with a strong man's voice, otherwise you are bound to lose. In these conditions, we have to help women with an electoral system that is exactly the electoral system we have chosen. Politics puts women under a lot of public scrutiny and attention and if a woman makes a debatable move she might find herself under attack just because she is a woman, and not because what she did was right or wrong; at the same time, nothing is considered as wrong when the very same action was done by a man. People will not say that what he did was wrong because he was a man -they will bring up other reasons.

The trust that women should put on other women is more important than the quota. If we look at the statistics, we will not be able to find out that women candidates are voted more by women than by men. The opposite holds true.

Many women still fail to trust women, regardless of the intensity of the discussion of the problems affecting them. At the end of the day I am a woman facing the same kind of troubles every woman faces. Trust is the core ingredient that needs to be increased.

Certainly we as lawmakers should be the first ones to deal with it. In some fields, women rights have failed to keep their step with the overall advancement of the society. The level of women's education, especially high school education has fallen at very low levels. Even though there are more young women than young men in the universities, unemployment among women is higher than among men. Violence against women remains another major concern, and by this I mean not only physical domestic violence but also the verbal and psychological violence which kills more women than physical violence.

Even though we face verbal violence in the parliament, we are not yet capable to get together and to say "Stop" to our male colleagues. We should first cherish unity and trust to each-other. Only once we have it we can try to impose it on men. The failure to do so makes women more vulnerable. On its end, the state should help women to make their life simpler in some directions - through better day care centres and kindergartens.

Longer school hours can further help women engage in social and economic activities, to increase their professionalism and to advance their status. I would like to stress once again that emancipation has nothing to do with degeneration, but quite the contrary, it has to do with education. The improvement of individual capacities transforms women into dignified contributors to their families and to the society. The Albanian woman is a traditionally heroic character in the past history, and this role comes because of multiple reasons. We should try to get the best out of it, but we should start with a better education for our children, by preserving a healthy family that is the stem cell of our society. Our efforts will prove to have been launched in vain, if this cell is corrupted. In its absence, even a democratic system will not be real, but rather just a façade.

What is the social issue that is closest to your heart?

There is one issue that is really close to my heart, and it takes just one word to say: children. I have tried, even though I may say I have not always

succeeded, to have one single system of reference when it comes to children: my son. So far we have accomplished a modest undertaking for children: we have reconstructed a building of the army so as to transform it into a kindergarten for the autistic children of the Armed Forces staff. I hope that we carry this project on until it is totally completed and we hope that it will serve as a model for other similar endeavours. The centre will provide free of charge services. It builds on an initial modest contribution, but we will have donations from some banks for buying dedicated equipment. We have employed specialized staff to take care of the children. We will also train two psychologists from the Armed Forces to this end. I believe that every child of this world, where s/he is, deserves care and attention, and vulnerable children need more of it.

What is, in your opinion, the role of media in educating society? Do you think that a wide coverage of political news by the media is beneficial to society, or do you think that media should cover more the social problems and the Albanian society itself?

I think that daily news is filled up with trash reporting, and I believe that there is much abuse on behalf of 'transparency'. I think that much abuse goes on underneath the catchphrase "independent power" of the media. On the other side this does not mean that there are no good professionals or media people who truly believe in their noble profession. Very often, especially in the morning before I come to work, I watch public television and I see that they broadcast turbo-folk music instead of showing educative programs of whatever kind.

We are lucky because today there are many TV channels and all you need to do is some zapping into other TV channels such as the Italian public television. The difference is self-explanatory. On the Italian public TV in the early morning one can find a variety of programs from how to cook to health programs. At the end of the day, these are the kind of programs that a good citizen needs. I know that our children lack development models, games, playgrounds. They also lack visits to museums or concert halls and I am speaking about small children. I am afraid we are about to produce a generation without heroes, without civic education, without systems of reference. At the end of the day this makes the Albanian

society a second-hand society compared to the kind of society we want to integrate into. I am against the practice of putting a ten year old boy to sell cigarettes on the streets. I am against every parent who forces his child to do that. I am against violence in the family or in the classroom. We see violent youngsters, who were not born during the Communist system - they are children of the democratic transition, they became violent whilst we were on our way to build up a democratic system.

We need to open up to the media; we need to be more positive and show more understanding toward the public persons that do this kind of job. I know that media often confronts us, but we need to have some common points and we should try to help each-other. You are not perfect, we are not perfect, and we are under your observation, but this has to be in good faith, and not as a means of blackmail. Media is a power that should be respected and it should also respect itself by taking on some responsibilities, just as we as politicians try to do. Nothing is perfect, and media needs to be reformatted so that there is not only politics shown on the screen. Broadcasting political news has become an aim in itself; meanwhile politics should be in function of other things that we mentioned during this interview.

Who are the women and men that have inspired you the most?

There is only one man and one woman on this list - my parents.

I still think that even though I can claim an outstanding career, I have not accomplished what they have managed to do with their work. They are still my heroes. One of them is my star in the sky and the other is my star on the ground, and I will continue to watch them as far away stars that I will never reach. My thoughts about them changed when I became a mother for the first time, because then I fully understood their approach toward me. Today I can be a grandmother; I believe my parents did countless heroic acts to raise two good and educated women. I really hope so much that I have never disappointed them. They will continue to be absolute values in my opinion.

Even though I think I am a good mother, a good partner, a very dedicated person towards my family, lucky to raise a good son, I believe that I never equalled what my parents have accomplished in my regard. My opinion has continuously changed about them in a positive sense. Certainly, when I reached a certain age I had a kind of feeling like I was the parent of my own mother. I could not do that for my father because he passed away when he was very young, but I really hope so much that where he is now, he will continue to be proud of his daughters.

VOLTANA ADEMI

A woman mayor for Shkodra

by Irena Shabani

Voltana Ademi speaks at a slow pace, with a clear voice. Confidence and self-control seem to be good weapons in the hands of the new Mayor of Shkodra. Her articulation is clear and leaves little room for confusion. Let us see below the challenges she expects to face in the upcoming four years at the helm of the Shkodra municipality.

Why did you get involved in politics? What are your personal challenges? Who are your supporters and opponents?

I was involved in politics very early, at the first democratic movement of the 2nd of April, when I was a student at "Jordan Misja" high school. I was part of that historical protest, which started out among the students, and which ended tragically.

I continued my political path during my studies at the University of Tirana. I returned to Shkodra in order to get a real try in the political life by doing my best in my hometown. I also wanted to be near to my parents and to try to rebuild the little property that was left to us after communism fell. We used to be one of the richest families of the area. We cultivated the well-known *Tarabosh* tobacco brand, but the communist system took away everything we had. I started to work at a young age in order to support my family and also to provide the necessary money for my education.

I wrote articles for newspapers, then I worked in the services sector, which means that among others I also worked to vitalize Shkodra's social life on a voluntary basis. I was among the very first civil society activists, along with Valentina Leskaj, Diana Kastrati and Diana Çuli.

Our group established the first centre for women in Shkodra. I was one of the co-founders of "Luigj Gurakuqi" University and I also lectured there.

Following in the footsteps of my mother, I was engaged in the structures of the Democratic Party.

My mother and some of her other friends were among the first women to become part of the Women's Forum of the Democratic Party. Keeping in mind the past of my family, it was natural for me to be part of the Democratic Party. My grandfather used to be a member of the municipal council. He was also a member of the forum of the chamber of commerce of Shkodra.

This is in few words, a bit of my family background. It has given me the possibility to be a part of the Democratic Party and a way to return to my roots. After 2000 I was engaged in all electoral campaigns of the Democratic Party in Shkodra. I performed all possible jobs and assignments in these electoral campaigns: I served as a commissioner, vote-counter, and I was one of those who knocked at every door in order to urge youngsters to become part of the electoral campaign and I have also been among the persons who delivered the opening speech in political rallies.

On several occasions I have been criticized about the way I dealt with certain issues. Apart from working for the Democratic Party I have worked for a political alternative that according to me pointed at the right direction. That has been my constant stand.

I ran for the position of the Shkodra Municipal Council, and later I was appointed as a deputy Mayor. That was my very first experience with the public administration, and it was completely different from what I used to do in academic life or in civil society organizations.

It was also different from my job in the University or in the party. This was a different level of responsibility in many ways. It was a real responsibility because we speak quite often about responsible citizens or about the need that our citizens should become responsible, but when it comes to becoming part of the public administration that is not a theoretical responsibility any longer.

As I came from a predominantly academic life, I took my commitment to local governance very seriously. If you are a professional, you try to do think in the right way and at the right time; you try to respect procedures, and to be transparent. But, when you are in power it is not always like that and you have to fight, or better still, you have to face a lot of factors that are not always rational, factors that are political and everything is part of a certain context in the city or in the political momentum.

You have been Deputy Mayor in difficult times. How was it?

Being a Deputy Mayor at the age of 28 was a radically new experience for me. I worked in that position for three and a half years, and I had to do my job, in a very poor town that wholly lacked the attention of the central government. At that time the Municipality of Shkodra was totally abandoned and in a miserable situation, reminding you of today's Kandahar. There were no investments. I remember myself at that time waiting in line in front of Mr Ben Blushi's office in order to get ALL 200,000 which was needed to buy fuel for the generator so that the municipal staff could work. I have lived through such hard times.

The situation was difficult because there were a lot of new and tough problems to face. After that I was still engaged with Shkodra Municipality but this time as a member of the Municipal Council and chair of the right wing councillors, this happened during the tenure of Mayor Luka. I can say that I haven't considered myself simply as a representative of a political party, because as a member of the municipal council I considered myself as a representative of the citizens. In several cases I chose not to keep the same political line as my party. Together with several other local professionals I was also engaged as an ICT expert in development projects. We initiated and implemented many project in the sector of public services or projects which aimed to train teachers on ICT skills. This was a very important experience for me. Since that time I continued my professional contribution for Shkodra in the field of strategic and financial planning.

Why is local governance a passion to you - what is the reason behind?

My engagement in politics is not simply political. It is also a mission to represent the interests of different community groups, to represent the people who align with the philosophy I believe in. In my case it is the right wing.

Were there any cases when you found yourself incapable to fulfil such mission? Which were your feelings?

I believe that as long as you are a member of a party you should try to change things from the inside. Once you become member of a party, such things like 'I think that' do not necessarily function, and the politically correct version is 'we think that', and 'we' should stand for all of us, otherwise there would be endless and useless discussion. It is important to say that not always one is satisfied with this universal 'we', because one believes in what one believes and this is not always 'we'. Quite often I managed to convince others of my ideas and these ideas became the ideas of all of us. In a way this is always a mission – the mission to produce results. I believe that our mission is to serve others. I was happy because at a very young age I was able to accomplish things in service of the community. I work long hours, in fact I work from morning till night.

Isn't it exhausting to keep such a rhythm?

I am still young, and I think I can still cope with this. I have a six year old son. He needs his mother and I need to find time for him. It is me who brings him every morning to the kindergarten and also picks him up at the end of the day. He cannot understand what it means to be the Mayor. He asked me what it means to be the Mayor. Once he asked me whether "to be a Mayor means to go every day at work or to love your son more'. And I replied to him that 'it means to love your son more' and this is true. I will try to be home more often. I have done this during the time that I was a Member of the Parliament even though it was very tiresome to travel every day from Shkodra to Tirana and back. So at least I will have now more possibilities to be longer with him. I would say also that I am very good at organizing my day.

What about your opponents?

There is a certain thing about me: I do not change my principles, and if you do not change them, then you are always at the centre of the attention. But I fight for my principles as I believe they concern honest work, transparency and fight against corruption.

Speaking about corruption, what are the chances that you can fight corruption in such a big institution as the Municipality?

It's not a matter of chances, it's a matter of belief. I strongly believe I can do something about this. One of the first things you see in our program, is citizens participation and digitalization. Do you know why? Because there are people who say that they are at work but instead of working they go out and sit at the coffee shop and nobody asks them about their work plan. They leave no 'traces' of the work done and they report to nobody. They communicate in total informality and they do not write down their communication.

As a result we are determined to use technology to stop this. Each and every job done will be documented. This is one of the ways to fight corruption that starts at this very basic level. It goes from the bottom to the top. I believe in this. The only difficulty I see is to find the right instruments to make this possible. I say this, because somehow we both have and do not have professionals to rely on. It is a long process, and my principles are not always upheld by everybody in the group. That is wearisome because you have to work a lot in order to realise your aims, while there are people in your group who are not totally convinced. Using politics only to produce more politics is bad, because it in this way politics does not serve people. Yet, sadly, this is what actually happens in Albania most of the time.

This is the major part of the difficulty. I have noticed something during the last electoral campaign here in Shkodra. I think that owing to the legacy of the Communist regime, it is difficult for us to think positively. Instead of trying to work out joint solutions, we are rather keen to ask

difficult questions, just to make things harder than they actually are. This is our mentality, we are suspicious of everything.

What is your view of Albania?

Albania is still a poor country because we are not able to establish a functional system of governance. We don't want to. We relate to each-other through petty interests. Yet I still believe we can do it. I decided to start this in Shkodra. I have returned to live in Shkodra because I want to do something for my hometown. That is why I think we should move forward based on positive things and avoid destroying what has been achieved to date. We should not be conflictual. Unfortunately, we still fail to trust others. Interpersonal relations in Europe function differently; Europeans function more as a group and there is more positivity in work relations. These principles should apply here as well.

During the electoral campaign you had a public debate with the other candidate, Ms Ketii Bezhani. Who had the idea to organize such a debate?

I have always been in favour of public debates, because I want to share with others my opinions as openly as I can. I respected the agreement to have a public debate, because I thought we had to be there for our citizens, because we were the people that would serve them. Public debates are usually initiated by civil society, international organizations or media, in order that we discuss and debate our alternatives. I do not think that we managed to have such a debate because we were both women, I think that our decision to do so is related to who we are and to our approach towards such a debate, especially at the local level. I am a Mayor for all, and I will have the same approach with each and every citizen, no matter what his or her political affiliations are.

What do you think about the connection between politics and media? What do you think is not shown on the TV screen?

I feel sorry that media is used by politics for the purpose of setting the stage for its permanent spectacle. On the other hand, media often

deprives the general public from the possibility to discuss to the bottom issues of interest. This is obvious and sad. If you walk in the downtown you hear people talking only about politics. I would like them to speak about other issues that interest us all. Media is a means, but considering it from a social point of view, I would prefer that people discuss about issues, rather than criticizing people, because it is very easy to criticize at the expense of giving options.

I think that media should give more chances to intellectuals and professionals to present their thoughts and ideas.

Who are the people that have inspired you?

My father. He has passed away. He was a very good person, a very hard working man, an artist in his own profession of modelling machinery for agriculture equipment. He was a basketball player. He was excellent in everything he did, he was honest and hardworking, a good parent and good friend. He used to say that to be honest always pays back in the end; you should not be disappointed, you should work to get what is best for you. He used to say: compete for the highest possible mark -that should be your goal. He was a self-sacrificing person, and I think I have taken over some of his characteristics. The other person is my mother. She is a conservative woman, not authoritarian, but she believes in rules. My mother and father were partners and friends to each-other. My family was a model family. My parents supported me in every direction, in every imaginable way, even though we were poor. They supported me during my school years and in all my public undertakings.

You have an interesting municipality. What do you think will change in the upcoming four years?

The public administration will change in its entirety – it will be public-oriented. The way public services are provided to citizens will change. It will change not only in its quality but the public communication will change as well. We will fight corruption. There will be transparency and citizen participation. The standards of service will be costed, the law will

be respected and my staff will be professional. I know that the promise 'to abide by the law' might sound strange but this is something that we have to do. I will try to get as many donations as possible from international programs. Shkodra has a good tradition in this direction. Alleviating unemployment is a priority that needs direct investment, as for example in agriculture, in tourism and trade. There is a need for tourism packages, tourism promotion, and the whole chain of support services for that. There is more employment when there is more productivity. We will work as of now in order to attract foreign investments and orient them in the right direction.

Do you think you will face difficulties in cooperating with the central government, keeping in mind that you are heading now a right-wing municipality?

I don't think we will face difficulties in getting the necessary funding. I am not being modest, but I think that we will present a lot of projects to the government. I have the good will to clarify everything that might pose a technical barrier to cooperation. I believe that good communication clarifies a lot of things.

ALBANA VOKSHI

The quota is not enough; politics is still controlled by men

by Gjergj Erebara

The Democratic Party MP believes that regardless of the advancements made over the last decades in the field of gender equality, women are still paid less than men; they continue to do unpaid work at home and to suffer from significantly higher unemployment levels than men. The current gender quota might pose a challenge with regards to matching the requested quantities with the needed qualities. Her mission: to fight against violation of women's rights.

What is your opinion about the change in women's role in the Albanian society over the last two decades? In which direction do you see improvement or deterioration?

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the fall of the communist regime in Albania. It is very important to stop and reflect on the milestones of the struggle for gender equality over these 25 years marked by extraordinary challenges and barriers, a huge shift of mentality, and astonishing achievements. From this point of view, women have played a historical role in Albania's transition towards democracy. Their contribution is evident in the courageous engagement in the democratic movement of December 1990, which resulted in the fall of the communist dictatorship and in the establishment of the Democratic Party, Albania's very first opposition party.

Women played a pivotal role in Albania's democratic transformation. I believe that their achievements have been of a more qualitative than of a quantitative nature. Women have become increasingly aware of their rights and have fought against gender stereotypes. But on the other hand, women have invested more in jobs that are a traditional feminine domain, thus increasing the wage gap compared to men, as many of them work in the education, health system or in the field of social services. Over the last two decades the number of women who attended university has significantly increased. Many women have studied in renowned universities in Europe and in the U.S. Women have increased

their stakes in the national political representation by gradually getting a larger share in the political decision-making, even though I admit that there is still much to be done in this regard.

On the negative side, women continue to suffer from discrimination in many ways. Their economic rights are not sufficiently safeguarded, including the right to property and the right to work. Women still provide unpaid work at home. There are many reports of women working without any type of health or social insurance. Most rural women do not enjoy any rights in these directions. Statistics point at an aggravated social and economic status of women. Based on the statistics provided by INSTAT, unemployment among women is very high and is increasing every month. Only over the last quarter it increased by 0.8%.

Domestic violence against women and girls continues to remain a serious phenomenon. The number of women and mothers who commit suicide because their life has become unbearable and hopeless is alarming.

Women have become more visible in the Albanian political life over the last years. This positive trend is visible in the local governments, in the parliament and in the central government. What are the benefits of such a development for the Albanian society?

Women have made tremendous efforts over the past 25 years. Regardless of this, we have fared lower than expected. I believe that more women in political life means more responsible social policies; more women in key positions means less corruption; more women in the decision-making process means less criminalization of public administration and of political life.

In the last local elections of June 2015, further to the tremendous lobbying efforts of the Alliance of Women MPs and of all women MPs, the political leaders agreed to introduce a 50% quota that enabled for the first time for an equal gender representation in the candidate lists for the municipal councils. On the other side, women were not equally represented as candidates for mayors.

We managed to successfully increase the percentage of women councillors, but we failed in our efforts to increase the number of women running for mayors, and to increase the gender quota in the MPs' lists of political parties. Furthermore, the plenary sessions of the Assembly are stained by banal insults and suffer from the lack of basic ethical standards of behaviour towards women MPs. The blatant lack of ethical speech makes our parliamentary sessions unacceptable for families and for children.

So, I should say that there are many achievements, yet the status of women in political life and decision-making is still vulnerable to regress!

Has the quantitative increase of women participation been accompanied by a qualitative increase of their contribution in the political life?

There has been progress, but as I mentioned earlier I think that women are still underrepresented in political life and in the decision-making processes. On the other side, an obligatory quota might sometimes pose a real challenge to the quality of women representatives. No society needs "marionettes" in public institutions. The gender quota has increased women's representation in the government and in the parliament, and I am convinced that the majority of these women fully deserved those positions and they are more capable than the majority of men in the executive and legislative. Thus, while we seek to increase the gender quota in order to improve women's representation, we should not fall in the statistical trap that sees in women mere numbers. We should promote individuals who are able to make a difference in serving our citizens.

It is a fact that the present electoral system leaves the election of the candidates (men and women) in the hands of the political leaders and in several cases, personal contributions, experience, talent and abilities of individuals are overshadowed by political favours. Consequently, it is of paramount importance to strengthen the role of women's forums and structures in the political parties in order that they prepare, propose and impose capable women candidates to become an integral part of local and national electoral campaigns.

The political parties cannot and should not use women just to create a democratic façade during elections. For in order to make the dream of a revolution in mentality come true, it is important that the voice of women gets louder. Women are the half of the population and should have the same natural rights for fair representation and decision-making as men do.

What are the main challenges for women in Albanian political life?

Women continue to remain under-represented. The leadership of many institutions remains in the hands of men and the "male superiority" in decision-making often degrades into different forms of unbearable verbal and psychological abuse. On the other hand, political infighting within the same gender still perseveres, and as always this weakness is used for narrow political interests to the men's benefit. I am convinced that there is a qualitative increase of the political debate among men and women. In the parliamentary sessions, the women's voice is being heard more owing to their professional capacities.

What concrete steps should be taken for strengthening the role of Albanian women in politics? Do you think that the quota system is sufficient?

The role of women in decision-making and in politics goes beyond the quota system. Mere numbers cannot limit a balanced gender representation forever. The support and lobbying in favour of women's representation should not only consider women's representation in the Assembly; it should also address their representation in important state positions and their representation in municipal councils. Having women in such positions also is a way to fight corruption in all levels of governance. I think that political parties should try to engage more women in their structures. In another front, the right to education remains a denied right to many women who simply lack the means to pursue meaningful educational paths. The Ministry of Education and the line ministries in charge of gender equality should present concrete action plans in this regard rather than televised propaganda.

What can be done so that women's engagement in politics is translated into progress in other dimensions of gender equality such as equal pay and equal chances for career advancement?

The Albanian legislation on gender equality is well developed, but the institutions in charge have lost their control over the territory after the eradication of the institutional mechanisms for gender equality, in the line ministries and in the local governments. The gender equality employees appointed in the ministries and municipalities were replaced by political militants and as consequence women remained *de facto* under-represented. The territorial-administrative reform has created a vacuum as far as the re-establishment and re-activation of such mechanisms is concerned. This is not the case only for women. The same can be said for pensioners too.

The institutional mechanism to protect women and children was a multi-year investment of the Albanian government in cooperation with international organizations and it should not be eradicated!

In the meantime, the Labour Code is being discussed in the Assembly and there is a tendency to infringe on women's rights in that dimension too. Long and detailed discussions have taken place about the draft Labour Code in the parliamentary committee I chair, the Parliamentary Committee on Labour, Social Affairs and Health, which dropped the articles asking for longer working hours in private businesses. In cooperation with the Alliance of Women MPs and the relevant sub-parliamentary commissions, we organized hearing sessions with the groups of interest in order to come up with stronger protection of labour rights for women including equal pay with men.

I think that the Assembly should increase its oversight functions towards the institutions in charge of women's rights, so as to hold them accountable for the implementation of the National Strategy for Gender Equality and Reduction of Domestic Violence and on the measures related to the provision of social services. I want to draw the attention of civil society and other activists on women's rights so that abusive cases are

denounced. In many cases women's associations have been threatened that state institutions will not cooperate with them in case they are vocal against the government in their projects. During these two years the government has sent to the parliament laws which have attempted to infringe human rights and women's rights, while civil society has had almost no voice!

Based in your personal experience, what do you think was your main concrete contribution in this direction?

I find it difficult to speak about myself. All I can say is that my work in the women's forum of the Democratic Party has been one of the toughest but at the same time one of the most beautiful challenges of my political career. I believe that by working together with a group of industrious and dedicated women, I have been able to establish the Women Democratic League of Albania (WDLA) as an efficient and functioning structure. The WDLA has branches in every local administrative unit of Albania. At present it is over 20 thousand members strong. It is an authentic structure which has gotten stronger and stronger over the years. Its voice is being heard more and more every day, despite the refusal of some 'backward' leaders in certain DP branches who still consider politics as a men's job.

RAJMONDA BALILI

by Irena Shabani

Rajmonda Balili is a quiet and smiling woman. Her eyes spark when she starts speaking about her town and the emotions of her previous mandate as mayor. She ran for the second time in the local elections of 21 June 2015, and won her second mandate. She is an economist, and she has always felt comfortable with that job, just as she feels comfortable in her position of Mayor of Patos. Over the last 20 years Patos has given up being a town of oil-drillers. The shortcomings of the transition have caused many well-educated people to leave the town. Even though Patos does not abound in opportunities, Rajmonda Balili and her city hall have done their best to provide to those citizens who have decided to stay chances for a better life, for more job opportunities, more asphalted roads and hopefully a better future.

Why did you get involved in politics? What are your personal challenges? Who are your supporters and opponents?

My involvement in politics did not come as a result of prior planning, nor was it an end in itself. In 2000, I was asked to run for the position of the Deputy Mayor of Patos. I accepted that nomination as an added responsibility, as I tried to be an active part of civil society at that time. In 2007, I was proposed by the Socialist Party to run for the Mayor of Patos, but that nomination could not become a reality, because in those local elections the Municipality of Patos was offered to other coalition allies. In 2011, I again received an invitation to run for the same position by the Socialist Party. I readily accepted it as I believed my profession and the knowledge I had about the local government would help me meet the challenge. Since I became mayor I started to put party politics aside from the management of local affairs. This was not because I was afraid of politics or I consider political activism as a taboo, but because I believed in the model of the politician who is primarily a manager, a capable administrator, that is, able to manage and implement development policies, service policies, and social policies.

From my personal perspective I see the following challenges in front of a mayor who is worth her salt: One has to be a good administrator, one should be able to orient development policies, to increase the quality of the services provided by the municipality, to alleviate social problems, to give a good name for the municipality inside the country and abroad.

My family has always been supportive of me. My staff, my colleagues, and collaborators are the real engine that sets my energy in motion. They stand behind each and every success of mine. I do not consider as adversaries those persons that for one reason or another do not agree with my policies. They are not adversaries from the professional or personal point of view; they might be considered ideological opponents.

How is it to be the Mayor of a municipality like Patos?

Patos is a town caught in transition, because the cause of its establishment does not exist any more. Patos was founded as a town of oil-drillers, but nowadays it does not live from oil-drilling.

When we try to draft development strategies for Patos, we are in doubt which should be the direction. We want to develop it further, of course, to provide the needed infrastructure so that the citizens feel comfortable in the town they live, and on the other side we want to develop the agriculture. Based on the new territorial division, 60% of the current population of the new municipality works in agriculture and husbandry; consequently, we have to focus on these fields, especially olive orchards. At first look it seems that Patos does not have much to offer to tourists, but we have to point out that the castle of Margêllic, whose old name was Orgesus, is also part of our territory. On the other side, oil-drilling will be continued as the oil fields stretch from Patos till Marinza, but they are given out to concessionary companies, with the state-owned Albpetrol remaining only a service provider, so I do not see any perspective in that direction. A lot of well-educated people have left the town already and the majority of the newcomers are from the rural areas. Actually we face difficulties in finding professionals for our administration in the field of town-planning or finance. But if we do not plan then it will be difficult to ask for it.

What are your achievements as Mayor?

I have said it before that the lands that have a rich underground are poor places, and that is connected to the policies followed for the exploitation of the underground resources. I have been re-elected because there has been progress. We were able to invest, even though we had precious little money, but we handled our funds well and we allocated it for the right purposes. 50% of our population lives in the rural areas and the other 50% in the town. We wanted to benefit from the mineral rental fees so as to fund a part of our municipal budget, but due to some legal changes and amendments this became impossible. The mineral rental fee would have been a direct income to be used for the citizens of my town. At present a draft law is being discussed that the mineral rent fee should be redistributed as a grant. There are no construction businesses in Patoz. There are only family-run businesses and fuel businesses. There are 54 big businesses and only one shoes CTM, while we have been able to attract a Turkish cloth CTM were 150 women out of 600 that applied have been employed. In fact the CTM industry is the only possibility to get something; anyway they are not very profitable. We are trying to turn the buildings of the former oil refineries into municipal assets in order to lease them to other CTM industries; one of them we intend to transform into a palace of sports. We have asphalted and constructed the sewage and lighting system, and more than five km of roads and now the citizens have started to practice their evening walk. Now we are working to destroy illegal fencing within apartment blocs. We built gardens and children's playgrounds and recreation areas for the elderly.

What are your overall impressions as a Mayor?

It is true that to lead the life of a common citizen is different from trying to change a municipality. I have always thought that I had some leadership instinct, but to get a public office is also a matter of destiny and you should also be predisposed to be lashed by evil gossiping. This kind of job deprives you of many things, like shopping, or spending more of your time with friends, but on the other side it gives other satisfactions. I get satisfaction from each and every citizen who says thank you for the road you constructed and so on. My most difficult day is Thursday which

is the day I receive citizens, because I know that their real problem is unemployment. The municipality, through its services, is in daily contact with the citizens, but the gravest problem remains unemployment. We do have some opportunities to alleviate unemployment but we are still far from creating jobs for everyone.

What do you think of the political developments in Albania?

Today's Albania has reached this stage further to over 20 years of its elite-driven policies. This elite has been governing the country for decades. Over the last years we hoped for many changes in numerous directions, but in fact we suffered the pain caused by politics leading to destabilization, caused by its lack of real interest for the country's perspective, while we are poised more than ever to become full members of the European Union. There has been a tendency to move away from the unproductive policies that do not deliver what Albanians expected from their political class, toward compromise and cooperation, especially concerning the national interest. I believe that instead of stressful debates in the parliament or in the media that do not produce any constructive development, we ought to work toward achieving consensus and cooperation among parties, which has been strongly requested from our international partners. Only if we go in this direction, then the policies of the past years will really remain in the past and we will be moving forward. I am also convinced that now in Albania, we have a governing majority that is ready to work and cooperate with the opposition. This kind of policy is promising for the future of our country.

What will change in Albania four years from now? What are the main priorities of Albania, what are its challenges?

When we speak about what's next for Albania in the coming four years, we should carefully analyse the developments and changes that took place throughout the years of transition. There are many challenges ahead, but the possibilities that they are successfully met, run counter to the high expectations we nourish. The continuous efforts for reforms need perseverance and perseverance needs an iron will because only in this way the necessary progress towards the EU integration can be achieved.

The concrete initiatives for institutional reform geared toward EU integration, such as the reform of the judiciary undertaken by the government, or the fight against corruption and organized crime are to be commended. The territorial-administrative reform is also an important indicator for the fulfilment of the necessary standards.

What is your take on gender equality in Albania? Do you think that the implementation of the law which demands 50% women in the municipal councils is a discriminatory or a necessary initiative?

I have said it before, and I will say it again that the initiative undertaken by the Alliance of Women Parliamentarians and the civil society on the gender quota is to be commended. I think that the Albanian society is going through one of its most laudable phases as far as the engagement of women in public and political life is concerned.

At any rate, such initiatives should not stop here, as a continuous monitoring of the actual situation is necessary. It is important to push towards an effective, rather than just numeric participation of women in politics. Such initiatives should remain the focus of future challenges, because it is important to have a close look at all measures taken in order to be able to say which initiative has been successful.

My employment policies have always had in focus the promotion of women in management positions. The social policies implemented in the Patos Municipality that were aimed at helping women and girls have been commented on in many roundtables. Women work harder and they are more sensitive to the needs of the community and are more capable of winning their trust and hearts. I am inclined to believe that a council with 50% women will be fairer in the process of decision-making. I am deeply convinced of this.

I do not consider the participation of women at the level of 50% of the municipal councils as a discriminatory measure. I think it is a challenge that has to be met with dignity, and I think that the way our women will act as representatives of the people through their professional decision-

making at the council will show that women command respect. I think that the council's decisions will be fairer and more comprehensive.

What is your take on social issues?

In fact there are plenty of cases related to social assistance that I follow. I try to deal with cases connected to the wellbeing of families, minimum living standards and economic integrity within the standards that we are bound to guarantee. Believe me, it is difficult to prioritize when it comes to social cases, but the episodes that have truly touched my heart are connected to the life of women-led households with one or more children who do not have housing, do not have a job or other means to secure a living. Social housing for women-led households is one of the projects we have started wholeheartedly, and we will do our best to make a success out of it. I am always ready to ask for the support of other state institutions that deal with this issue.

What is the role of media in society? What do you think on the way media reports on politics?

Today the media, the visual media as much as the printed media, are 'cooking' so much that you can pick up and taste whatever suits you. Albania is a small country with a lot of political life. Over our transition years we have not been able to cultivate a culture of perusing the things we really need. I believe that media plays an important role in the education of the society when it truly reflects real life. It can play an educative role through the variety and quality of the information it provides. Media is necessary in order to open us windows on everything that happens, but I think it is important to abandon commerciality, repetition, clientelist behaviour, and low quality. Today's public is well informed, especially over the social media, and media ought to bring in additional quality in order to compete in the big information market. And one more thing: The audience has to be respected.

Where should the Albanian society concentrate its efforts in order to bring positive change?

Our society has undergone deep structural changes, the majority of which affected our mentality and attitude. The new generation is very different from ours. We should be careful not to put more obstacles in its way. The deep societal change in such a short period of time affects all the layers of the society, and this has to be taken into account. Our efforts for a positive change in should target education and culture, while the new generation should be taught to cultivate democracy and to live with it.

A well-organized civil society plays an important role in the overall outcome of our efforts to become truly democratic, but helping civil society grow is a very delicate affair. We should stress the importance that social cohesion plays in the promotion of the social values of a nation.

Our current education system risks to create and reproduce a generation that is not merit-based. Such a generation will not be able to face the challenges of emancipation and progress with a view to a higher standard of living. Consequently the reform in the education system should be pushed forward and should be supported by all actors who hold in their hands the future of our society.

Who are the women and men that have inspired you most?

Just to mention a few:

The iron lady, Margaret Thatcher, who is known for her strong will and uncompromising attitudes;

Hillary Clinton, a charming lady and an important voice in American politics. She was bold enough to propose and lead important reforms in the field of education, health and social insurance, where the majority of beneficiaries were women and children. She was the first First Lady who had the courage to run for public office.

Barack Obama, an inspiring man that projects our view on the infinite possibilities that tomorrow can bring. An example of the new in politics; and

Edi Rama, the painter who changed Albania's capital and who is today the promoter and leader of the process of drafting progressive policies for this country. He is the man who gives life to the progressive initiatives aimed at increasing the role of women in leadership and decision-making.

But I am also inclined to be inspired by the simplest persons, such as a woman, who with her dedication and courage fights to fulfil her ambitions and to get more from life; a professional economist who with his clear ideas gives life to the economy of a whole generation; and even more, a professor who is tireless in preparing numerous generations of future professionals.

And last, but not least, my parents, who struggled hard to get an education for me, even though their conditions did not favour them at all for this.

EVIS KUSHI

Politics as rationality

by Irena Shabani

Evis Kushi is a Member of Parliament for the Socialist Party. Before her political engagement she was a lecturer at the Faculty of Economics of Aleksander Xhuvani University in Elbasan. She is known for her simple and rational style of communication. She recognizes the importance of media in politics. Her family is her biggest source of inspiration.

Why did you get involved in politics? What are your personal challenges? Who are your political supporters and who are your adversaries?

I became involved in active politics in 2013, after 15 years' experience as a lecturer in the Faculty of Economics at the University of Elbasan. Up to that moment I was keeping away from the aggressiveness of Albanian politics. At any rate I replied positively to the invitation from the Socialist Party. I was convinced that each and every one of us has to do something for the benefit of all. My engagement in politics was a wholly new experience. It enlarged my knowledge; it enriched my professional and communicative skills and my ability to interact with people.

My key challenge is to fulfil my duties as an MP, to represent to the best of my abilities the interests of the citizens of Elbasan and to help them as much as I can in responding to their everyday needs and concerns. The citizens of Elbasan are my best supporters. They voted for me in order to have a voice in the highest law-making institution of the country. As far as your last question is concerned, personally I do not have any adversaries and I do not consider anyone as an adversary. As a representative of the majority, I consider corruption, informality, illegal trafficking, criminality and violation of the law as my main enemies, and the fight against them should be the main focus of our work. It should intensify each and every day.

What do you think about the political developments in Albania?

The political situation has never been quiet in this country. Yet its

frequent ups and downs have always produced developments, debates and polemics, which are sometimes very sharp. However, this is normal in a democratic country because it makes us more serious and responsible in our political activity.

Still I feel sorry that in Albania we spend more energy in personal accusations, denigrations, and mudslinging, rather than in concrete activities, exchange of ideas and opinions on more productive and efficient policies. Especially over the last two years, a number of very important reforms have been launched, and a number of important laws have been approved. Despite these advancements, the political debate has been very much focused on petty battles that are not at all productive and constructive among parties.

What will change over the next four years in Albania in your opinion? What are the main advantages and disadvantages of Albania?

I cannot foretell the highlights for the next two or four years, but I can indicate what should change. These are exactly the same challenges I mentioned above: fight against corruption and informality, reform of the justice system, reform of the education system. Employment is a matter of priority, especially employment for young men and women, who should be given more opportunities for acquiring the necessary skills through professional training. I am happy to confirm that education is one of the main priorities of this government and important steps have been taken in this direction. I hope and I wish that this will bring tangible results for all Albanian youth.

What do you think about gender equality in Albania? Do you think that the implementation of the law which gives a 50% quota to women in the municipal councils is a discriminatory or a necessary initiative?

We face a host of challenges on gender equality. These challenges are already in the focus of the work of the national and international institutions and of many associations and civil society organisations. Unfortunately, every day extreme cases of violence against women, grave cases of abuse in the family, and even cases of murder of young mothers that cause grave

consequences for the children and the rest of the family are reported. Sure enough, these problems cannot be solved within a couple of months or even years, especially because they are deeply rooted in the mentality of the people and are passed on from one generation to the other. At any rate there is an ever increasing positive momentum and certain progress has been made on these issues especially during the last years. Today women are more engaged in the political life and in the decision-making processes. There are several women ministers, Members of Parliament, heads of institutions and so on.

Today women are more active economically, especially in the big cities. The latest achievement in the field of gender equality is the approval of the law imposing a 50% participation of women in the candidates' lists for municipal councils. This is indeed a very important step forward. I consider it as a very positive development especially in the present conditions of our country. Still, I believe this should be only a temporary measure, until the necessary standards for ensuring gender quality in Albania are fulfilled.

What is the social issue that lies closest to your heart?

First of all, the support for the orphans remains a very sensitive social issue, and all of us need to do more in this direction. As an MP of Elbasan I have tried to organize a number of activities for the orphans of my hometown. The aim of such activities cannot be just the distribution of some presents. We want to make society aware that those children need more support and above all they need more love and affection from the people around them. Secondly, I would mention the employment of youngsters, which remains an undisputable priority especially in the conditions that our country is going through.

What is your opinion on the role of media in educating society? Do you think that a wide coverage of the political news by the media is beneficial to the society, or should it be reduced?

Media plays an important role in educating the society, as technological improvements have made possible for us to get news at all times and in

every place. Certainly, media coverage of political news is very important in order that people are informed, so that they become aware and take a stand to support or to engage against policy decisions that influence their lives. Anyway, I am not that much concerned about the amount of news in the marketplace as I am concerned about the truthfulness of the information covered. Media should be professional and independent in order to cover political news correctly and in an unbiased way, so that it does not just pay lip service to political parties. This is the only way for the vote of the people to become real.

Where should our society concentrate its efforts in order to bring about a positive change in Albania?

This is a question of a very wide scope, because our society, as any society, requires contributions in all fields of life. For the time being, having in mind the current situation in Albania, I think that our main efforts should concentrate on the fight against corruption. This battle can only be fought and won with the support and co-operation of all strata of the society. If we fight back corruption in the justice system, in the tax and customs administration, in the education system, healthcare and everywhere else, then the results will be tangible for all, and Albania would be much closer to integration in the EU.

Who are the women and men that have inspired you most?

There are many inspiring persons in my life. Their profiles differ, depending on my circumstances, on the kind of work I have been doing during the phases of my life, and on the challenges and difficulties I have passed through. Sometimes I got inspired by my professors, other times by well-known world personalities, but what really inspires me at every time and in every place is my family. It is my primary supporter and my most beautiful inspiration in every step I take.

NUSHE HOXHAIJ

by Irena Shabani

Nushe Hoxhaj entered active politics at the very outset of the democratic movement in Albania. She has remained the same idealistic and fair-minded person ever since. Over the years of democratic transition she has come to face not only her voters, but also her own ideas and thoughts while analysing political promises. She believes that the country has reached the point that makes a change in its course an inevitable necessity. In her opinion Albania is facing important challenges, starting with judiciary and education. For Nushe, this county will have no future if the wrong people will lead it.

How did you get involved in politics? What are your challenges? Who are your supporters, who are your opponents?

Since I was a little girl, I dreamed of being someone important and I always saw myself as a leader. When I was in a group with other friends I always wanted to play the leader. But on the other hand, as I believe I will continue to be that child till the day I die, I will always be a fair person. I have always tried to be fair to others and I have tried to do good things and to help people in need. To be fair and to believe in ideas are a virtue of mine - maybe the best present I have received from my parents. In the early nineties I got involved in politics and I became a member of the Democratic Party.

Since then, the European integration of my country has been the most beautiful dream I have cherished, and I have never stopped working for it to come true. I have honestly worked within the structures of Democratic Party and with the structures of its Women's Forum. I have always been open and critical in my remarks when things did not progress in the right direction. Over the years I have increased my knowledge and skills by participating in many training courses. I got a Master's Degree in Public Health Management from the University of Montreal in Canada, so that I can be prepared and give my best in my job. My main supporters in the Democratic Party are the members of our Women's Forum. I have not

have any real opponents, but I believe others have considered me an opponent when they saw in me a strong candidate to replace them in the party structures.

What do you think of the political developments in Albania?

I believe that the energy spent by the political class during these 25 years since the regime change has not been very productive in the majority of the cases.

I think that much more had to be accomplished over a quarter of a century. Today, the European dream of the Albanians is yet to be fulfilled. I think that in the four upcoming years, the political class should fulfil all the duties and engagements towards the country's EU integration; we should appoint the best people, the most experienced people, those with the best performance and integrity, who can serve as a model for the Albanian society, and who can push Albania forwards. This is badly needed, because the experience of the past years has proved to be negative.

What is going to change in Albania in the four upcoming years? What are Albania's priorities and challenges?

The main challenge is the justice system reform. Another challenge is the fight against corruption at all levels, starting from the very top to the very bottom.

I would also mention the electoral system reform. The selection of well-educated people is of paramount importance. We should rely on young people educated in the Western countries, who can bring into the country the best practices of developed democracies, who can give their contribution in the legislative, executive and judicial branch, and also in the media and in the public administration. They are needed at all levels of public life in the country. It is extremely important that Albania meets all the requirements necessary for its EU integration. It is important that the reform agenda of the country aims at long-term and sustainable achievements that can show progress towards EU integration.

Our goals ought not to be diverted by the priorities of political agendas. It is important to draft projects that are aimed at the alleviation of poverty which can be effectively supported by international organizations. Such projects can help Albanians to regain hope and to believe that their country can change. It is important to draft concrete strategies for developing tourism all over the country in all seasons of the year. The good management of national assets is another issue of pivotal importance.

What do you think of gender quality in Albania and of the 50% quota for women in the municipal councils? Does such positive discrimination provide for unfair competition or do you think it is a necessary measure?

This achievement is the result of many years of tireless work. The results are significant and the future is now secured based on the provisions of a strong legal framework. I consider the legal framework on gender equality as a necessity that takes our conditions into account. It is, on the other hand, a challenge when it comes to its implementation. The legal framework on gender equality provides benefits to all, because I believe women are very concrete in their work; they are not prone to deplorable compromises, and they are careful, social and more committed to complete what they have started.

What is the social issue nearest to your heart?

Social problems lie close to my heart. I care for orphans, marginalised members of the Roma community, and women victims of violence, single mothers and aged persons. I have volunteered and wholeheartedly worked all over Albania for the *Albanian Children Foundation*. I believe that crime derives from extreme poverty. I believe that poverty destroys the dignity of the human being. I am very concerned about the system of education in Albania. I think that in our country education is lagging behind. Unfortunately, education is treated as a 'commodity' that can be bought and sold. It is not any longer a national priority; this is the root of our failure.

Which is, in your opinion, the role of media in educating society? Do you think that an intensive coverage of political news by the media is beneficial for the society, or do you think it should be reduced?

Media, or the fourth power, is of paramount importance. It should be independent because there is nothing more painful than the destruction of the freedom of speech. This happens when media outlets are divided along political lines. Media outlets should side with the public interest against any wrongdoings of the people in power; they should show that problems exist not only in and around the capital, but throughout Albania. They should help in the fight against corruption at all levels of public life. Media should show the successful people who can stand as models for the motivation of young generations against the prevailing models of easy money and easy fame. The 'fourth power' has a long road ahead in facing the challenge of showing the real Albania. I believe Albania will change when the lies and the disgusting models of our politics won't be in the main news anymore.

Where should we concentrate our efforts to bring about positive change?

I believe our main challenge is the education of the young generation and the creation of models of inspiration based on education, hard work and fairness as the keys to sustainable success. Another challenge is to revive hope in Albania. We need to convince our fellow Albanians that everyone can contribute for the prosperity of the country. I am optimistic and I try to share my positive attitude. I hope we can say "Stop" to the wrongdoings that stand in the way of Albanian integration in the EU. I believe that civil society should be more active, because experience has taught us that civil society can make a difference and there are many people with integrity who have led a dignified life over these last 25 years. New and clean personalities should take the responsibility to lead Albania forwards. I have been raised to be fair, human, diligent and open-minded in order to be successful and to offer my contribution, because Albania will become a prosperous country when everyone of us will fight to democratise the women forums and the political parties. We have to engage in the fight against corruption in each and every field of life in Albania.

Who are the women and men that have inspired you most?

The model of my inspiration is my family. Politically I find inspiration in the strong personalities of Ms Jozefina Topalli, Ms Albana Vokshi and Ms Grida Duma. I would like to mention especially Ms Liri Berisha as a source of inspiration, as I have worked as a volunteer in her Foundation "Our Children". She never behaved like the Prime Minister's wife and she never asked for any favour using her husband's name.

Felek Brahim

The difference politics can make

by Irena Shabani

Felek enjoys politics. Her way of doing politics is one of a different sort – not the usual politicking full of public relations and campaign slogans. She wants to bring values back to the citizens, to help them bridge the differences between people supporting opposed political camps. She also talks to those who have had enough and don't support anything anymore.

Politics ought to be of some value to the people, and women can be good examples of how this can actually come to pass. This is Felek's motivation and hope. She notices that politics has grown softer over the last couple of years. She believes that women's ideas in political parties are clear vote-winners, if women manage to prevail. Felek considers that over time, women's political participation has overcome plenty of prejudices. Old mentalities do not win over reason any more – at least not that easily.

How did you get involved in politics? What are your personal challenges? Who are your supporters, who are your opponents?

It all came very naturally. I started out back in 2010 in the framework of a program on development and decentralization. I participated alongside other women councillors such as Nirvana Lekaj, Irma Kopliku and Aferdita Haka.

What is your take on the political developments in Albania?

We have established a network for women in decision-making and a forum for women in policy-making, with the participation of women from Lezha, Malesia e Madhe, Rubik and Puka. Politics for me doesn't need to be tough. It can have a human side and women are very good at this. Back in 2001, I became a local counsellor for the Socialist Party. Since October 2013, I am the Secretary General of the Prefect's Office. In

order to be able to make it this far I have always been supported by my family and by my party.

What will change in Albania in the next four years? What are the main advantages and challenges awaiting Albania?

We'll face plenty of challenges. Yet we also have some achievements to report to date. One of the biggest achievements to date is the new territorial division. It will enable local governments to become more effective and to cover more responsibilities, with better human resources able to work in concert.

What is your take on gender equality in Albania? How do you consider the implementation of the 50% quota in the local councils: is it discriminatory or necessary?

The Alliance of Women Parliamentarians fully deserves praise for its work. The women MPs put a lot of pressure on the men to make the quota come true. The second of April will be commemorated as an important date as it marks the sanctioning of the 50% quota.

Women certainly play a positive role in local administration. One can't help noticing the ability women have to successfully bring complex matters to completion. It is by now clear that the presence of women in the parliament has reduced the amount of insults and vulgar words in the plenaries. In their presence men have to behave, and this gradually sets a new standard that is beneficial for the public discourse.

In this regard I have to recall the positive spirit that was the salient feature of the electoral campaign for local elections in Shkodra. The reason behind this is easy to find: both leading candidates were women. This sufficed to put an end to the fierce attacks among the opposite political camps after many years of pluralism. For the first time in the history of local elections in Shkodra the two candidates, Ms. Bazhdari and Ms. Ademi had the guts to put up a civilized debate and to sit at one table

whilst responding to the questions of young people during the campaign. It was a great show of civic values, and its clear that this time change had to come through the hands of women.

What social issue is closest to your heart?

My managerial background and my involvement in the educational system brings schools closest to my heart. I care a lot about school infrastructure and curricula. Only education can cater to the needs of a healthy society. I have noticed that the curricula have become too complex over the last years. On the other hand, it shouldn't be possible to allow to every teacher to be part in developing them. The textbooks ought to be written by well-known and qualified authors. They oughtn't be considered as a lucrative business.

What is your take on the role of the media for the education of society? Do you think that the coverage of the political situation benefits society or should it be somehow limited?

Media is a very valuable national asset. It can be a weapon in the hands of politicians, but it can also be an instrument in the hands of the citizens who need to become aware of their problems. In my opinion there's too much politics in our media. People don't feed on politics, they are sufficiently aware about it already. Media ought to cover more social problems, so that people are able to develop their civic values further, and so that community members start contributing more for the public good.

What should be the focus of our efforts for a positive change in the society?

Time is ripe for a different approach enacted through civil society. People oughtn't see politics as the only way to move ahead. The Albanian society ought to speak up on the issues of its concern. It has to be a factor, not just a voice that wants to tear down the masks.

Who are the women and the men who inspired you the most?

Every person meets valuable people during his or her life. You can learn a lot from them, you can internalize plenty of knowledge that helps you move forward. My father was the greatest source of inspiration for me. He taught me that a person should never stop in the middle of the way and just let things go. The tougher it gets, the bigger the prize.

ARJANA PUPA

An insider in politics

by Irena Shabani

Arjana Pupa entered politics in 2001. There were several reasons behind her political engagement. The most important one was her belief that she could make a difference. Yet she is not as enthusiastic about this as she was a decade ago. Arjana has plenty of objections and criticisms about what went wrong, maybe like all those who know things from the inside. She is sharply aware that facts count more than words. For eleven years, Arjana Pupa served as a municipal councillor in Korça for the Democratic Party.

She was not parachuted into a party position. This reason alone suffices for her being not overly enthusiastic about the recent adoption of the 50% women quota for municipal councils. Still, she is not one of those politicians who are eager to speak out against positive discrimination. She maintains that quality ought to prevail in a mass democracy. Maybe the 50% quota will bring in some women who are not up to the task. For Arjana, quality politics remains an important part of her life.

What was the reason that made you enter politics? What are your personal challenges? Who are your supporters and your adversaries?

I started out very young, mostly attracted by the social dimension of politics – I simply wanted to be active. Later on I believed I had to advance politically, and political parties were the right vehicle for me. I learned the ropes. I saw that women and men have the same abilities to learn and act. They have a similar courage (or lack thereof) to set targets and to break through limits. If they are so similar, why don't they participate at a similar level? Is it because women are afraid of challenges? I tried to answer that question through my work and through my dedication. I think I was able to give the right answer.

I was always interested in gender equality beyond the dimension of political participation. Public participation was a concern for me. Politics is, of course, a sort of struggle. You have to take risks, and these are

permanent risks. Competition is fierce. It takes guts to resist. At any rate, I have, as a matter of principle, always pushed for more women in political decision-making.

Things didn't always turn for the best for me. I didn't always get support from the persons I counted on. At any rate, I still maintain that more women in politics can only improve politics. That's the only way to succeed, in a situation marked by a low level of support from male politicians in particular and political parties in general.

It's a tough reality out there. Political power has highly traditional features. The more democratic political parties are, the more access is available for the women in decision-making. I always saw political opponents in those male politicians who can't stand women in politics. I never missed an opportunity to have my say on this.

I can only hope that the next generation will be sufficiently emancipated to appreciate the values of our politicians, regardless of their sex.

What is your take on the political developments in Albania?

Our political parties only deal with power politics. All they care about is seizing power. Power is their only goal. It absorbs the whole of their mental and human capacities. Attaining power ought to be only a means for enabling the implementation of a political vision. The concept of democracy means government by the people, realisation of the people's will. Democracy in Albania has a long way to go. We still need to perceive politics the way we should. Politics is the vehicle that brings people to the voting booth. Yet it shouldn't just end there.

We need to educate people and politicians alike about politics, even though politicians need it the most. At present politics is lost in a maelstrom. Political parties fight it out to the bitter end to get "the majority". They look at people as if they were a mere crowd.

What will change in Albania in the next four years?

The political elite's permanent failure to bury the hatchet continues to take its toll on Albania.

Corruption, political appointments in the public administration, organised crime, money laundering and trafficking represent serious problems for the country, according to the European Commission's reports on candidate countries. Albania remains away from the EU, which thinks that Albania has a political class that is unable to overcome conflict, unable to pass a law for controlling party finances, which leaves a lot of room for corruption inside the party. The inability of the political class to fight corruption remains Albania's main problem according to the latest reports.

What is your take on gender equality in Albania? What about gender quotas?

Gender equality isn't a reality yet. Countries that are much more developed than Albania, with a longer and more solid democratic tradition have often applied quotas as the best possible option.

However, mere numbers do not suffice. We need to pay particular attention to the role women of women in decision-making. What we need is active women, women able to influence their parties, able and willing to listen to other women, and able to defend and promote their interests. We need women with management and leadership skills; we need women with high integrity, women who command respect. It is often said that in order to know the level of democracy of a country, one has to look at the situation of the women in it.

Political parties lay at the centre of the problem. Do they put the most valuable women in their list for the purpose of meeting the quota requirements? Do the appointed women really represent the community? If so, then Albania can boast of having a new model of empowerment in place.

Could you name a social issue that lays closest to your heart?

I was a member of the Social Aid Committee in the Korça Municipality for eight years in a row. I saw what human suffering was like. I tried to do my best to provide aid to individuals in need. I still try to do that. Being able to help others is a human need. I particularly try to address the needs of orphans and single mothers.

How do you see the role of the media in Albania?

The Albanian society is heavily politicized. Media definitely plays a role there. We are overloaded with political TV shows. The TV channels have clear political allegiances. To whose benefit is this? Of course they serve to certain political parties. Yet there should be a balance in everything.

Where should the Albanian society focus its efforts to improve itself?

We are still heavily influenced by our communist heritage. Our past comes to the surface very often in the present. Our transition has been overly long and difficult. The democratization of our frame of mind seems to be one of the biggest challenges for our society.

SANIJE BATKU

by Irena Shabani

Sanije Batku is a long-serving member of the Dibra NGO community. It was her free choice to work in a very challenging environment, even though it would have been much easier for her to make a quicker career under the aegis of some political party. Sanie opted for a different path. She strongly believes in the values of the human community and the strength of each individual.

When did you get involved in working with civil society?

I started out back in 1993. Working in this sector is intrinsically related to community development, to direct engagement with families, with social amenities. Community is the locus of human education, it's the place people learn cooperation. From the community perspective, the state is, even though important, just another partner. Unluckily, we are traditionally used to expect everything from the state. The state will build the bridges for us, it will build the kindergartens for us.

I started out my cooperation with the OSCE Presence in 1998. We were able to reach out to the most remote areas, including Bulqiza and its adjoining villages. We wanted women to take their place in politics, to have enough courage, not just to vote independently, but also to be independently voted.

At first there were no women in charge of social or political functions. One could hardly find more than one or two women in the meetings of political party forums. We worked for long months to create some minimal opportunities for their participation. We also worked with the women to build their self-confidence.

Through the independent forum of Albanian women we started to tackle the issue of women in decision-making. We managed to contact a French NGO. At the outset of democracy it was almost impossible to

bring together women of different political affiliations. Cross-party work was an unsurmountable challenge.

When was the independent women's forum established in your town?

The forum was launched in 1993 upon the conclusion of the second democratic elections in Albania. It was an independent structure. We did our best to include women from all political parties. I was the first director of that forum, then I resigned from it, to be replaced by another woman who did great things to advance it further. I continued to contribute as the forum's coordinator. Yet the good times did not last too long. The DP women started to boycott our meetings. I was told they were instructed by their party bosses to stay away. Same thing happened with the SP women a bit later. Only a few of us were left. Yet there is an advantage if you work in remote areas. Change is difficult to be achieved, yet once you achieve it, it is hard to be erased. We boasted a solid reputation. We tried to be impartial in our community work.

In 1996, Ms Rolanda Dhimitri was able to secure a wheat supply to be distributed for humanitarian purposes. We secured them in the warehouses. We identified the poorest areas and distributed the aid. People started to trust us. It is easier to work with them since then. Yet I wouldn't make it if I were alone. The donors want to have reliable partners. They want to learn from you as you want to want from them.

That's their philosophy.

What do you think about the changes that have occurred over these difficult years? What has changed about women, especially with regard to the spirit of cross-party cooperation?

If tomorrow an organisation such as the OSCE would call women from different political parties in a cross-party meeting, I am sure they would show up. This was the case last time in spring 2015. The women's readiness to work together accross party lines indicates an important

shift in their mentality. Remember, before such a thing was impossible. During the last parliamentary session we ran a big project on women in decision-making. The problem repeated itself. Many women from opposing parties avoided the meetings under a lot of different pretexts. Yet now it seems things have started to change.

Every new session of the parliament brings along a degree of change of mentality. I believe that change of mentality was felt in the union of women MPs, who decided to sit at one table. It is an example worth pursuing further.

What is your take on the 50% quota? Does it mean less discrimination, but maybe not necessarily more quality?

We always faced the problem of low women's participation in politics. We had few women in the political forums, women stepped back, and men did not have any second thought about why they were not in the lists. I always said to everyone: if a male party leader is married to a woman who is worth her grains, he will know how valuable women in party forums are.

Can the quality of the participation of women in politics suffer from quotas?

Yes, it is possible. There have already been cases of inclusion of some women in municipal councils, who were definitely not up to the task. Yet, the 50% quota is a positive precondition for making another great leap forward.

The 50% quota is above all a tool to raise the awareness of the forums of the political parties. It also raises positive expectations among the women. If a woman manages to enter the council, it suffices for us if she dedicates just 5% of her time to discuss gender equality in public. If we were to give over gender equality only to the hands of the municipal councils we could go on talking in vain forever. It has always been like that. Positive action is needed.

Let me give an example. Before the advent of pluralism, I used to lead the women's forum of the Dibra area. The First Secretary of the Party noted that women were missing in the upper ranks. He asked the head of the human resources to compile a list with women who would qualify for leading positions.

The head of human resources said simply "no". He claimed there were no such women. He pointed to one neighbourhood after the other, assuring us that there was really none. After that episode the First Secretary came to ask me directly. Of course I told him there were plenty of qualified women around. I made a list for him with 50 names of women who would have sufficient qualification to be in leading positions such as school directors, directors of farms, or directors of hospitals. The First Secretary read the list and said that these women really fulfilled the required leadership criteria, yet he conceded he didn't think about them. Maybe such things will always happen as long as the men will continue to look at women in careers the way they see their own wives.

What is your take on the Albanian media? How are citizens' interests represented?

I wouldn't like to watch so much politics in the media. It stresses me out. Of course, of all things politics definitely deserves media coverage, but I find the way it is covered as rather overwhelming. I wouldn't like to watch politics day in and day out, I wouldn't like to watch it every single minute in all the public and private media. No one can really take this stress. I still remember my meeting with one American lady back in 1992. She asked me about the Albanian youth, how they are doing, whether they are into drugs and alcohol and those sort of things. Further to listening to me she said that we have great young people, but the movies and the TV programs will damage them because you haven't developed sufficient parental controls of the way TV is watched by young kids. It is indeed a matter of culture. In Albania young kids and grown-ups all watch TV crowded in one single room. We have TV channels that run party propaganda 24/7. There is nothing good for the people if their screens are filled to the brim with party propaganda.

Who are the people who were a motivation for you?

My father was the primary source of motivation for me even though he passed away when I was very young. He was highly educated. He knew Italian, English and Arabic. On the other hand I think I got the will to work and a passion for justice from my mother. She would never let us abuse with anything. As far as the NGOs are concerned, I have worked a lot with Ms Diana Çuli and Ms Rolanda Dhimitri and plenty others. I am particularly grateful to Ms Alenka Verbole, who knows very well how to work with women, how to enable them to take on responsibilities, how to promote them, how to give them courage to move on. The same goes for Ms Arjana Haxhiu, for her special way of bringing new information and advice to us on how to improve our standing through lobbying. I am very grateful to both of them, for their support to all women.