

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.

## Introductory words

- Mr Gazmend Oketa
- Mr Arben Malaj
- Mr Gjergj Bojaxhi

## Interviews

1. Ms Etleva Tare
2. Ms Lindita Nikolla
3. Ms Evjeni Kota
4. Ms Nirvana Lekaj
5. Ms Grida Duma
6. Ms Dava Rusta
7. Ms Sose Çallpani
8. Ms Majlinda Bufi
9. Ms Mimoza Arapi

## Closing words

- Ambassador Florian Raunig, Head of OSCE Presence in Albania



## Gazmend Oketa

“Empowering Women in Politics” is a publication certainly worth reading. To me it is difficult to compress in a few paragraphs everything it takes to frankly and openly address this matter. The Albanian society hasn’t yet found the right equilibrium in matters of gender equality. Women who can serve as positive models, women who are successful in politics and in social life often have hard choices to make. Our politics are loaded with conflict; more often than not it’s a system in which meritocracy loses ground all the time. In this situation, it’s really hard for anyone who is different, regardless of gender, to decide whether to enter politics or not.

At any rate, dear ladies, you have to enter politics. Politics is full of challenges and difficulties, but that’s life. In all walks of life one can choose to do his or her best, to be honest, to work to the benefit of one’s country, so as to be able to say proudly “I was there”, that is, I wasn’t hiding anywhere, I was not addressing the problems of my country just from a coffee-shop or from a beauty parlour. If you’ve been there, that means you did not run away from trouble, from the unknown, that means you did not think just about your family. On the contrary, being in politics means that you have offered your talent, sincerity, dedication, understanding, perseverance, your voice to speak out the truth.

Being in politics for a woman certainly means to challenge men, but also to cooperate with them. Being in politics for every honest human being means to do your best to hand over to our children a country that is in many ways better than the country our parents handed over to us.

Thinking about gender equality, I am firmly convinced that the best is yet to come. The world has known many women who have served as sources of inspiration for many generations. Women in politics excel through their dedication, through their love for their country, through their political talent. I believe that inside every woman there is sufficient capacity, courage and strength to be an honest, successful and good politician. Now it’s our turn to get to know better these nine honoured women in politics, which certainly deserve our attention and congratulations for being part of this publication. Don’t forget, maybe one day it can, and it will be, your turn.



## Arben Malaj

Women are in no way simply half of the population. They play key roles in shaping our lives. The traditional society sees them as mothers, wives, and schoolteachers. At any rate, their participation and their contribution is becoming more and more known, recognized and formalized in all domains. The more women are visible in the so-called non-traditional gender roles, the more impact they have, the more creativity, added value, problem-solving skills and energy is transmitted to the society as a whole.

I have always held many women in high esteem, even more so those women who brought something new in those fields that have yielded an influence upon me.

Education is one of those fields. A young woman from Pakistan, called Malala Yousafzai, has deeply impressed me through her courage and perseverance to educate women in her country. Regardless of the obstacles, even of the threats to her own life, she followed her dream. We need voices like hers here in Albania, so as to be able to pursue the real social transformation, which we still miss. Malala's history carries a precious message for me: we can be the change, regardless of our sex, age, race or religious affiliation. I really feel inspired by this woman.



## Gjergj Bojaxhi

The active participation of women in a country's public life is a right and a necessity. It is a right, because it's written in the country's constitution. It is a necessity, because discouraging or ignoring half of the country's human, mental and emotional potential is translated into an unpardonable economic inefficiency.

Albania needs its full potential, exactly because the need to boost economic development is now more of a necessity than ever. At a more personal level, my work experience in Albania has taught me that women in general make better team members. Maybe it's just a natural instinct; or maybe it's a social gift.

It's possible that the traditionalist aspect of our society has forced women to engage in a more active way of interaction, to adopt a more effective culture of communication, which translates into what it takes to work effectively in a group. Still, regardless of the individual achievements of a few remarkable women in the public and private sector, the gender gap has been increasing over the last years. It is even more visible if we compare the rural with the urban areas. This gender gap makes Albania a country which has a lot of work to do in order to achieve a respectable level of gender equality.



## ETLEVA TARE

By Irena Shabani

Etleva is a member of the Egyptian community and a leader of her people. She graduated in catering and logistics administration in 1989. Her family didn't have an easy life after the fall of communism, yet they never gave up hope. Etleva was quick to integrate in the civil society sector. In 2005, she was a local coordinator for Terre des Hommes. In the meantime she established an NGO called "The knitters", with the mission to help women in need. The idea behind the NGO was to fight discrimination, as the attempts of many Egyptian and Roma women to get jobs in the knitting business were unrightfully ignored. She continues to consider politics as a worthy challenge, even though the barriers are considerable, and obstacles are at times simply absurd.

*Ms Tare, how was your jump into politics? What were the challenges, your opponents, and your supporters?*

My political career started in 2009. The reason behind it was my effort to stand up against a tough reality. After the year 1997 my family faced severe economic distress. I felt sad; I had no hope. I thought we were really at the bottom of the ladder. Yet, when I started to work with the NGO sector, I got to see with my own eyes that that wasn't true.

*My own standard of living was absolutely not comparable to the extreme shortages I saw in many Egyptian families.*

First, I started to participate in the meetings of the OSCE Presence-supported National Platform for Women. The task-force of the Platform was established in the year 2010. The aim of the Platform was to work towards enforcing the 30% gender quota with women from across the political spectrum.

I was the first Egyptian woman to join the task force. In the year 2011, with the support of two friends of mine and of the OSCE Presence, I ran as an independent candidate in the municipal elections. I belong to a numerous community in Korça. Out of a total of 68,000 inhabitants, 27,000 are Egyptians and 3,000 are Roma. I had problems to register as an independent candidate.

I was asked to present 700 signed declarations of support for my candidacy.

Because of the short notice, it was almost impossible. Yet I managed to collect over 200 signatures on the first day. On the second day, which was the administrative deadline for the final submission of the signatures, nobody was at the candidates' registration office, so my bid for candidacy was over. Later on, someone from the candidates' registration office told me in confidence that my candidacy was favoured by neither of the political camps, because the majority and opposition had 17 seats each, and in that situation I would become the kingmaker of the municipal council.

They resented this. They resented me being a woman, and what is more, a woman from a minority community. But I did not give up. I won't give up now. Regardless this problem, Korça Municipality was supportive of our NGO. It provided us with premises in the pedestrian area, in a very lively area of the town.

*What do you think about Albania's development over the coming four years; what are Albania's strengths and weaknesses?*

From the civil society point of view, what I miss is a common language between the majority and the opposition. One has precious few things to learn from a parliament that excels only when it comes to verbal abuse. These people are elected by the people; they should work for the people. The politicians should be always mindful about the people's issues, beyond the electoral campaign. At any rate, there are positive steps too.

The Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth has established a technical secretariat for the vulnerable communities. A couple of days ago, I presented to the secretariat some 30 names of Korça students who are about to finish their studies. I want them to be offered an opportunity to get employed. This may bring a positive turn to the situation in Korça, a good reason for more youngsters to study. In the last employment fair organised in our town, we managed to find employment for four youngsters.

Maybe this is too little, and true, there is much more to be done.

There are plenty of improvements needed. At any rate, I notice a change, at least in the mentality of how things are done. The Ministry of Education is setting up community-based schools. A pilot community school will be opened in Maliq in September this year. At least on paper, the program of the Socialist Party was good.

I hope they will manage to put it into practice, so as to prevent the usual disappointment in four years' time. Mr. Niko Peleshi, the Deputy Prime Minister, considers Korça a priority. Initiatives to support tourism in the Dardha area, to rebuild the traditional bazaar of Korça, the construction of a guitar-shaped new business centre, seem to bring us on the right path to revitalize the town.

*What is your take on gender equality? Who are those in favour, who are those against it?*

We don't have gender equality right now. Women can be compared to the neck: it steers the direction the head turns, yet regardless of this, Albania is heavily dominated by men. There are attempts to raise the bar of the gender quota above 30%. At any rate, in today's government, there are more women than men, which is a good thing. I believe women make better administrators, because they are able to manage relationships. Women by nature are better communicators.

Women should always support other women, regardless of their political affiliations. The biggest opponent to gender equality is, to my mind, the unbridled male mentality. The biggest support to my cause came from my family, my colleagues, and my community.

At the outset they told me: "What will you do for us, if you're all alone?" Now this is not the case anymore. We are represented, but we still need more representation. This is an issue that pertains to the future.

*A social issue that is close to your heart?*

I still remember the extreme poverty, coupled with a high level of violence. When I started to work as a community coordinator in charge of social affairs, the members of my community started to address me as "the boss". I didn't want them to call me that way, yet they saw hope in me, so I committed myself even more to their cause.

In the year 2010, the Ministry of Education passed a law that exempted the children of Roma and Egyptian families in poor economic conditions from university registration taxes.

In the same year, eight youngsters were about to register in the Fan Noli University of Korça. I followed the process. The dean was very welcoming and nice. On the other hand, the university secretary was contemptuous. He said

that we were about to benefit from an unfair concession, therefore there was no way the youngsters could register.

We persisted in our efforts to overcome these barriers. We asked and managed to meet representatives of the Ministry of Education. At the end, the youngsters were able to register, as written in the law. In these matters, persistence does really count. In this regard, the training on women in decision-making helped me a lot; it was a second school to me.

*Who are the women and men who have inspired you?*

My father was an idol for me. He followed each step I made. He was a friend to me, and he never said anything that would make me give up on my ideas, even though he might have different opinions. I was always told that I was his most beloved one. Everything I ever achieved in my life, in my career, is dedicated to him.

## LINDITA NIKOLLA

By Gjergj Erebara

**Back in 2003, when she was invited to enter politics, Lindita Nikolla was a high school director. Today she's proud of her success in the SP primaries and even more so of her double victory in her municipal unit. She has good words for Margaret Thatcher, mainly for Thatcher's will to push for reform, even though she doesn't really stand for the policies of "The Iron Lady". She has a message for the women and girls who want to engage in politics: "Go step by step, it's not difficult!"**

*What is your take on the political environment in Albania?*

I don't believe I'll be able to tell you anything you haven't heard before with regard to the environment we face every day whilst engaging in politics. I share the perception of each and every sensible citizen that the policy debate is harsh, unfocused, and it has more often than not no relation to the formulation of valid alternatives.

Of course, political parties and individuals engaging in politics have greatly differing and competing visions and ideas, but at the level of public discourse, I certainly resent the use of half-truths and the dominance of the logic of defamation, which is used to detour the efforts to tackle the problems, to distort the personality of the opponent, who is a citizen like every one of us, a mother and a father like most of us.

I used to look forward to my participation in parliamentary life; maybe "rosy expectations" aren't the right word to describe my state of mind at that time. Yet I was really looking forward to becoming a Member of Parliament. I would like to share with you that more often than not, once you're inside the Parliament, you see that your expectations aren't really fulfilled -as a politician, and even more so as a woman, when you have to face a myriad of lies, spelt out in a language that is really shameful to everyone.

At our level of discourse, regardless of one's pros and cons, regardless of the issues one wants to raise, one is always prejudiced; more often than not your challenge is not the issue at hand. Unfortunately, rather than to debate issues, one has to spend time and energy to respond to invented realities, to react to mudslinging.

*How did you enter politics?*

Entering politics is a process. It's not a really infinite road, but it's still long, and it takes little steps to move ahead. In the year 2003 I received an invitation from my local branch of the Socialist Party to join its campaign for the local government elections. I did not run myself, as I didn't feel sufficiently prepared to meet that challenge.

At that time I was the director of a high school in Tirana, and I believed a career in education was my future. Still, I positively responded to that request to contribute to the party, and I certainly did contribute for four years as a Socialist Party municipal councillor in Tirana Borough No.1.

I believe those years helped me to get to know what was going on outside the education establishment. During that time I learned the ropes. I saw what community contribution was, what the voice of the citizens sounded like out there, in the community. I became more and more aware of the responsibilities each of us has to improve our own and everyone else's quality of life. I also got to know the structure of my constituency.

Upon completing my mandate of four years as a councillor, I participated in the one-member-one-vote contest in the primaries of 2007 that would decide the candidate who would run for the position of mayor of Borough No.1 in Tirana. My opponents were the incumbent mayor, a woman, and a very distinguished doctor, with a good reputation in the community. From the presentation of our platforms, my proposal got the most consent. This was an additional sign of the support I had from within the Socialist Party, which was confirmed in the local elections I won in February 2007.

I then served as the Mayor of Borough No.1. It was an overwhelming victory; I believe I got more votes than my party did, as more people from the local community saw in me and in my family a model of integrity, a familiar face, someone to rely on. In fact we have lived in that neighbourhood for quite a while. My husband is a member of that community since his birth; we still live in the same house in which he was born. Maybe the voters saw in me a new model of commitment of governance at the local level.

My campaign and my election as mayor came to pass at a time when the Socialist Party was leading the opposition. I served my first mandate in a situation of double opposition: the Socialist Party was in opposition at the national level; also in my borough we had less municipal councillors than DP had.

Those years gave me the best schooling in terms of local governance. During four years we managed to get only one budget approved. That situation put me to the test. I tried to do my best to avoid any interruption of services for the community, and to continue to deliver more services externally funded by projects.

At that time, my municipal unit implemented plenty of projects funded through the engagement of non-governmental organizations and donors. It was a real school of life in the full meaning of the word. It also was a new standard of governance, which, leaving modesty aside, was achieved not only because of the mayor, but also thanks to my incredible staff. We were able to set a new standard in an open, transparent institution, able to account for the services it provided. We did our best to consult our budgets with the community, and to get them approved with its consent.

*Did you ever have any doubts about engaging in politics?*

To be honest, at times I have reflected whether it would have been better for me to pursue another career. Yet, if I add up all the pros and cons, I believe that at the end it was worth it. Every woman that enters politics in Albania is worth it. It is important to bear in mind that we, those women who made it, aren't necessarily the best women ever.

We are not special. All we can do is to serve as a model for other women to join, for better women to come in, so that they can do what we did, and do it even better. It's important to dare and go out, to dare and be part of politics. It is not impossible; on the contrary, it can be nice.

It is hard, but everything that is worth its grain, especially when we take into account our young democracy, is hard. It's so nice if more women are part of it.

*What is your opinion of the positive discrimination in favour of women in politics?*

Indeed an interesting question. Before I became a politician, I loudly spoke out against the gender quota. I maintained I didn't want to be elected because of some reserved quota for women. My stance came also as a result of my double victory in the elections of 2007 and 2011. I won both contests through direct competition in a majoritarian system. In the 2013 elections I was part of the candidates' list of the Socialist Party for Tirana.

Now I maintain that positive measures are those that can actually yield positive results in the Albanian reality. And, in this reality, the more women we can get in the parliament, the better off we are. Women's participation in politics has been supported, also thanks to the latest amendments made to the Electoral Code with the contribution of the OSCE Presence and thanks to the lobbying of the National Platform of Women in which I participated, the 30% quota enabled women not to end up at the bottom of the list. Now, one out of three of the candidates ought to be from the opposite sex. This enables women to benefit from the quota.

If MPs relinquish their mandates, the vacant mandates go to women. These are good steps forward; on the other hand, they need to be followed up by empowering women at the decision-making level, to empower them as party activists: the more, the better. I believe that women ministers, women MPs, elected women officials at the local level, have to serve as models to show why it's a good thing to believe in women and what women can do once they are in command.

*What is your prognosis for the four years to come?*

These are crucial years, closely related to the achievement of the candidate status by Albania. I believe responsibility should prevail in the four years to come, in terms of the functioning of the state institutions, of the independent institutions, not only to fully apply the democratic standards, but also to set the stage for the country's social and economic development.

I am confident that the Government and all state institutions will work harder in order to meet the new responsibilities and to fulfil the new expectations related to Albania's bid for full EU membership. In order to be a member, you need to be truly European.

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

I can't separate my work from my passion that is education. My personal challenges are closely linked to the reform of the education sector, with the transformation of the education system into a real public service, less and less dependent on politics. Of course, good policy-making is closely linked to communication with the interest groups. I think education is a domain that pertains to all of us, so everyone has to be part of the success, but also part of a continuous monitoring of the work in progress, including the work being done by the Minister of Education.

*Who were the women that inspired you?*

I have found inspiration in many famous women. Margaret Thatcher, even though she is definitely not left-wing, is an inspiring personality, as far as her determination to pursue her policies is concerned, her will to push forward reforms, even though the first steps of each serious reform encounter stiff resistance and cause a lot of reactions.

Yet Thatcher was the politician who adopted drastic measures, such as the removal of the free milk for children in the schools...

I identified the inspiring part in Thatcher, at least as far as I am concerned; I certainly do not agree with the policies she implemented, yet I admire her determination and her commitment to reform. I really appreciate determination in women. In order to be determined, you don't necessarily need to shout around, or to put yourself at all cost in the limelight.

*Which are the men who inspired you?*

My father was always an inspiration to me. Since I was very young I always tried to be like him, in the sense that I tried like him to be nice to other people, to reach out to other people just like he did. Politically speaking, I would single out Edi Rama as a source of inspiration for everything I achieved, from 2007 to the present.

Those who know me will also know that I don't link this with the fact that he is now the Prime Minister of Albania. Edi Rama was the one who extended an open and sincere invitation to women and girls. He also was the one person I worked with during those four years when he was the Tirana mayor and I was the mayor of one Tirana borough. I always found in him goodwill and an incredible energy to move things forward.

## EVJENI KOTA

By Irena Shabani

Great people don't always come in shining armour. They don't have supernatural powers. They may walk among us, and still make a difference. These were my thoughts right after meeting Evjeni Kota. Evjeni was born in Gorica, a Greek minority village in the Dropull area. She grew up in a large family. She listened to the stories of her great-grandmother, she treasured them, and she remembered them very well. Evjeni is the Chair of the Tirana Branch of the Human Rights Union Party (HRUP), and the Deputy Chair of the "Omonia" organization. Evjeni is not one of those women who choose to pass unnoticed. On the contrary: she has chosen to put on display the best in her.

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

My family was persecuted under the Communist regime. Several family members were in prison. If you ask me about my opponents I would count that regime as one of them. I entered into the political scene to ask for justice. I want to be able to help people; I don't want to use people as tools to serve the achievement of my own ends. To me, being a woman means being responsible. I consider myself as an engine; I want to put my energy to pull my wagons.

The more you dare to do things, the more things you achieve. I want to speak out; I want my voice to be heard, because I belong to a national minority. I never hid my origin. I always try to give to people as much as I take from them. My family was my greatest supporter in my political career, which started in 2005 as a MP candidate. I tried to do politics by doing things for the people. I didn't manage to get elected, as women are not really favoured by the Electoral Code.

If you ask me who my supporters are, I can tell you that I was elected as the chair of the Tirana HRUP branch by the men. Most of the party members are men. I ran against men in the party elections, and I was voted by most of the men.

*What is your take on Albania's political developments?*

I see will to move ahead, but I see everyone getting stuck somewhere. The

issues at hand are the same, for the majority and for the opposition. This is reason enough to find a common ground. It is imperative to change the mind-sets of the political parties.

The language they use in the parliament has to change. If you watch a parliamentary session on TV, the only thing you learn is how NOT to behave. We still have an opposition, which walks out of the parliament, even though everybody remembers the times when the present majority MPs, at that time in opposition, would walk out, thus leaving the parliament in a situation of collapse.

I expect from the ruling majority to be able to clearly read the living standards of the citizens. This can be done only if you study the people, if you survey them properly, by sending sociologists out in the field.

This can be achieved only if the politicians clearly know how much it costs a citizen to live decently, only if all costs are properly factored in starting from the toilet paper, and continuing with everything that it takes to ensure a normal living standard. I was against the abandonment of the parliament by the opposition.

If you want to oppose something, you should do it on the battlefield. You cannot stand up against something by simply walking away. Laws should apply equally on everyone, also to the MPs themselves. To conclude, as far as the political developments are concerned, I consider that there is will to change reality, but no one has found the way to do it, so far.

*What will change in Albania in the next four years? What are Albania's main advantages and challenges?*

First of all, those in power have to keep their electoral promises. They shouldn't be forgotten, they have to be recalled, analysed, addressed. This should be done by those who have made those promises, not just the opposition. I think media has a role to play in this aspect.

The media should be aware of the electoral programs; they should regularly scrutinize them so as to hold accountable those in power, to tell them they're responsible for promises that have remained only on paper. This would help us reduce the abuse of power.

At first sight one might consider that things are changing at a fast pace, but this is certainly not the case. It is unacceptable that Albania still imports water, energy and a host of basic products. This is scary. Poverty brings corruption along. Just to give you a detail: in my neighbourhood, you can easily count fifteen thrift shops selling used clothes.

There weren't so many before. Apparently people tend to run this sort of business, because used clothes don't go bad, as vegetables do. I believe we should turn our attention to the local products. Albania can be built by the Albanians, not by our neighbours. Albania is full of water and energy resources, yet they're poorly managed. Even God says: if you want to get enlightened, get a move on!!

It's sad to see Albanians having trouble to get a shower in a country that is so rich in water resources. I think that reality in this country is not properly reported. I consider as successful those leaders who go out to meet people instead of accepting the praise of their close staff, who usually say how good they are. We are located in a very nice spot in the Balkans, yet our rules are absurd.

When I visit Greece I see that the sea is full of vessels and all sorts of ships.

The sea in Albania is empty. I believe it would be good for the country to liberalize the navigation sector. I also favour collectivisation of the agriculture, it is impossible to be effective with those tiny farms, which at the end cause plenty of crime. You see people going at each other for just a fence between two tiny properties, or for some water supply.

*What is your take on gender equality in Albania?*

Women are 100% responsible for the in-the-house decision-making, but once they leave their home behind, their decision-making power goes down to a formal 30%. Our women are enchained upon getting married, they're alienated, and they're considered as their husband's properties. What is worst, some women think of themselves that way. Most Albanian men don't think of their women as of their friends. They consider a friend someone they can talk to over a coffee.

*You have initiated the twinning of the town of Alexandropolis in Greece with Tirana Borough No. 5 (Central Tirana). How did you come to this idea?*

I got to know Jeta Seitaj, the mayor of Tirana Borough No. 5 in one of the OSCE Presence events on women in decision-making. We became friends since then, and we cherished that friendship. I always told Jeta that we ought to come up with some joint project one day. I really appreciate her capacities as a manager and as an organiser. We represent different political parties, yet I believe everybody benefits from a friendship that lasts. I visited Greece on the occasion of the last local elections, and I happened to meet the person who later became the Mayor of Alexandropolis. He told me to come up with some concrete idea for co-operation. So I came up with the idea to twin the two local government units. We have a lot of things in common in the field of economic development, education and culture. I think this twinning will help us coordinate better with each-other also during the high tourist season, when seasonal employment can be an option. I think we are on the right track on this.

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

The woman who inspired me the most is Madeleine Albright. I read her biography, in which I noted striking similarities with my own life. She came from a Czech migrant family that moved to the United States. Everything she achieved in life she owed to herself. I don't have a male idol though. I would like men to be a bit more like Angela Merkel, especially as far as perseverance is concerned. Good men have to show themselves as such through their actions, they've always got time to do that.

You know the saying according to which a successful man is always backed up by a clever woman, but I'm convinced that's not his wife. In many cases, the speeches of male politicians are written by women, so I see much hypocrisy among men. I hope that women in politics will come together one day; they have much more to show. I don't expect from women to wear men's pants; a woman should never forget what she is.

As far as men are concerned, I cannot say that they are born to co-operate with women. Yet I will never forget those men who helped me become what I am. I am grateful to them for their support. If I wasn't, I would just be like those ungrateful little men who surround us.

## **NIRVANA LEKAJ**

By Gjergj Erebara

**Nirvana Lekaj entered politics in 1992. She is the Chairwoman of the Democratic Women’s League and a member of the Shkodra Municipal Council. She speaks in an open and frank manner. She criticizes the “non-democratic policies” of party leaders, who put barriers, not only to women’s participation in politics, but also to the development of democracy in the country as such.**

*Tell us something about your political career. How come you entered politics?*

I joined the Democratic Party in the year 1992. Six years later, in 1998, I was elected as Education Secretary of the Shkodra DP branch. During the whole of this period I was a member of the Shkodra Democratic Women’s League.

In 2008 I was elected as the Chairwoman of the League. I still hold that position. In the 2011 elections I was part of the winning list of the DP candidates for the Shkodra Municipal Council.

*You have been very active in the political scene of Shkodra. Did you ever think about embarking into national politics?*

My political contribution isn’t limited only to Shkodra. I participate in national politics, as a member of the National Forum of Democratic Women. I have contributed in the drafting of the national platform for gender equality of the Democratic Party. Since 2009 I have been a member of the DP National Council.

*What does it mean being a woman in politics? What are the challenges?*

It’s a privilege, but one has got to have guts to enjoy it as such. Shkodra is a town full of tradition, and that tradition extends to the very organization of the women’s movement.

That organizational heritage can be tracked back as far as to 1920, when Marije Çoba established the first women’s association “The Committee of the Albanian Woman”. Shkodra women have high expectations when it comes to who runs the town. It takes a lot of energy and prudence to represent them.

*What is your take on the recent political developments in Albania?*

The most recent political developments, especially those related to the approval of an incomplete territorial reform, lead me to think that the political representation of women in the upcoming local elections might come to suffer considerably.

*How do you see Albania in the next four years?*

I am not very optimistic on Albania's democratic perspective in the four years to come, especially considering what happened over the last four months.

The ruling majority's 84 votes in the Parliament make just a political analyst out of the opposition. The opposition is not in a position to be a factor of change, as it should be, at least in a democratic country.

*What is your opinion on gender equality in Albania?*

It takes a lot of effort to achieve gender equality in Albania. We have still formidable barriers to overcome.

Just to name a few: the male-oriented attitude of the society, the non-democratic policies of the party leaders, and the forced indifference of the women themselves.

It is plain to see that the reforms undertaken over the last year, especially those targeting the changes in the Electoral Code, aiming at forcing the political parties to fulfil a gender quota of 30%, have been ineffective.

The party leaders put pressure on the women candidates to relinquish their mandates. We have experienced concrete examples of such pressure in the Lezha region.

Regardless of the barriers we had to face, women did not remain silent. They were able to react, to use the continuous support of the international community, especially of the OSCE. I believe we will be able to jointly yield a positive influence in the improvement of the women's representation in decision-making.

*Which is the issue (social, political or other) that lies closest to your heart?*

Women's representation, at the top level. That doesn't apply only to politics. It applies to everything. To education, culture, health. To everything.

*Who were the women who inspired you the most?*

History is full of women who contributed to the development of our country, who helped not just our country, but the whole world. Mother Theresa is a symbol of self-negation, of love for those in need, of love for humanity.

Back to politics, as a Shkodra woman, I find inspiration in a lady who has represented us, and still does represent us all over the world, by taking up issues that are important to our country, especially to women and children.

*What would you tell to a young woman who might have an idea to enter politics today?*

Politics is usually tough on idealists. It has always been. Yet engaging in politics it is not an unachievable target. In order to succeed in politics one has to be well-prepared.

One has to be strong, one has to know people, especially those one is going to represent. One has to struggle to represent them properly.

## GRIDA DUMA

By Rezarta Delisula

This woman is crystal-clear in what she thinks, in what she stands for. She is new to politics, yet she seems born for it. She was spotted out by former Prime Minister Berisha, who offered her a job in the government upon watching her appearance in televised debates. Grida Duma is the strong female voice of the Democratic Party of Albania. She says that nobody can prove one's attachment to the country other than by doing politics geared towards improving everyone's economy.

*What is your take on politics in Albania? Let's take a wide angle so as to avoid talking about petty details.*

To me, what you called "petty details" make up our daily chaos. Petty skirmishes escalate into personal clashes, on personal matters, with particular names. We are overwhelmed by petty details all the time; through them, political debates are channelled into issues of little or no importance to the lives of most of us.

*In fact, our petty details are the iron lid on the top of that deep manhole that leads into what really vexes us. We live today in a situation of anomy.*

Every time one turns one's head, one is sure to spot names rather than issues. The rules of the game are missing. Sound principles are lost to us. Politics needs them both. It needs clarity and ideological differences between what are left, centre and right, between differing opinions on what is right and wrong.

We miss that. People vote based on their personal acquaintances, they vote based on their immediate interest or on their expectations to run a profit, big or small, sooner rather than later. That happens because in terms of political identity nothing makes a difference any more. Politics is sick, people are sick of it. Meritocracy has been lagging behind politics for some time now.

If one compares Albania's first pluralist parliament with today's Assembly, the difference is really striking. The overall level of educational and social attainment of most of today's MPs is visibly lower, compared to say, ten or twenty years ago.

Recently I read an article written by one of the brightest minds of the left wing.

Sadly, the article justified campaign lies; it did so by using some rather inept comparisons with the U.S.; it argued that “leaders lie over there as well”. This way of excusing immorality shows the depth of the problem: it shows our entrenched inability to move politics from mere politicking to a development agenda.

We should be able to see clearer: who represents what, what is left-wing politics, what is right-wing ideology, what is the added value of centrist ideologies to development; what are the alternatives to bring Albania back to the track of economic growth. These should be what we would like to hear in everyday discussions instead of what you termed “petty details”.

You know, if all of us are a bit better off, it’s much easier for most to push away politicking and appreciate real policy-making.

*What is your prognosis on the economy for the four years to come?*

The best way a politician can prove her or his attachment to the country is by actually doing something for the economy. Increasing our per capita income will enable us to overcome Albania’s everlasting dark side – an entrenched, all-embracing poverty, in terms of financial and human resources.

Of course, by a better economic situation I do not mean absolute growth, which is quickly eroded by inflation more than in the early nineties.

The surge of public debt, the burgeoning taxation of the middle class, the division of the business sector in “left” and “right wing contributors”, the massive firings in the public sector and the massive replacements through party militants, triggers nothing but depression.

If we are serious about improving the situation, we should be able to engage in a fight with the “demon” that blocks the engine of the economy.

Regretfully, I have no positive prognosis to make. Uncertainty runs high; crime has recently preyed upon people with a high profile in the country’s business scene. This makes my current reading of the situation not optimistic.

*What is your opinion on the women in politics? Do you see advancement or regress?*

Women’s representation is a complex thing. On the one hand, there are too

few women newcomers, to the point that the legal gender quota of 30% can't be fulfilled. To me, those who claim that women actually sit in the parliament because of the quota, squarely miss the problem.

If we were to really aim at the application of the quota, then we would have it fulfilled by now. If we were serious about gender equality, women would not relinquish their parliamentary seats to be replaced by the next best man in the party list. The legal framework in force is a formal, ineffective arrangement that doesn't help women's participation.

Of course, in addition to the gender quota, more women may be co-opted into politics just as another facade. Both phenomena aren't helpful to the cause of gender equality.

Nonetheless I maintain that women MPs are rather competitive in the parliament, and in many cases superior to most of their male colleagues. Just to sum up, I don't believe we have reached a substantial progress in this matter. There remains much more to do, both in terms of numbers and in terms of quality of women's representation.

*How did you get involved into politics? How were you invited to join and why do you believe in your political party?*

A public invitation to join a political movement is the formal part that easily springs to the eye. Real political engagement is a vocation. Politics is a total investment. It takes many tough choices to make that investment; you need to identify resources within and outside yourself – and try to commit them. You need to give up on plenty of things, regardless of whether you are in opposition or not. I maintain that I have what it takes to engage in politics. I believe in the strength of the individual first, then in the strength of the organised community.

Let me explain this: I think that personal well-being comes first. If one is fine with oneself, one may be able to do something good for the fellow man. I believe in the strength of those who believe in what they do every day. No-one can distribute or redistribute wealth if one doesn't generate it first. To distribute you need to accumulate.

Under the Communist regime, Albanians were forced to relinquish the natural mode of production for many years. They were forced to abandon private property. They were cut off from their own creativity in business matters, in the name of the benefit for the community, in the name of "us", as set against "mine".

What we now lack is a prolonged period of economic well-being. Ten or twenty years of higher per capita income cannot make up for generations of severe hardship. Once you reach a certain level of well-being you get the strength to decide upon your own fate. My beliefs are very much anchored in the right-wing ideology: I maintain that there can be no Marx if there were no Adam Smith.

Whoever ignores one of them ignores the whole picture. As to your question, on who invited me to enter the realm of politics, the answer is simple: former Prime Minister Berisha. He spotted me out in televised debates. He invited me to join his government.

*Overall, people think you're quite a capable person. How hard is it to find one's place in life?*

Thank you for saying that this is an overall perception. It's hard to find one's place in life; one is never really done trying to do that. It gets tougher every day. I started work as a very young girl, as I tried to help my parents make both ends meet. I got a job immediately after high school, in parallel with my university studies. I tried to apply for scholarships abroad. Then I started to participate in international students' debates. I got more and more on my plate and it never became less.

*What is your take on the right way of conducting a political debate?*

I tend to agree with anything that is not influenced by prejudice or political bias. I try to spot my mistakes and to address them.

There are many reasons why somebody manages to dominate a political debate. First, if you have a good argument, people might be more willing to listen. People won't always agree with you, but at least they will listen. There are many things that block one's message, including prejudice, social and gender stereotypes. I know all too well those stereotypes, especially when applied to women speaking in public.

There is quite a difference in the public perception of women versus men. Every time a woman wants to make herself heard, she runs the risk of being perceived as contentious, rather than strong. In an identical situation, a man is just considered to be a successful public speaker.

At any rate, I have made my way into the public debates, so I don't worry very much if they consider me contentious or call me the usual names.

*Do politicians benefit from good looks?*

The outer appearance, the physical fitness, the good health, the good looks and everything that relates to our shining outer shell tend to provide more self-confidence to each of us. I would tend to say that my looks did help me - most of the time. It is a fair observation that most of those who really care about their lives take good care of themselves, and that includes the outer appearance. This is some sort of biological wisdom.

Of course I dismiss those who attribute to good looks merits that actually lie elsewhere.

One cannot be attractive to the public if good looks are coupled with interior ugliness: this can bring more trouble to the good-lookers than one can think. It is easy to be jealous of one who looks good; so, it's much easier to attack him or her, and even more so if you've got a good argument.

*Men against women, men who fear women, sexism... How do you deal with these issues?*

I would not say that politics is made up of men fighting women, or the other way around. In many cases, women get precious support from men - and vice-versa. Yet, men, socially speaking, have been around for many centuries more than women in the public sphere. Globally, women are just entering their first century of active participation in politics. Men are still more of a political animal than women.

At times they look better after another. They are better at accepting a given reality and following a decision. On the other hand, men feel the dualism of a capable woman who cannot rely on peers as men often do. In many cases, women fail to lobby for women. Maybe inside themselves, many women see in another woman a fiercer competitor than in a man.

*Why do women often fail to be more effective in this regard?*

Maybe our negotiation skills, taken as a global average, aren't that mature yet. Women may negotiate effectively up to a certain point, but then they may give up, because of missing self-confidence and lack of peer support. They might be afraid to lose everything. Women have a good perception of alternatives - and lack thereof. This might hamper their determination in pursuing legitimate goals.

*Who is Grida Duma actually?*

I try to put my education to good use, for a good project, for a good cause. Time is too short to be superficial. I have a passion for moving things forward; I believe that one has to decide within oneself whether to build or to destroy. I try not to waste energy in whining about problems when solutions are within reach.

*Some years ago you won the prize as the best debater in the Civic Education Forum for Central and Eastern Europe. What is your recollection of that event?*

I still remember noticing one Russian student who had obviously made extensive use of the opportunity to read most of the texts we were debating about in their original languages. That reality made a lasting and powerful impression on me. Albanian students came from a closed system; all we had were our notes from the lessons, and most of the translations were inaccurate.

I simply could not believe that this Russian guy had the original texts of de Tocqueville, Machiavelli and Foucault right there, in his hand, right when we debated the question of power. On top of them, he had his hands full with contemporary authors and articles. At that time, I understood the extent to which we had been cut off from the rest of the world. Yet, that gave me more reason to try to catch up, to read as much as I could, mostly in English, even though I didn't master it fully at that time.

*Is the ability to debate something you learn or is it rather a gift?*

There is some natural inclination, and there's of course some effort in it. One can be a natural, yet if one doesn't build up one's capacities, all one can spit out are senseless words. On the other hand there are plenty of people who can be very charming speakers in the absence of cameras, away from live audiences and large crowds.

Still, in order to be a good public debater, you need to have a grasp and a clear head on the issue at hand. You have fractions of seconds to decide what to say and how to respond to the colleague on the other side of the table. You must have the needs of the audience in mind, and you need to follow a mental map that guides the debate towards the message you want to give.

If you have nothing to give to the audience, then it will quickly understand that what you're hurling at them are just a bunch of words. Overcoming an opponent

in a debate is not an end in itself; it's just a means to advance your cause.

*As a former Head of the Sociology Department at the Tirana University, what is your take on the ambitions of today's students?*

In my opinion, today's students show less patience, less trust and less optimism. Of course, the same phenomenon is visible in Western Europe, yet I rather selfishly maintain that our own burden of pessimism is heavier. Today's generation can't really count on meritocracy as an alternative. It is tougher for today's students to answer the question: "What should we study for?"

It's hard to argue that "knowledge makes a better person out of you", if they can't figure out what is "better". At times I try to use statistics to make my point. I argue that the ones who completed a university education have better chances in life. I always try to motivate them to attend my courses.

Yet, I sense a lack of genuine drive towards studying, towards reading. Of course, part of the blame lies with the professors. Often, students face inexperienced, untalented professors, who lack the qualifications to teach in a university.

*You were the Deputy Minister of European Integration for almost two years. How does it feel to have a woman boss? Do women manage to get along?*

Women can get along perfectly well in top positions. They can also totally fail to get along. It's a matter of choice; it's a matter of personality. It is not related to being a woman or a man.

*What was the most interesting moment in that position?*

The Ministry of European Integration was a goldmine in terms of information. It enabled me to get to know almost everything that was going on in the other ministries, and what is more, it helped me consider them from a European perspective. Few people know the real importance of that ministry. Its mandate was shaped in various ways according to the differing perspectives different people had on it.

The Ministry of European Integration has a unique role to play – co-ordination. Co-ordination in the Albanian or Balkan context, especially in our institutional culture, is a very hard job. Every minister tries to look after his or her turf; the ascendancy over one's sector is jealously protected, even though everybody knows that no sector can be covered by one ministry alone: things are

complicated, things are intertwined. In this context, I learned a lot during my term of office.

*Your son Darien is 9 years old now, and Ilir, your husband, is your life-time companion. How do you manage to find time for yourself, your family, and your work engagements?*

True, work takes its toll on my family time. At times I feel left out from it. Often I have to deal with this with an “I must”, and then I go on as I can. I think I may be quite a boring person for my family at times.

*What does your daily routine look like?*

It’s a typical day of an average person and average mother; just add it up to more and more work. I normally eat lunch in the office; seldom I can go out for a lunch. My working day rarely ends before 7 or 8 pm.

*You have published two books; you have run a whole university... is there some top achievement you’re aiming at?*

I try to do my best every day, for that day. I accept the fact that a human being is conditioned by one’s circumstances. We are conditioned and also shaped by our circumstances. Therefore all we can do is to carve a part of them in our favour.

I am conscious of the fact that only a part of our reality can be improved or changed. So I first try to deal with what I have within my reach. At the end of the day, I need to feel that I have done everything that could be done.

\\

## DAVA RUSTA

By Irena Shabani

Dava works as a nurse in the Lezha public hospital. She has worked there for years. By now she is used to getting laid off from time to time, because of the shifts of power from one party to the next. No professional motives were ever involved. Maybe it happens just because her ideas don't exactly match with those of the ones in power. She is quick to mention her concern right at the beginning, noting that Albania will enter the path to progress only when professionals are not fired every time the country holds new elections. That's because Albania badly needs professionals, regardless of their party affiliation.

Dava Rusta is a strong, straightforward woman. She says she has had to suffer the consequences thereof. She doesn't want to change though. Many people want to be free because they miss freedom, but Dava cherishes the freedom she has in herself. She doesn't hesitate to speak out about what she thinks, and her truths are of the kind that make you think for a while. She doesn't speak the words of a politician; her language is plain, spoken out in the language of a person who is never out of touch with the people. "If you want to take a walk with me across Lezha, you will need more than two hours, even though it takes just five minutes to cross if from one corner to the other", she says.

*How did you engage in politics? What were your challenges, your supporters, and your opponents?*

I engaged somehow unconsciously in politics. I used to support the Socialist Party, and I always will. At the outset, I helped with the organisation of political campaigns, and then I became an election commissioner. In 2005 I was elected as the head of a party section. Later on I became the head of the SP women forum for the Lezha municipality, and then I was appointed party secretary. In 2011 I was elected as a municipal councillor. In 2012 I was elected in the SP national assembly. At present I am a municipal councillor for the Socialist Movement for Integration.

Maybe someone can consider that it was a mistake to pass from one party to another. All I can say is that it was a tough choice to make, because I am a convinced Socialist. My whole family is Socialist, to the point that we jokingly claim that even our cats' DNA tests would reveal they're Socialist cats.

The decision to pass over to SMI came as a result of my frustration with the actions of my party leader regarding the selection of the candidates who would stand for the elections in Lezha. I expressed my opinion in a face to face discussion with Chair Rama.

I told him that in my opinion it was not right to import candidates from outside, because Lezha has plenty of capable young persons, who have contributed to their town. You are aware how the elections turned out in Lezha for the SP. Lezha has always given the right answer to every party.

I am a bit fanatic about politics. I love the SP, I just want to see in it only honest and open people. I don't want to see in the SP those who come in only to reap the fruits of the victory. I appreciate only those who have sown the seed of victory, who have watered the tree of victory. I am a realist too. I know that if you are straightforward in politics, you will have to pay for it, but I am ready to do it. I might behave differently if I wanted, but I don't want to.

I don't want to play games with people; I know that those who play games just play themselves out at the end. Maybe the political climate in Albania is not favourable yet, but I am convinced that Albania will enter into the path of progress when the position of the Prime Minister is taken by a woman.

*How do you see the environmental situation in Albania? What should change?*

Starting from Lezha, I wouldn't say the situation is normal, yet I can still see that steps are taken in the right direction. Lezha implemented a pilot project aimed at changing people's attitudes towards the environment and at providing some external improvements.

Albania doesn't have a long-term environmental plan that would remain in force regardless of who is in power. Those who take control tend to start from scratch, by destroying what is left by those who were in power.

Property relations are very much controlled by power relationships. What frightens me is the fact that we tend to give our resources away. The historical Lezha castle would generate sufficient income for most of the Lezha people, if we invested there wisely and sufficiently.

Our cities, in general, don't look like they are in a good shape. It just takes a glimpse from the air to find out how poorly planned and designed Albanian towns are. One needs to be a bit of a patriot, in order to be able to worry about

the environmental situation in one's country. We still need to learn how to be patriotic in this regard. This is how we'll learn how to preserve our environment, so as not to offer it to the best bidder.

*What is your take on gender equality? Who are the supporters of the cause, who are the opponents?*

Women make the tougher opponents to the cause. I know it, as a woman with a long political career. When I took office as the head of the women's forum, I started out with only 12 members in my organization. At the end, I had over 280. As the forum's leader I told the women I wanted each of them to feel as a leader, but the hierarchy recognises only one chairperson. When the time was ripe for me to resign, I acted accordingly; yet, at that time, I had to learn that in Albania resignation is perceived as an act of weakness, not as a message of humility.

*To me, it does not make sense to be a woman who is not supportive of other women.*

In this regard I have to say this: if I had not participated in the OSCE Presence training on women in politics, I would have abandoned politics altogether, because I would not have been able to figure out what the side conditions were that affect women's participation.

Unluckily, we lack people who sincerely engage in their work. Therefore I insist on the importance of professionals. Many leaders use women politically. The "quota women" are often forced to say what the leaders put in their mouths. Those who don't agree to do it are cut off.

*Where will Albania be in the next four years? What are the challenges, the weaknesses, and the strengths?*

We are bound to remain hopeful. Recently I was involved in an IDRA project, so I'll give to you the response a young man gave to me when I interviewed him. I asked him about the future, and he told me: "It can only get better; it can't get worse!" So I learned that we've reached the bottom. I consider a major challenge for Albania to get a woman as a Prime Minister. We should have an open-list electoral system, in which parties propose names, which are freely voted by the people. That would make a good start.

We don't need those who buy their way into the Parliament as our representatives. A good politician is not a good public speaker. A good politician is a person

who sees the right way to do things. Albania has plenty of challenges ahead. We suffered from the global crisis. At the international level, not everyone is Albania's friend. At times, I think we have been already sold out, and we know nothing about it.

Once I was talking to an old man, who told me that we Albanians sell ourselves out very cheaply. I don't want to believe this, but maybe it's true. We need to unify all sides of the political spectrum, towards a greater goal. Political organisations are not warring parties, we should debate about ideas, and we should be able to honour the best idea. This doesn't mean we should shoot the looser. One should shake hands with the opponent at the end of the contest, rather than swear that one's hatred against him will be perpetual.

I happened to visit a village close to Lezha once. The village's name is Malecaj. I wondered how far that village was from what we consider civilization. People were extremely poor, they had no potable water, and they washed their laundry by hand. I asked them how they considered their living conditions, and they responded that they considered them as average. I think we should work hard to make people understand at least what extreme poverty is.

*What issues lie closer to your heart in the political and social dimension?*

The cause of gender equality lies very close to my heart. This is the reason why I engaged in politics. Women are heavily discriminated against. Maybe much of the discrimination is self-discrimination, deeply entrenched in us.

In Albania you still happen to see that when a baby boy is born, the family celebrates, and when a girl child is born, there is no such celebration. I am a free person; to me there exist two sorts of freedoms: the freedom to feel free, that is, to be a free person, and the freedom to do the things I like. I want women to be free. I have suffered gender-based prejudice since I was in high school. My own mother wanted me to be always escorted by my little brother. I felt so humiliated by her lack of trust in me. Now I understand her as being deeply conditioned by tradition.

But I don't want that tradition to persist. Women have to start out by looking deep into themselves in order to be able to change things. There's no reason why women should have a 30% quota in the party lists. 50% would be fairer.

*Who is the woman or man who particularly inspires you?*

On the women's side, I am inspired by Hillary Clinton and Angela Merkel. Yet in Merkel I would like to see more of a woman, as far as her outer appearance is concerned. I saw something fragile, feminine, in Eglantina Gjermeni. I also appreciate Ermelinda Meksi for what she stands for, for her capacities. I would like to see her in the position of Prime Minister.

I think men tend to look at things from a certain distance; women see things in their vicinity and are quick to understand. Maybe this understanding of the tough environment somehow causes capable women to stay away from active politics.

On the men's side I like Pandeli Majko's way of doing politics. He is not aggressive; he's not tough, not resentful. He was a very proper Prime Minister. Another man I really appreciate is my father-in-law. He is a great friend to me. He supported me with everything he could, a real gentleman. I got engaged when I was only 18. My family was a bit afraid I would be locked at home and fail to go to university. My father-in-law insisted upon me getting a university education.

If I happen to come home late and my husband asks me where I've been, my father-in-law responds: "She had things to do". One is lucky to have such persons close to oneself.

## SOSE ÇALLPANI

By Rezarta Delisula

Sose Çallpani is the sort of woman who never lets another person to do her own job. She works even harder just to show what she's capable of. She received plenty of men's elbows in her political career, yet she never gave up. She always started anew, and she managed to do something that was unheard of in Tropoja: she established the Party for Democracy, Integration and Unity (PDIU), the Çam party, in Tropoja, winning over 1,600 new members. She is the mother of three daughters and one son. Sose is full of energy. She never stops working. She thinks women have to stick together to get what they deserve.

*What does it mean to lead the PDIU in Tropoja?*

I am the PDIU leader for Tropoja. This party is otherwise known as the Çam Party. I am not new to politics. I am in it for over 24 years. I was one of the founding members of the Democratic Party of Tropoja; I was the head of the DP women's forum for the Tropoja District, a member of the DP chairmanship, a member of the municipal council. At the very moment I felt there had been irregularities in the party, and my contribution wasn't recognized, I moved to the PDIU, ran as a candidate for the municipal council, and made out of PDIU the second largest party in the town.

*How did you get involved in politics?*

I belong to the community of the formerly politically persecuted persons. My uncle, Ibrahim Zherka, spent 10 years in prison on political charges. He then escaped and went to the U.S. This came to a great cost for my family. When Communism collapsed, I felt bound to join the Democratic Party. I was one of the strongest activists for the DP.

*Did your family resent your engagement in politics?*

I was always supported by my family. My husband was always on my side; he supported - and supports - my decisions. Same goes for my children. As they grew older, they supported me more and more. They are a strong pillar for my political career.

*Does your husband engage in politics?*

He adheres to my party. But he never held any elected position in the party structures.

*You left the Democratic Party after 24 years of direct contribution. Was this decision related to the elbows received from your male colleagues?*

Yes, it was. Not only in Tropoja. Women are bypassed in politics throughout Albania. To be honest, men are not really eager to leave to women the functions they want for themselves. It is possible to counter this trend. If you work hard, if you show resilience, you will be successful. When I took charge of the DP women's forum it had only three members. When I left, they were 250. The PDIU had no members at all, as there are no Çams in Tropoja. Now, this party has over 1,600 members.

*Do parties support women's participation in politics?*

They don't. If they had actually supported it, we would have more women in politics. The 30% quota is not fulfilled in the Assembly. Some women who got elected had to relinquish their mandates, so that they could be replaced by men. Thanks to the external assistance of the OSCE Presence that supported women in politics we feel more united and support each-other.

*Do you participate in any women's organization?*

I am a member of the task-force for women in politics. There are forty of us all over Albania. This was supported by the OSCE Presence, to which I extend my gratitude for what it did to make us feel more confident. A woman can be a good mother, a good spouse, a good economist, so why can't she be a great leader? We see this happening right now. If women are leading, things get better.

*Yet men always claim: Isn't it hard to have a female boss?*

A woman is very correct. She is demanding, she wants to get the job done. That's why they don't want women bosses. Women can be very powerful, you know.

*What if they would try to get you out of politics?*

They have tried to make me quit, but I never backed down from politics. I was successful, and I will continue to be successful. I was a good administrator. I was the director of the power distribution company in my district, and the head of ALUIZNI in Tirana. I have worked perfectly well with people of different backgrounds; I maintain I was able to earn their respect. The key to earning respect as a public administrator is to judge people by their merits, not by their political colours.

*What do you expect from the 2015 local elections?*

I see problems related to women's representation. They can be solved only if the law forces the parties to have a woman as one of every three candidates. Women have to be included in a fair manner in the party lists. This is the only way to achieve a substantial change. But it will be tough. They will not let us do it.

*What can be done?*

In the parliament there is the Women's Alliance led by Mesila Doda. I hope and believe we will have their support. A good way to show support is to pass a law that favours women's representation in politics. I insist on having one woman among every three candidates. This will enable more women to get elected in the local structures of power and in the parliament.

*Do you have a male deputy in the Tropoja PDIU?*

No. I decided to have a woman as my number two. She is Zyra Tahiraj. Both of us are members of the municipal council. The PDIU has in total eight municipal council members in the Tropoja district. There will be more of us after the next local elections.

*Do you have any particular women leader as a personal inspiration?*

At the outset of the democratic change, there were many such leaders, such as Jozefina Topalli, a really lofty, iron lady, who never gave up and gave much to the DP. Also Mesila Doda. I also appreciate women of the left wing, such as Monika Kryemadhi. She manages to get things done wherever she intervenes.

*Do you feel any prejudice from the male party colleagues?*

At the beginning of my political career this was the rule rather than the exception. In Tropoja people were really conservative. They could not understand a woman who would show up in public with some political aim. Yet I never backed down. I was always out there, shoulder to shoulder with Azem Hajdari, Doktor Berisha... because I felt I had to.

I faced a lot of trouble though. For 18 years in a row, I was the only female member of the DP chairmanship in Tropoja. When I was elected as the chair of the women's forum, that number went up to five. The number of female party members went up to 250. If you get more women to participate in politics, they make more successful politicians.

*By now you can be easily considered as a veteran in politics. Is there any message you want to share with other women who might wish to engage in politics, but can't still make up their minds?*

Never be afraid. Do engage in politics, you've got a chance. Do accept to start out small, as a simple member, and then try to go up the ladder. You are able to succeed, if you feel it's within you.

*Have you often faced tricky situations?*

Yes, I have. I have managed to overcome them. You know the example: at the very moment I saw my credentials in danger in my party, I quit it, and I made the PDIU the second political force in Tropoja.

*Are men jealous?*

Sure they are. They want to keep their career for themselves.

*Do you think this is an inherited mentality?*

Yes, but things have started to change. When I ran as a candidate for the municipal council for the PDIU, other women started to come out as candidates for the other parties. Today in Tropoja, out of 15 municipal councillors, seven are women.

*Do you engage in cross-party cooperation with other women?*

We cooperate with each other. There is mutual respect and openness between us.

*Did your children have to hear any malicious comment regarding your political engagement?*

Not really. I was elected as the chair of the school board, in the high school and in the elementary school.

*What is your view on the recent political developments?*

I don't see things going in the right direction. If a party is ousted from power, its supporters are fired. This sort of thing ought not to happen anymore. I have been the director of a public institution for many years, but I have never fired anyone because of political reasons. This country badly needs professionals. No one should be persecuted because of his or her political affiliation.

## **MAJLINDA BUFI**

By Gjergj Erebara

**Majlinda Bufi was elected as a parliamentarian from the candidates' lists of the Socialist Party, even though she would prefer direct competition in her constituency, regardless of whether her opponents are men or women. She has led the Socialist Party of the town of Roskovec for over ten years. Majlinda attributes part of her success to the support of her husband. To her, the increase of women's participation in politics is a top issue. For her, Albania has a long way ahead in terms of "changing the attitudes" related to gender equality.**

*What is your view on Albania's political environment?*

We have a lot to catch up, from the gender perspective. We politicians have to change ourselves in terms of approaches and attitudes in the first place. The way of doing politics has to change. When discussing participation of women and men in politics we don't discuss only gender equality. Politics ought to be based on principles, regardless of whether the politicians are women or men. Yet this is not the case today. People are still prejudiced against women politicians.

*What is your take on the gender quota? Would you prefer to earn your seat in the parliament by competition, not through a guaranteed quota?*

Personally I would support direct competition. Women ought to compete, with each other or with men, based on their own capacities, not based on a legal entitlement to a guaranteed quota. It doesn't make sense to me to favour a woman only because she's a woman, or only because a certain quota needs to be filled.

Yet, in the Albanian reality, still characterized by a patriarchal mentality, still full of prejudice against women, the quota is to be seen as a temporary positive discrimination, which shall apply until we have effectively removed the prejudices.

*What made a lasting impression on you recently?*

In terms of important decisions that captured my attention, I would single out the territorial reform. The necessity of reform has been stressed by the majority

and by the opposition. The opposition wanted reform, even though it did not come on board because of its own reasons.

From my point of view as a member of the ruling majority, I have my own question marks, yet I maintain territorial reform has a crucial importance for the country.

Of course, territorial reform is not sufficient per se. This is only a first step. More steps have to follow, related to decentralization, taxes, and local government functions. I believe that upon the completion of the first steps, more steps will be taken, aiming at decentralizing functions and competencies.

*How did you engage in politics?*

It was not just a coincidence. I started to engage in local politics back in 1997. At that time we had national elections, and that was when I entered politics for the first time. First, I served in the municipal council, then as I served as a local party leader, for over ten years.

*What gave to you the impetus to enter politics?*

It all came to pass naturally. Politics is like that: once you get into it, it gets into you.

*What are the biggest challenges you have faced in your political career?*

I had to face lots of challenges. I competed in primaries several times. I ran for the chair of the party in the so called District Council, and I also ran in the one member-one vote elections. I always faced men in those elections and I always won. My biggest challenge was the last national elections. We competed though party lists, yet we were assigned constituencies on which we had full responsibility. It looked quite similar to a majoritarian system. I was in charge of an area comprising five local government units.

All the heads of the local governments were right-wing, so I had to face them in the field. Of course, I had the unconditional support of my party colleagues, yet I can frankly say I was fully in charge of the overall co-ordination. We had a great result.

You can see it in the overall national election results. In the Fier district, the Roskovec area had one of the best results for the Socialist Party.

*Who was your greatest supporter in your political career?*

My husband. No one can make it without a bit of support. This doesn't apply to politics only. It applies to everything in life. Getting support is crucial to every sort of career. My husband is one of the persons who supported me the most and that wasn't only moral support.

Yet moral support is important. It gives you strength and optimism when you're down, when you feel tired, when you feel insulted and overwhelmed from countless meetings and debates with men only. I attended many meetings in which I was the only woman in the room. Of course one needs support in certain moments. It's also because of my husband that I am here today. I owe a lot to his support and to his presence.

*Who was your toughest opponent?*

I had quite a few tough opponents, running against me inside the party, both women and men.

*What is your take on Albania's development in the next four years?*

The economy is a challenge for the government and for the Albanian society. It's undeniable that the largest cross-section of the Albanian society is in trouble. All economic indicators point towards that fact. I believe that the measures and reforms undertaken by this government by the end of its first mandate, that is, in three years' time, will manage to bring the growth back. We have to grow again.

*What are in your opinion Albania's biggest advantages?*

Albania and the Albanian society have a lot to offer, but we need to be aware of how we can put our advantages to good use. Our country has plenty of untouched natural resources. Suffice to mention tourism, that's one of the directions in which Albania is sure it can perform better.

Our politics has to show sufficient maturity, so as to allow these resources to be tapped. That would help us bring out the best of Albania.

*What are Albania's main challenges in the way ahead?*

Generally speaking, economic growth. We have to get the economy running. Albania's European Union integration is the next step. We need to follow up on the candidate status by opening the real negotiations. The reforms to be undertaken in this context are another important challenge to the whole of the Albanian society.

*Somehow we have got used to seeing EU integration as the very first, and at the same time, the ultimate objective for Albania. How come you rank it at number two?*

Everything is inter-connected. I see things from the point of view of the Albanian society and from my personal point of view as an economist. There can be no integration into the EU if we are not able to grow, if our well-being is not improved.

*What do you think about gender equality in Albania?*

We know the numbers that speak about the situation of gender equality in Albania all too well. There is obviously a lot to do. I don't want to speak here about extreme or "soft" cases of discrimination. I believe a wholesome change of attitude is what we need. All of the gender-related problems are rooted in the patriarchal mentality of the Albanian society.

Again, if we refer to the government statistics, it's plain to see that most of the jobs are held by women, yet the closer you go to the top, the fewer women you'll find. The whole decision-making in the political organizations and in the executive structures is a male business.

The lack of equality comes as a result of an entrenched mentality. It's the duty of the government, but also of us women in the first place, of all those who hold some position of power, to come together and do something to change all this. This is not a task that pertains to women in politics only. It should be taken over from women in the civil society as well. All women should speak in one unified, clear and strong voice.

*What are the policies you pay more attention to?*

Gender equality is one the issues I have been engaging the most. I feel it close to my heart, not only because I'm a woman, but because I believe this is one of the

issues I have been contributing to most of the time. I would like to continue this contribution, and to further it towards changing mentalities. This is especially important in rural areas. We can't be democratic only in urban areas. Change starts in the fields, where the extreme cases happen more often, because of that entrenched mentality I mentioned before.

*Who are the women who inspired you?*

Madeleine Albright is one of my inspirations. I admired her when she was in her best moments, at the very top of her political career. She was a strong woman, who was able to take the right decisions in the right moments.

What would be your piece of advice for a young woman wishing to enter politics?

It's the right time for all young women and men to get involved, so as to flood politics with young blood. This is the only way to bring a new wave into politics in Albania.

## MIMOZA ARAPI

By Rezarta Delisula

She is a native of Konispol, a town of over 4,000 inhabitants. Her father used to represent her townspeople in the Parliament before the nineties. In 2011 Mimoza Arapi was elected Mayor.

Mimoza Arapi proudly reports that her hometown was never depopulated as was the case with most of the remote border areas in Albania. On the contrary, her town has grown. Konispol boasts a rich history. According to Mimoza Arapi, it is a cultivated place; women are well respected and recognized as leaders. She wants to pay back her townspeople for the trust they have in her.

*Ms Arapi, you lead the Konispol Municipality, Albania's most southern point. How do you feel about this?*

Thank you for the opportunity you gave me to speak about Konispol, southern Albania's end point. Konispol is the first Albanian town you come across when you enter Albania from Greece. In a way, my town is Albania's business card. I feel proud about it; I love this place, above all because of the qualities of its people. I feel very committed to my role as the mayor.

*Do you face any male prejudice as a woman leading the place?*

It's actually the first time ever that Konispol is led by a woman. I really appreciate the opportunity given to me by the Socialist Party and by its leader. I think my commitment to my townspeople, my communication, my affinity to them made them vote for a woman, a fellow citizen. At the end it was their choice, and I feel very good about the fact that they trusted a woman to lead them. I will do my best to pay them back.

*What was your life like before you became a public personality?*

I graduated with a degree in History and Geography in 1990. I taught for 21 years at the Konispol high school. I always cherished being a teacher. I was a municipal councillor for the Socialist Party of Albania, and then I was elected Chair of the Council. Now I am the mayor.

*How did you get involved in politics?*

It would be wrong to say that during the transition to democracy, most people stayed away from politics by abandoning political forces. At present, fewer people are interested to contribute in the political organization of the community as they did back then.

I immediately felt good as a part of the Socialist Party. It has a simple, easy-to-grasp program. I was influenced by my family as well. Things are strongly interconnected. I believed the Socialist Party was closer to the people, so I joined it, first as a supporter, then as a member.

*How did your spouse react to you entering politics? We know plenty of Albanian men are a bit conservative, especially in small towns.*

I don't rule out cases of resistance of men towards their spouses' wish to enter politics. Of course I am a lucky case, for several reasons. The family is the stem cell of the society, so I tried to give my best to my children, to my spouse and to get from them a lot of support in return. If I were to say that my current position came as a result of my efforts alone, I would be greatly wrong.

No woman, no man, can do it alone, if the family is not consolidated. If you've got problems inside your family, you cannot be successful in public, and you've got no morals to work for others. In this regard I consider myself very lucky. Artan is not just my spouse; he is my friend... the closest one. I am happy to share my achievements, my concerns, my worries with him.

*Is it hard to be a woman in politics?*

Albanian politics is loaded with tension. In a way it is still a male monopoly. Not all the evils of the world are located in the male mentality though. Women have to support each other to move forward. I don't claim to be a women's rights activist. I don't mean to say that the world should belong to women only. I want to see capable women move forward, so that they can contribute to the society, so that they can serve society.

We have very good women professionals in many fields; they should support each other, so that we have more of them challenging a society which still denies to women their chance to advance.

*Are women jealous of each other?*

I can't say they aren't.

*What was your experience with political work so far?*

I received good words of support from people who believed in me, and maybe that was conditioned by my own way of communicating with people. I try to be as simple and as down-to-earth as I can. I feel with the people, and try to understand their problems, so that I can solve them. Of course, there are risks that await each person who chooses to be direct, yet this is the way I have chosen.

*Do you meet often with the party leaders in Tirana?*

I respect all SP structures, which are to be credited for seeing in me the person who would win for the party. The municipality of Konispol was lost by the SP in the previous elections. It wasn't easy to find the way back to victory, especially for a woman, yet I am very happy they trusted in me, and I was able to pay them back by working hard.

*I owe them a great deal for the trust they had in me, on the other hand I feel a greater obligation towards my townspeople.*

In order to strike a good balance between party affiliation and public duty, I need to go to great lengths in both directions, by trying to stick to the party program on the one hand, and by trying not to be overly political, on the other, so that I can accommodate those who have a different opinion.

*Which women colleagues are the most supportive to you?*

The Socialist Party has a lot of women personalities, who have supported the party from different angles. They have personally contributed to consolidate the party. Each of them represents a valid asset, and their different profiles help us get the best out of them.

*Is there any woman politician you like the most?*

Even though I don't want to say I want to follow her way, I always admired Margaret Thatcher, the Iron Lady.

*You are a mayor today. Do you intend to pursue further political goals? What if they offer you to become a minister?*

I have been very careful in laying out the blueprint of my political and professional career. If I were quick to say yes, I would consider it as a sort of euphoric approach. If I was offered another position, I would have to be very sincere to myself first, I would first have to ask myself whether I could do it or not.

*What is your dream about Konispol? What would you like to change in your hometown?*

As the mayor I want to implement in real terms the very simple program I drafted for the citizens. I feel lucky that my project to construct a new public square for my town was positively assessed by the government. Very soon we will have a city centre. In addition to that, I would like to solve the issue of the water supply for my town.

It is a difficult issue, because our area is not rich in water sources. We still have an interrupted water supply in Konispol – one day we have water, the next day we don't.

*What was the toughest day in your career?*

I had plenty of tough days. Things get tougher if, in addition to facing the people's problems the whole day through, we had to face the silence of today's opposition. Today we have to implement a program written by the people, for the people. One needs to be patient. Being patient is all about how you reflect on the time you spend waiting.

*What was your happiest day?*

That was the day when the project for the central square was finally approved.

*What does your administration look like?*

My philosophy is to have a small, functioning administration. I gave a chance to women who were able to demonstrate they could work better than men.



## **Closing Words**

It is my great pleasure to congratulate all the women whose stories you have read. Opportunities for women to actively participate in decision-making and be represented at all levels of decision-making are key aspects of democratic development. However, women face a number of obstacles, including gender stereotypes and prejudices against their aspirations to run as candidates, to “be politicians”. Women still grapple with limited access to party leaders and decision makers, challenging internal party dynamics, and last but not least the demands of family life.

Each of the women portrayed in this booklet has become an agent of change, with the view to increasing participation of women in politics in Albania. Some of them have been involved with politics for a long time; some became more recently involved while working closely with the National Platform for Women – a network established under the framework of the OSCE Presence’s “Women in Governance” project in 2010. While these women come from across the political spectrum and from civil society, they have one thing in common - they want a better tomorrow.

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

