

INTERIM REPORT
9 – 31 May 2017

2 June 2017

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- A three month standoff between the Socialist Party (SP) led government and the Democratic Party (DP) led opposition, culminating in the DP's refusal to participate in the parliamentary elections unless certain conditions were fulfilled, ended on 18 May with a political agreement reached between the leaders of the two parties. The Agreement secured the participation of the opposition in the elections and allowed the DP to appoint several key government positions. It also postponed the previously set election date by one week to 25 June.
- Discussions to amend the electoral legal framework following the last elections stalled due to the political stalemate. The Agreement, however, introduced several late changes, including in respect of the campaign, campaign finance, media, and electoral crimes. These changes have been criticized by several OSCE/ODIHR EOM interlocutors for their late adoption, inconsistency with the Electoral Code, and lack of prior consultation, resulting in legal and practical challenges for authorities and contestants.
- As of 30 May, 18 political parties will contest the elections, including the DP and the Republican Party (RP), which registered after the Agreement. The Central Election Commission (CEC) fined two political parties for not meeting the gender quota requirements in their candidate lists.
- The elections are administered by a three-tiered administration comprising the CEC, 90 Commissions of Electoral Administration Zones (CEAZs), and 5,362 Voting Centre Commissions. Counting will be conducted in 90 Ballot Counting Centres. Commission membership is based on political nominations. Eligible opposition parties initially declined to nominate CEAZ members, resulting in the CEC appointing members directly, in line with the law. On 31 May, following the Agreement, the CEC dismissed its appointees and filled the vacant seats with nominees from the DP.
- Since the Agreement, the CEC has had to operate in exceptional circumstances, facing complex legal, institutional, and financial challenges, including the expedited drafting of regulations to clarify new aspects of the electoral process. On 22 May, as a result of the Agreement, the parliament replaced the CEC chairperson, bypassing legally prescribed procedures. Despite these challenges, the CEC has continued to meet and publish its decisions regularly.
- Voter lists are available for public scrutiny. Following the Agreement, new lists were printed to reflect voters who will turn 18 by the new election day. There are no provisions for voting abroad or via mobile ballot box. As of 24 May, the total number of registered voters was 3,452,308.
- Some political parties have held campaign meetings with voters, including before the start of the official campaign. Substantial legislative changes were adopted after the Agreement, with a view to reduce the cost of electoral campaigns and strengthen campaign finance oversight. Such provisions have not yet been clarified by the CEC.
- The media environment is lively but widely perceived to be politically aligned. The latest legal amendments obliged private broadcasters to provide free airtime to all contestants and also prohibited paid political advertising, which contradict provisions of the Electoral Code, as publicly noted by several private media outlets.

II. INTRODUCTION

Following an invitation from the Government of the Republic of Albania, and based on the recommendation of a Needs Assessment Mission conducted from 6 to 9 March 2017, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) established an Election Observation Mission (EOM) on 9 May.¹ The EOM, headed by Ambassador Peter Tejler, consists of a 13-member core team based in Tirana and 26 long-term observers deployed on 19 May to 12 locations around the country. Mission members are drawn from 23 OSCE participating States. Participating States have been requested to second 300 short-term observers to observe election day procedures.

III. BACKGROUND AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

The 2013 parliamentary elections resulted in a majority of seats for a coalition led by the Socialist Party (SP). This brought about a peaceful transition of power from the previous government, led by the Democratic Party (DP).²

The European Union (EU) accession process has required co-operation between the government and the opposition in several key areas in order to adopt legislation, including on judicial reform, on preventing people with criminal convictions from holding public offices, as well as on electoral reform.³ Despite entrenched and ongoing acrimony between the SP and the DP, the Law on Guaranteeing the Integrity of Persons Elected, Appointed or Exercising Public Functions (commonly referred to as the ‘Law on Decriminalization’) was successfully adopted by parliament in December 2015. The principles of judicial reform, including on vetting of all sitting judges and prosecutors were also agreed upon in 2016.⁴ However, co-operation stalled when the opposition challenged the Vetting Law in the Constitutional Court, which subsequently upheld most of its provisions in January 2017. The ensuing political standoff brought electoral reform discussions to a standstill.

On 5 December 2016, the president called the parliamentary elections for 18 June 2017. On 7 February 2017, the DP started a boycott of the parliament, alleging that the government was involved in multiple criminal activities and was preparing widespread electoral fraud. The DP claimed that credible elections could not be held under existing conditions, and announced it would not participate in the elections unless several demands were met. These included the resignation of the prime minister, the formation of a technical government, and the use of electronic voting. The SP-led government rejected these demands and claimed that the DP did not want to participate in elections due to their lack of popular support.

Since February, several attempts at international mediation have taken place, with both sides holding firm on their positions. As a result, opposition parties did not register for the elections by the 9 April deadline.⁵ With all registration deadlines having expired, and the CEC having decided on the content of the ballot paper, a large DP-led demonstration took place in Tirana on 13 May, reasserting the party’s call for the acceptance of its conditions in return for its participation in the elections.

The deadlock ended on 18 May with a political agreement (the Agreement) reached between the leaders of the SP and the DP. The Agreement secures the participation of the DP and stipulates that the DP

¹ See [all previous OSCE/ODIHR reports on Albania](#).

² Results of the 2013 parliamentary elections: “Alliance for European Albania” 83 seats: Socialist Party of Albania (SP) – 65; Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI) – 16; Human Rights Union Party (HRUP) – 1; Christian Democrat Party (CDP) – 1. “Alliance for Employment, Prosperity and Integration” 57 seats: Democratic Party of Albania (DP) – 50; Republican Party of Albania (RP) – 3; Party for Justice, Integration, and Unity (PJIU) – 4.

³ Albania applied for EU membership on 28 April 2009 and became a candidate country in June 2014.

⁴ Resulting in constitutional amendments in July 2016 and the Law “On Transitional Re-evaluation of Judges and Prosecutors” (“the Vetting Law”) in August 2016.

⁵ The Agrarian Environmental Party (AEP), which was part of the parliamentary opposition, applied for participation, but did not submit candidate lists.

appoint several key government positions, including one deputy prime minister, six ministers, the chairperson of the Central Election Commission (CEC), and the Ombudsperson. The Agreement also foresaw the postponement of the elections to 25 June as well as extension of party and candidate registration deadlines to 26 May.⁶

The Agreement was widely welcomed by key political figures, as well as by the international community, although some raised questions about its impact on the electoral chances of smaller political parties, as it does not foresee the formation of pre-electoral coalitions.⁷

IV. LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Parliamentary elections are regulated by the 1998 Constitution, the 2008 Electoral Code, and other legislation.⁸ Primary legislation is supplemented by CEC decisions and instructions. Albania is party to international and regional instruments relevant to the holding of democratic elections.⁹

Prior to these elections, amendments to electoral legislation to address the most recent OSCE/ODIHR recommendations were discussed in an ad hoc parliamentary committee but the process was stymied due to political stalemate. Following the Agreement, the president's decree calling the elections was amended on 21 May to change the election date to 25 June and parliament adopted amendments on 22 May to the Law on Political Parties, the Law on Audio-visual Media, and the Criminal Code.¹⁰ No amendments were made to the Electoral Code.

These amendments introduced new requirements to campaigning and campaign financing, to campaign advertising in broadcasting media, increased sanctions for existing electoral offences, and established new electoral crimes.¹¹ Amendments to the legislation have been criticized by several OSCE/ODIHR EOM interlocutors for inconsistency with the Electoral Code and lack of prior consultation.¹² Adopted a little over a month before the elections, these changes have also brought about legal and practical challenges for the authorities and contestants.

The parliament's 140 members will be elected for a four-year term through a closed list proportional representation system in multi-member districts that correspond to administrative regions. Based on the population data from the Ministry of Interior, on 3 December 2016, the CEC allocated the number of seats for each district, ranging from 3 in Kukes to 34 in Tirana – a decision approved by the parliament.¹³ To qualify for seat allocation, parties must surpass a three per cent threshold of votes cast in the respective district (five per cent for coalitions).

V. ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

The elections are administered by a three-tiered election administration: the CEC, 90 Commissions of the Electoral Administration Zones (CEAZs), and 5,362 Voting Centre Commissions (VCCs). Counting will

⁶ The [Agreement](#) also includes continuation of the process of judicial and electoral reform, introduction of electronic voting techniques for the next legislative period, and institutionalization of dialogue between the two party leaders.

⁷ See, for example, the 21 May [statement](#) of President Bujar Nishani that he "...appreciates this agreement as an important achievement in the interest of the Albanian nation and its people".

⁸ Including the 2000 Law on Political Parties, 2001 Law on Demonstrations, 2013 Law on Audio-visual Media, 2015 Law on Decriminalization, 2008 Law on Gender Equality in Society, and relevant provisions of the Criminal Code.

⁹ Including the European Convention on Human Rights, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, UN Convention against Corruption, and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

¹⁰ Authorities highlighted that some amendments reflected the work of the parliamentary committee on electoral reform.

¹¹ New criminal offenses include abuse of public function for electoral activities, unauthorized use of identification documents, and more detailed prohibitions on vote-buying and vote-selling.

¹² Under the Constitution, codes are adopted by a qualified majority of votes and ordinary laws by a simple majority.

¹³ The parliament approved the allocation of the seats on 20 April 2017, some five weeks after the legal deadline.

be conducted by Counting Teams (CTs) in 90 Ballot Counting Centres (BCCs) established in 90 Electoral Administration Zones (EAZs).

The CEC is a permanent body responsible for the overall conduct of the elections. All seven members, including two women, are appointed by the parliament. Three members are proposed by the parliamentary majority and three by the parliamentary opposition. According to the law, the chairperson is appointed by the parliament through an open application process.¹⁴ On 22 May, following the Agreement, the parliament assented to a DP proposal to replace the CEC chairperson with another CEC member, bypassing the legally prescribed procedures.

Since the Agreement, the CEC had to operate in exceptional circumstances, facing a complex set of legal, institutional, and financial challenges, with time constraints being an added burden. The CEC had to draft a number of new regulations for the monitoring of campaign finance, to clarify new campaign regulations, and to adopt party and candidate registration decisions without a legal basis. Despite these challenges, the CEC has continued to meet and publish its decisions regularly. The CEC informed the OSCE/ODIHR EOM that it plans to request additional funding from the government to ensure it has adequate resources to fulfil the new tasks and responsibilities.

The CEAZs are composed of seven members, nominated by the parliamentary majority and opposition.¹⁵ At least 30 per cent of the CEAZ members proposed by the largest majority and opposition parties must be women. Eligible opposition parties declined to nominate CEAZ members within the initial deadline. Therefore, in line with the law, the CEC solicited applications from eligible citizens. Two weeks after the deadline, the CEC formed CEAZs each with only four members and a secretary.¹⁶ On 31 May, following the Agreement, the CEC dismissed its appointees and filled 252 vacant seats with nominees from the DP. Earlier a few CEAZ members and secretaries have been replaced, mostly due to requests of nominating parties.¹⁷ The VCCs are also composed of seven members and are to be appointed by the CEAZs by 5 June according to a similar formula as for the CEAZs.

Due to the political deadlock and change of election date, the CEC only launched its voter information campaign on 26 May. It continues to implement various voter information initiatives to enhance the participation of women, national minorities, persons with disabilities, and first-time voters.

VI. VOTER REGISTRATION

Albanian citizens aged 18 years or older on election day are eligible to vote. Suffrage rights have been revoked for citizens found mentally incompetent by a final court decision and those serving a prison sentence for committing certain crimes.¹⁸

The voter registration system is passive; however, voters over 100 years of age are automatically removed from voter lists and must confirm their records for re-inclusion.¹⁹ Voter lists are based on extracts from

¹⁴ In November 2016, the former SP-nominated CEC deputy chairperson was elected chairperson.

¹⁵ The nomination formula for CEAZ members mirrors that of the CEC, with the exception that in one half of CEAZs the chairperson is nominated by the largest majority party, and in the other half, by the largest opposition party. The deputy chairperson and the secretary belong to the main political party that is not chairing the respective CEAZ.

¹⁶ The Electoral Code foresees that if parties fail to propose their nominees, the CEC appoints CEAZ members upon its initiative. Thus, all CEAZs had three persons (CEAZ members and/or secretaries) from the SP, one – from the SMI, and one – CEC appointee. The quorum for CEAZs to meet and adopt decisions is four out of seven members.

¹⁷ Despite a long-standing OSCE/ODIHR recommendation, parties are entitled to recall their nominees from the CEAZs at any time at their own discretion.

¹⁸ The Law on Decriminalization introduced restrictions on voting rights of citizens serving a prison sentence for committing crimes listed in some 50 articles of the Criminal Code. The OSCE/ODIHR EOM was informed that voting rights were thus suspended for 1,371 persons.

¹⁹ According to the GDCS, 1,480 voters over 100 years of age were removed from the voter register between December 2016 and 24 May 2017.

the electronic database of the National Civil Status Register, maintained by the General Directorate of Civil Status of the Ministry of Interior (GDSCS). Electoral contestants are provided with a copy of the voter list free of charge upon their request.

Any changes in citizens' status must be registered with local civil status offices. Corrections to voter records are possible up to 40 days before the elections. As of then, and up to 24 hours before election day, requests to correct voter lists can be made only through a district court. The GDSCS published updated extracts of voter lists on a monthly basis and voter lists are available for public scrutiny. Voters can also check their records online on the CEC website. Following the Agreement, new voter lists were compiled and printed to reflect voters who will turn 18 by the new election day. In January 2017, the CEC appointed two auditors to assess the accuracy of voter lists. Despite the fact that auditors noted some incorrect address data, no significant issues have been raised by OSCE/ODIHR EOM interlocutors.

Voters are included in the voter list of the polling stations serving their place of residence. They can only vote in person and there are no provisions for voting abroad, by mail or via mobile ballot box. Special polling stations can be organized in hospitals, prisons, and pre-trial detention centres. Voters residing abroad remain on voter lists according to their last registered address. As of 24 May, the total number of registered voters was 3,452,308.

VII. CANDIDATE NOMINATION AND REGISTRATION

Any eligible voter can stand for election, except those serving a prison sentence or with a prior conviction for specific crimes.²⁰ The Constitution also lists categories of officials whose activity is incompatible with the right to stand. Independent candidates can stand for elections through the nomination of groups of voters.²¹ Candidate lists can be submitted by political parties and coalitions of parties.²² Lists with the required supporting documents are verified by the CEC in line with the Electoral Code and Law on Decriminalization. Some OSCE/ODIHR EOM interlocutors have noted concerns regarding the consistency, timeliness, and quality of verification of candidates' criminal records and supporting signatures.²³

On 7 May, two days before the legal deadline, the CEC registered lists from 15 parties.²⁴ The following day, the CEC approved the content of the ballot paper, a decision perceived by some interlocutors as politicized since the CEC did not wait for possible appeals against registration. On 28 and 30 May, following the Agreement and far beyond the legal deadlines, the CEC additionally registered candidate lists from the RP, Albanian Demo-Christian League Party, and the DP.²⁵ At the same time, an independent candidate was denied registration due to late submission.²⁶ In total, 2,672 candidates were registered, 40 per cent of them women.

²⁰ According to the Law on Decriminalization, citizens convicted for certain crimes or deported, even in the absence of a final court decision, from an EU Member State, Australia, Canada, and the United States are barred to stand for election, as are those under an international search warrant.

²¹ Groups of voters should comprise at least nine voters and register with the CEC to collect signatures of one per cent of voters in the respective region (electoral zone), but no more than 3,000.

²² Parliamentary parties are not required to collect signatures. The candidate lists of non-parliamentary parties must be supported by 5,000 voter signatures nationwide.

²³ During the 7 May CEC session, the three opposition CEC members requested additional verification of supporting signatures for five parties. However, the four CEC majority members denied the request. Opposition members left the CEC session.

²⁴ Before the Agreement, the CEC received candidate lists from 17 political parties, two of which (the National Union of Albania and the Moderate Socialist Party) did not resubmit their lists after the CEC's requests for corrections.

²⁵ The parliament has not set new registration deadlines. According to the Electoral Code, after setting the new election date political parties should have been registered no later than 16 April and candidate lists - no later than 16 May.

²⁶ On 26 May, the CEC rejected an independent candidate who submitted supporting documents on 25 May, reasoning that he missed the deadline set by the Electoral Code.

A gender quota applies to each candidate list, which requires at least one woman and one man among the top three positions and at least 30 per cent of candidates of each gender. As of 30 May, the CEC imposed monetary sanctions of ALL 1 million (some EUR 7,400) against the SP and SMI lists, for not respecting the gender requirement in Berat and Tirana regions respectively.²⁷ The law does not require the CEC to deny registration if the quota is not respected.

VIII. CAMPAIGN ENVIRONMENT AND CAMPAIGN FINANCE

According to the Electoral Code, the official electoral campaign begins 30 days and ends 24 hours before election day. There are no sanctions for early campaigning. The OSCE/ODIHR EOM observed instances of early campaigning, both before and after the change of election date, including some posters and a number of election rallies.²⁸ The campaign has so far been low-key.²⁹

Campaigning in public institutions is prohibited. Resources of public bodies or entities cannot be used in campaigns and civil servants may not participate in political activities during office hours. On 12 May, the prime minister issued an executive order on the prohibition of use of public administration resources in electoral campaigns, reaffirming the legal provisions. Under the Agreement, the opposition was given top positions in ministries and public institutions as a safeguard against potential abuse of administrative resources.³⁰ Several OSCE/ODIHR EOM interlocutors voiced concern about potential vote-buying.

Amendments to the Law on Political Parties on 22 May introduced campaign restrictions not envisioned in the Electoral Code. Specifically, the amendments require the CEC to determine the types of activities, services, and materials that may be used in the campaign. In addition, placement of campaign materials is allowed only within five metres of campaign offices.

Public funds are allocated to parties for their regular activities under the Law on Political Parties, based on their results in the last parliamentary elections. Public campaign funding is also provided to all parties contesting the elections with a total budget allocated for these elections of ALL 65 million.³¹ Independent candidates are not entitled to public funding. Electoral contestants may receive donations from citizens or legal entities, take loans or use their own funds. No donation can exceed ALL 1 million, including the equivalent value for in-kind contributions. All contributions exceeding ALL 100,000 should be made through a designated bank account.

The Electoral Code establishes an equal spending limit for each political party contesting the election.³² However, according to the amendments to the Law on Political Parties of 22 May, the CEC is now required to determine a specific campaign expenditure limit for each political party.³³ The CEC is also tasked to develop detailed rules for monitoring electoral campaign expenditures of contestants, as well as guidelines for calculating the costs of campaign activities, services, and materials, and to appoint financial

²⁷ EUR 1 is approximately ALL 135 (Albanian *Lek*).

²⁸ Announcements inviting voters to a meeting on 12 May with a PJIU candidate on school premises were noted by the OSCE/ODIHR EOM in Peshkopi. The OSCE/ODIHR EOM observed SP meetings with voters on 19 May in Korçe, on 23 May in Durrës and an SMI rally in Kukës on 25 May.

²⁹ On 27 May, the DP held its rally in Tirana, attended by several thousand people. Following the event, the MoI stated that 73 people sought medical assistance due to eye and skin irritation. On 28 May, the Ministry of Health announced that 140 people had sought first aid, 14 of which had been hospitalized. An investigation is ongoing.

³⁰ This included new ministers of interior, education, healthcare, social welfare and youth, finance, justice, as well as directors of electricity distribution operator, agency for construction permits, immovable property registrations office, prisons, and agricultural and development agency.

³¹ Parties that received more than 0.5 per cent of valid votes during the last parliamentary elections receive 95 per cent of the fund, proportionally to the number of valid votes received. The remaining five per cent is distributed to parties that received less than 0.5 per cent of votes and to parties that did not participate in the last elections.

³² According to the Electoral Code, a political party may not spend more than 10 times the highest amount that a contestant has received from public funds. An independent candidate may not spend more than 50 per cent of the highest amount obtained by a contestant from public funds.

³³ The CEC has not been able to clarify to the OSCE/ODIHR EOM the meaning of this new provision.

experts to monitor campaigns; the CEC has yet to do this. The financial experts shall report to the CEC within four months from the announcement of election results. A new reporting requirement is also introduced for contestants: within 60 days from the announcement of election results the parties shall make public and submit to the CEC a financial declaration of their campaign incomes and expenditures.

IX. MEDIA

The media environment in Albania is lively and saturated. It includes public and private broadcasters, and a variety of online and print media. The remarkable number, assortment, and accessibility of media outlets could provide voters with ample and diverse information about politics and elections, mainly through news and election-related debates. However, the economic and political interests of media owners often influence journalists' reporting, leading to a widespread perception that media are strongly polarized along party lines. Television (TV) is the main source of political information, with private *TV Klan*, *Top Channel*, and *Vizion Plus* the most popular channels. Among the press, *Panorama* currently enjoys the highest readership, but online portals and social media are rapidly replacing print media and becoming one of the main sources of information for voters.

The Constitution provides for freedom of expression, media freedom, right to information, and prohibits censorship of means of communication. Defamation persists as a criminal offense, yet from 2012 is punishable only with fines. Activities by broadcasting media outside of the electoral period are regulated by the Law on Audio-visual Media, while print media are mostly self-regulated.

Campaign coverage in the audio-visual media is regulated by the Electoral Code in a detailed manner. In their news broadcasts, all public and privately owned broadcasters are required to provide equal time for coverage of parties participating in elections with more than 20 per cent of seats in parliament. Each other parliamentary party will receive half of this time, while coverage of non-parliamentary parties running for elections is at the discretion of the editors and cannot exceed the coverage given to smaller parliamentary parties. Coverage of public institutions promoting institutional achievements, such as inaugurations of public works, is considered election-related and is counted in the airtime of the party associated with the head of the institution.

Campaign information transmitted during news editions based on the pre-recorded party-produced footage is still permitted (provided it is identified as such), contrary to previous OSCE/ODIHR recommendations. On 23 May, the public broadcaster, Albanian Radio and Television (RTSH) announced that they will not accept any pre-recorded footage.

On 15 May, in line with the Electoral Code, the CEC allocated free airtime on RTSH, to all political parties contesting elections as of that day according to their representation in the parliament. The SP, holding more than 20 per cent of seats in the parliament, received 60 minutes; the SMI, PJIU, and CDP (with less than 20 per cent of parliamentary seats) received 30 minutes each; 10 minutes to each of the remaining 11 contesting parties with no seats in the parliament. The order of appearance was established by lottery. Following the Agreement, on 30 May, free airtime was also allocated to the three newly-registered parties. As of 31 May, RTSH had not aired free airtime to any contestant.

The Agreement resulted in amendments to the Law on Political Parties, which oblige all private broadcasting media to provide free of charge airtime for political advertising to parties contesting the elections.³⁴ In addition, paid political advertising was prohibited for these elections, contrary to the Electoral Code. On 25 May, 10 private media outlets submitted a letter to the CEC stating that they intend to adhere to the Electoral Code and not implement the amendments which they regard as unconstitutional.

³⁴ The largest parliamentary majority and parliamentary opposition parties are entitled to 90 minutes; the other parliamentary parties – to 45 minutes; non-parliamentary parties – to 10 minutes.

On 19 April, nine days after the deadline, the CEC appointed Media Monitoring Board (MMB) to monitor the electoral campaign on public and private broadcasting media.³⁵ The MMB submits to the CEC a daily report, which may also include proposals for administrative sanctions. The CEC examines the reports at least once a week and adopts a decision if administrative sanctions are proposed. As of 26 May, the MMB started monitoring 13 audiovisual operators broadcasting from Tirana and 25 operators broadcasting from 8 regions. As of 29 May, and despite a legal prohibition, advertising by two state institutions continued to be broadcast in RTSH and several private TV channels.³⁶ In its 28 May report, the MMB proposed measures to the CEC in order to stop broadcasting the spots.

On 15 May, the OSCE/ODIHR EOM commenced its media monitoring of a cross-section of media outlets with quantitative and qualitative analysis of their political coverage.³⁷

X. COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS

According to the Electoral Code, decisions of CEAZs can be challenged to the CEC by contestants, within three days of the decision (five days for election results). No such administrative complaints were made in the reporting period. Citizen observers can challenge CEC and CEAZ decisions concerning their accreditation. The law does not clearly designate a responsible body for complaints about campaign violations. The CEC must decide on complaints on election results within 10 days of submission of the complaint but the deadline is not clearly specified in the law for other types of complaints.³⁸ The CEC administrative complaint procedure is elaborate and involves the appointment of a rapporteur, preliminary verification, review hearing, and admissibility of each complaint. Complaints that do not comply with formal requirements are returned to the applicant for completion.

Contestant may appeal CEC decisions and failure to act to the Electoral College of Tirana Court of Appeals.³⁹ Appeals in the Electoral College are heard by five-judge panels, drawn by lot for each case. During the electoral period, decisions must be made within 10 days. So far, three election-related appeals have been made to the Electoral College. The College compelled the CEC to take a decision on the request of a political party to be registered.⁴⁰ Two more appeals challenged CEC decisions on candidate list registrations, alleging that the lists were submitted by parties after the legal deadline.⁴¹ The applicants withdrew these cases following the Agreement.

Requests for changes of voters' data after closing of voter lists may be filed by voters in district courts, until 24 hours before the election day and be decided within five days, but no later than six hours prior to the close of polls. The OSCE/ODIHR EOM is unaware of such applications thus far.

XI. PARTICIPATION OF NATIONAL MINORITIES

Albania's Constitution provides for full political, civil, and social rights for minorities, and the Electoral Code guarantees the right to vote and to stand for election to all citizens regardless of ethnic background,

³⁵ The MMB is composed of seven members. Each CEC member appoints one member of the MMB from the list proposed by national non-for-profit media organisations.

³⁶ *ABC News, News 24, Ora TV, RTSH, Top Channel, TV Klan, , and Vizion plus* broadcast spots of the Ministry of Agriculture, Rural Development and Water Management and the Ministry of Innovation and Public Administration.

³⁷ Primetime broadcasts (18:00 to 24:00) of five TV channels (RTSH, and the private *Top Channel, TV Klan, Vizion Plus,* and *ABC News*), one daily print newspaper (*Panorama*), and three online portals (*balkanweb.com, syri.net,* and *gazetatema.net*).

³⁸ According to the CEC, the 10-day deadline applies to all complaints.

³⁹ The College is composed of eight judges selected by lot from among appellate court judges in Albania for four years. The current Electoral College was formed in December 2016 and includes one female judge.

⁴⁰ The recently formed LIBRA party requested the CEC to recognize that it satisfied the legal requirements for registration of parliamentary parties to contest elections because it had two members of parliament.

⁴¹ The AEP and Popular Alliance Party argued that the submission of candidate lists on 29 April, the 50th day before the elections on 18 June, was after the Electoral Code's deadline of "no later than 50 days before the election date".

race, religion or language. Albanian law does not preclude creation of parties by national minorities. Members of national minorities stand for the elections in both specific national minority parties and mainstream political parties.

According to the 2011 census, less than 1.5 per cent of the population in Albania declared themselves as belonging to a national minority.⁴² In past elections, only the Greek national minority has been successful in winning a seat in parliament through a national minority party. Representatives of smaller minority groups have suggested to the OSCE/ODIHR EOM that the electoral system could be reformed to lower thresholds for national minority parties.

The CEC produced voter information materials in Greek, Macedonian, Romani, Serbian, and Vlach/Aromanian. All OSCE/ODIHR EOM interlocutors feel comfortable using their own language in public in relation to the electoral campaign. The OSCE/ODIHR EOM is unaware of any complaints alleging any form of discrimination or unfair treatment due to a person's belonging to a national minority. Some voters from the Roma community still face practical barriers in terms of voter registration due to a variety of factors including lack of official documentation and less stable residency. Some OSCE/ODIHR EOM interlocutors noted that the practice of vote-buying in areas with a high Roma minority population could remain a problem.

XII. CITIZEN AND INTERNATIONAL OBSERVERS

The Electoral Code provides for citizen and international observation at all levels of the election administration. Contestants are entitled to appoint one observer to each CEAZ, VCC, and counting table at a BCC. Parliamentary parties may appoint permanent representatives to the CEC, while other parties have the right to appoint representatives to attend the CEC sessions for the electoral period only. As of 31 May, the CEC has accredited a total of 102 citizen observers.

XIII. OSCE/ODIHR EOM ACTIVITIES

The OSCE/ODIHR EOM opened in Tirana with a press conference on 9 May. The OSCE/ODIHR EOM has met with the government authorities, the CEC, representatives of political parties, media, civil society, the OSCE Presence in Albania, and the international community.⁴³ The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and the European Parliament intend to deploy observer delegations for election day observation. Mr. Roberto Battelli of Slovenia has been appointed by the OSCE Chairman-in-Office as Special Co-ordinator to lead the OSCE short-term observers.

*The English version of this report is the only official document.
An unofficial translation is available in Albanian.*

⁴² The Greek national minority accounts for 0.87 per cent of the population, Roma - 0.3 per cent, and ethnic Macedonians - 0.2 per cent. It is important to note that 14 per cent of respondents chose not to answer the question on ethnicity questioning the accuracy of the census data in relation to national minorities.

⁴³ The OSCE/ODIHR EOM and the OSCE Presence in Albania operate separately under their respective mandates.