



*Dialogue between Citizens and Politicians Key to  
Better Governance and a Stronger Economy  
Findings from Focus Group Research in Albania*

Conducted December 9 to 15, 2013



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## National Democratic Institute

The National Democratic Institute (NDI or the Institute) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nongovernmental organization that responds to the aspirations of people around the world to live in democratic societies that recognize and promote basic human rights. Since its founding in 1983, NDI and its partners have supported democratic institutions and practices by strengthening political parties, civic organizations and parliaments, safeguarding elections, and promoting citizen participation, openness and accountability in government. With staff and volunteers hailing from more than 100 nations, NDI brings individuals and groups together to share best practices in international democratic development that can be adapted to the needs of their own countries. NDI's multinational approach reinforces the message that, while there is no single democratic model, certain core principles, as enshrined in, for example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are shared by all democracies. In upholding these principles, NDI promotes institutionalized channels of communications among citizens, political institutions and elected officials, to improve the quality of life for all citizens.

NDI has been present in Albania since 1991, promoting citizens' political participation through civic education and issue advocacy; helping to increase public participation in decision-making at the local and national levels; organizing and supporting election monitoring and voter education; and supporting the development of political parties.

The Institute has placed particular emphasis on supporting gender equality in Albania's democratic transition process. With funding from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the Royal Norwegian Embassy, NDI is supporting women as they assert their voices on key gender reform policies, and assisting political party women's forums in advocating for internal reforms that increase the political leadership roles of women.

As part of its overall strategy in Albania, the Institute seeks to promote the views of citizens as part of political discourse. For the second year in a row, NDI has conducted focus group discussions to provide political and civic leaders with informed and unbiased research on citizens' concerns and interests to better define dialogue on their priorities in the lead up to campaigns.

For more information about NDI, please visit [www.ndi.org](http://www.ndi.org).

## Introduction

Albania's June 2013 parliamentary elections brought about a transfer of political power for the first time in eight years. The Alliance for a European Albania, led by the Socialist Party (SP), won a clear majority over the incumbent Democratic Party (DP). After four years of political instability ensuing from the partisan conflict over the results of the previous parliamentary election, Albania now has the opportunity to accomplish much-needed democratic reform. The new government, led by the SP and the Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI), is expected to deliver on its campaign promises concerning government transparency, accountability, and performance. Under new leadership, the DP is expected to play a constructive opposition role in providing strategic alternatives to government policies.

Within this crucial moment in Albania's democratic transition, the public expects elected leaders to engage them on issues of longstanding, abiding concern, as reflected in this research—namely unemployment, healthcare, education, and corruption. In order to provide impetus for such dialogue, and objective information on public sentiment with which to shape and enact reforms on these issues, NDI undertook a qualitative public opinion study in five cities throughout Albania from December 9 to 15, 2013. This round of focus group research took place six months after the parliamentary elections and three months since the new government took office.

The research, comprised of 10 focus group discussions, aims to:

- Identify citizens' issues of top priority in order to help political and civic leaders shape policies that better represent those concerns;
- Examine citizens' attitudes towards the performance of state institutions and the role of political parties and civil society; as well as expectations from the new government; and,
- Explore citizens' views of gender equality and women's political participation and solicit recommendations for political parties and governing authorities.

NDI engaged IDRA Research & Consulting, an agency for market, media and social research, to organize the study in Elbasan, Fier, Korçë, Shkodër, and Tirana. NDI selected target cities based on their population, size, and geographical location. In order to gather perceptions of a variety of citizens, demographic characteristics such as gender, age, income level, employment status and political affiliation were taken into account and reflected in the purposive sampling and recruitment of participants.

Focus groups were comprised of eight to 10 individuals. NDI designed a focus group guide and finalized it in close cooperation with IDRA to facilitate group discussions. For a detailed account of the methodology of the study including participants' recruitment process and the development of the research instrument, please refer to Appendix A.

Moderated focus group discussions provided citizens with the opportunity to reflect on Albania's political and civic leadership following the election, offer perceptions of key reforms and evaluate new government initiatives, and share their expectations for the future. While the research is intended to ascertain the views and sentiments of citizens in a manner that transcends "surface politics," the research also incorporates, as a matter of public interest and focus, those issues that are prominent at the time at which the research is undertaken. Only a few months after

the new government took office in mid-September, several high-profile public issues found their way into the focus group discussions, among them: the appointment of the new cabinet of ministers and other key positions; the government's decision to stop the import of waste; its decision to postpone the enforcement of the civil servants' law; reports concerning the alleged removal of public employees resulting from the government transition; the demolition of illegal constructions broadcast on TV; and citizens' protests against the proposed disposal of Syrian chemical weapons stockpiles in Albania, followed by the government's decision to reject the proposal.

**Focus Group Results and Usage.** Focus groups are semi-structured, small group discussions guided by a moderator who follows a pre-set guideline. The purpose of focus group research is to understand the attitudes, opinions, and experiences of participants recruited for the discussions. The interaction between participants in a focus group provides insight into how citizens think and feel, and is itself helpful in understanding why expressed attitudes exist, and the degree to which they are held. Unless otherwise noted, the conclusions presented throughout the report represent views commonly and repeatedly cited during the group discussions. Alternative views exist and are communicated in this report only when they are significant or can highlight a salient opinion.

Focus group research develops insight and direction concerning public opinion, rather than quantitatively precise or absolute measures. While attempts are made to ensure the groups represent a broad cross-section of society, and participants are independently recruited, the findings of the research may not be extrapolated as statistically representative of the larger population. Information gathered in this way reflects citizen values and needs and is critical in helping decision-makers test their assumptions and incorporate the will of the people into policy-making.

Any public opinion research, including focus group discussions, is only a snapshot at the moment the research is undertaken. Public opinion is dynamic and evolves as people experience and react to major events.

The focus group locations and participant demographic chart, as well as the methodology notes appearing in the Introduction and Appendix I at the end of this study, should be consulted to understand the subsets of participants interviewed for this study.

## Summary of Findings

The conclusions of this public opinion research report are drawn from 10 focus group discussions conducted from December 9 to 15, 2013, in five regions: including Elbasan, Fier, Korçë, Shkodër, and Tirana.

Similar to NDI focus group research conducted in October 2012, the general mood of citizens remains relatively negative, dominated by ongoing concerns over the economic situation, healthcare and education, and corruption. With these concerns in mind, citizens participating in this research send a clear message to decision-makers about their priorities, and how they would like to see them addressed. However, in comparison to last year's research, citizens convey more interest in playing a role in directly addressing these concerns, for example in tackling corruption—*if they see a meaningful response from state institutions*.

Overwhelmingly, the research shows that citizens have a clear desire for a different style of politics and governance, which nurtures participation, responsibility, and accountability of all actors involved. Without it, participants' negative views of politics, political parties, and parliament – which arise largely out of their self-described alienation from politics – will persist. Participants seek greater contact and regular communication with their elected representatives and with party leaders to ensure the latter possess a better and direct understanding of citizens' pressing concerns and needs. Participants explicitly call on politicians to:

- Deliver on election promises and hold themselves accountable if those promises are not upheld;
- Listen to citizens, communicating with them regularly in order to better understand their concerns; and,
- Work to achieve cross-party compromise more effectively in order to provide for the best policy solutions to citizens' concerns.

The research reveals an opportunity for political parties, elected representatives, and government authorities to embrace more pointed, diverse, and continuous dialogue and engagement with citizens. In the same vein, the research indicates an opening for civic organizations to position themselves as independent from political influence, and as capable of communicating citizens' concerns to officials, bringing citizens closer to decision-making, and holding public officials accountable for their actions. Similarly, the research indicates opening for women's forums within political parties and the newly established Alliance of Women's Deputies to devote its profile and position within political parties and parliament to the involvement of under-represented citizens, like women, in policy-making.

### I. GENERAL PUBLIC MOOD

- Despite participants' acknowledgement of several positive initiatives introduced by the government, an overwhelming dissatisfaction with the general economic situation shapes their assessment of the country's direction. **The poor economy, low incomes, and unemployment are the most pressing concerns for most participants.**

- **A number of participants expressed a certain degree of optimism for the future, mainly because a clear election result produced a peaceful transition of power without political conflict. Some have hope that a new political chapter can favor reform and with it better government performance.** This cautious optimism is a marked contrast to last year's research, when participants were nearly unanimous in their belief that the country was headed in the wrong direction.
- Similar to last year's research, **participants perceive corruption as widespread**, leading to inefficiencies in public institutions, a poor level of quality in public services, and limited opportunities for citizens in accessing employment, healthcare and education, among others.

## II. CITIZENS' PRIORITIES

- **A majority of participants perceive the economy as poor, prices generally high, and unemployment as an acute problem, especially for young people.** An overwhelming majority of participants claim their family incomes are insufficient to cover basic monthly necessities, including utility bills, groceries and medications.
- **Participants expect the government to deliver on promises related to creating new jobs and attracting investment**, viewing the government as responsible for providing solutions to citizens' pressing concerns regarding unemployment, high prices and low salaries. Very few participants view the private sector and business community as capable and/or responsible for providing such solutions.
- **Focus group participants view corruption as ever-present in their daily lives.** The majority of participants consider pervasive corruption as the main factor contributing to poor public service standards, bad governance, impunity before the law, and arbitrariness of law enforcement. Participants see healthcare, followed by the judiciary system and education, as the most corrupt and inefficient sectors. A number of participants view corruption as necessary to get things done and admit that citizens themselves perpetuate corrupt practices.
- **Participants seem generally supportive of the new government's campaign against corruption, though some are skeptical that it will bring lasting changes if not thoroughly and fairly implemented.** They suggest that raising salaries could decrease corruption because public sector employees, such as judges, doctors, and policemen, may be less keen to accept bribes and assume the risks of corrupt practice if they have stable and well-paid jobs. Participants state that **strict law enforcement and punishment of the corrupt will increase their faith in rule of law.**
- **Focus group participants consider public healthcare as ineffective and corrupt.** Participants claim poor standards of services, a lack of medication, improper infrastructure, and bureaucracy that obstructs obtaining a health card, as some of the most severe issues they face when navigating the healthcare sector. Several participants believe **more control by the government and other responsible institutions, investments in**



**infrastructure, as well as wage increases for medical personnel, would improve the situation.**

- Second only to healthcare, the judiciary system is seen as the most corrupt sector by focus groups across the country. Most participants claim that it is difficult to receive fair treatment in court unless bribes are paid to lawyers, prosecutors, or judges. **In citizens' view, the judiciary's consistent failure to deliver justice and punish the corrupt exemplifies Albania's weak rule of law.**
- **A majority of participants in the discussions think that the quality of education is very poor.** Similar to participants' beliefs recorded last year, participants view corruption as widespread in this sector. They believe fair competition for teachers' jobs, infrastructure investments, tougher entry standards for universities, and more supervision by government are needed to improve the sector. Citizens appreciate the willingness of the government to invest more in vocational education, which most participants view as one solution to reduce corruption and to ease youth unemployment.
- **Public safety, as reported in last year's research, is a concern for many participants** across the regions, with the exception of Korçë. Participants perceive an increased crime rate as a consequence of the poor economy and high unemployment, especially among young people, but believe newly introduced reforms in the police force may help.

### III. EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

- As last year's research found, **the majority of citizens participating in discussions favor European Union (EU) integration.** Participants see European integration as leading to more investment in the country, improved education, better healthcare, and less corruption. **Citizens perceive EU membership as a tool to monitor government performance and to strengthen the rule of law. Citizens are aware that, with the privileges of EU membership, come responsibilities and obligations for both the government and citizens.**

### IV. EXPECTATIONS OF THE NEW GOVERNMENT

- **Participants' expectations of the government and appraisal of its first initiatives are generally positive.** They recognize that it may be too soon to judge government policies and actions as a whole, but readily raise some concrete measures they agree with, in principle, including the closing of gambling sites and casinos; the demolition of illegally constructed buildings; the government's annulment of amendments to the law on integrated waste management, which had allowed for the import of waste; progressive taxation; and a campaign to fight corruption. **The extent to which the government manages to deliver on its promises, bring tangible solutions, and manage citizens' expectations through concerted efforts to include citizens in these reforms will help build citizens' trust in government institutions.**

- **Participants frequently expressed a degree of skepticism and/or frustration that some of the above initiatives are not thus far being addressed as effectively or as thoroughly as they would expect.** For example, participants mention cases of gambling sites that were reopened immediately after initial inspections without clear cause. Others perceive the demolition of illegally constructed buildings as arbitrary, selective, and undertaken at a high cost.
- **When asked what should be included in the government’s top priorities for its first year – in addition to tackling unemployment, fighting corruption, improving law enforcement and ensuring public order – participants highlighted establishing a merit-based recruitment system in public administration and supporting small businesses.** While participants champion merit-based recruitment for public administration jobs, they express skepticism that political bias will disappear.

## V. GENERAL POLITICS, PARLIAMENT, POLITICAL PARTIES, AND THE 2013 ELECTIONS

- **Similar to last year’s findings, participants express distrust in politics in general, parliament, and political parties,** and they are skeptical that any political party is interested in solving problems that matter to citizens. Parties are seen as equally culpable; none stands out as solution-oriented.
- **A majority of participants wants politicians to be more accountable for their performance in between elections. “Keep your promises” is an oft-quoted demand from participants of their political parties, across all focus groups.** Many participants expect political parties to listen to and consult with citizens in order to offer sound policy solutions in different areas such as the economy, healthcare, judiciary, public order, and others.
- **A number of participants perceive members of parliament (MPs) as disconnected from or unaware of citizens’ problems and conditions in their regions.** A significant number of participants say that they do not know who their elected representatives are. They believe that MPs represent the interests of their political parties and, in contrast, want all MPs to demonstrate a better understanding of citizens’ daily problems. Participants often express negative and cynical attitudes toward politics, but still demand more regular contact with their MPs between elections.
- A significant number of participants bemoan the fact that political parties seem to serve as employment agencies that secure jobs in return for votes and support. Others view direct, material benefit with job opportunities listed as the main reason for political engagement. Participants suggest that there is a widespread belief that political parties should provide jobs and other material benefits to individuals, in comparison to promoting policies that would create the economic conditions for broader job growth.
- **A majority of focus group participants expect an effective opposition to propose alternative solutions and support government-proposed solutions that resolve problems and are in the interest of citizens.** Participants do not think that the

opposition should insist on personal and party animosities or take an obstructive approach to every government action and proposal. They believe that the key roles of the opposition are to keep an eye on the government and its decisions, holding it accountable for fulfilling its election promises and denouncing corruption. Similar to their feelings about the government, a few participants say that it is too early to evaluate the opposition's work and that it is unclear what role the opposition will play in the future.

- **Focus group participants considered the June 2013 parliamentary elections as positive** when compared to previous election cycles. Their assessment is based on impressions that the process was calm, fair, and managed better than in the past. Despite noted improvements, a handful of participants remain skeptical about elections due to allegations of pressuring voters and vote buying. Trust has not been fully reestablished in the election administration, primarily due to public controversy surrounding the incomplete composition of the Central Election Commission (CEC) ahead of the elections.

## VI. WOMEN IN POLITICS

- **Most participants, regardless of age or gender, agree that there should be more women in politics because they view women as better managers, more diplomatic, less corrupt, and better connected to constituents' concerns.** Participants perceive women as more issue- and policy-oriented and believe women are better able to push for policies addressing citizens' concerns. **They highlight that including women's perspectives in solving problems contributes to more stable and longer term solutions.**
- Similar to last year's focus group findings, participants highlight the fact that, **women face greater difficulties than men do to be politically engaged, and are significantly underrepresented mostly due to the multitude of family and social obligations placed upon women.** A number of participants emphasize that many women do not participate in politics due to patriarchal social conventions.
- **When asked about the Alliance of Women Deputies, a recently formed women's caucus in parliament, a number of participants were aware of its existence and believe it may be a good forum to promote the inclusion of women's concerns on the parliamentary agenda and to provide solutions to those concerns.** A few participants noted that the Alliance should focus more on promoting gender issues in the public arena, and suggested that it should push for some concrete measures related to combating violence against women. They believe that the Alliance may contribute to lowering partisan tension during parliamentary sessions.

## VII. CIVIL SOCIETY AND CIVIC ACTIVISM

- **Participants generally admit that they are not active in their communities. They claim there is a weak sense of community in Albania,** or specifically within their neighborhoods, and awareness of civic activism is very low. Participants discuss time constraints, poor living standards, little sense of volunteerism for the good of the

community, and lack of leadership as primarily reasons for their personal lack of civic engagement. When asked what might help increase civic engagement, they mention needing appropriate spaces to gather and clear leadership and willpower to organize citizens.

- **Participants generally express distrust of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)** and/or affirm that civil society is not well organized and that their results are not sufficiently visible.
- In contrast to last year's focus group research, **a few participants claim community activism has improved**, with a small handful of participants – both young and old – mentioning that they have been involved in community initiatives and others citing projects in which they would like to be engaged. These are largely oriented toward neighborhood infrastructure or environmental cleanliness issues.

## Principal Findings

### I. General Public Mood

Focus group discussions conducted in December 2013 show an overwhelming feeling of dissatisfaction with the general economic situation, which shapes their assessment of the direction of the country. There is an undercurrent, however, of hope and cautious optimism that this new political chapter may favor reform and, with it, better government performance. This latter point contrasts with the findings of last year's research, which showed that participants were nearly unanimous in saying that the country was headed in the wrong direction.

The focus groups revealed that participants decisively consider the economic situation as the major problem impacting the country's negative direction. Participants are quick to point out poor economic conditions—principally long-term unemployment, low incomes and high prices—as the most pressing issues affecting their lives.

- *“In 1945, we learned in school that our country is the poorest or the most ruined country. Nowadays we still rank as the poorest country in Europe. So, in terms of economic development, we have not made any progress.” (Elbasan, Male)*
- *“Compared to previous years, the situation is very bad (Tirana, Male)*
- *“Things will go in the right direction when people are employed and have sufficient means to eat, drink, and live. That is what I want from the government, from our state: employment. People need to eat, their kids need to eat; if I don't work what am I supposed to provide to my kids?” (Elbasan, Male)*
- *“Since a family discusses even food, then this is a bad sign as the family is below the poverty level and obliged to tell their kid not to eat something for lunch because they need to eat it for dinner.” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“Before we had some help from the emigrants. We could go to Greece. I also have all my brothers there. They used to go there, help me; they gave me 100 to 200 Euros. If I was in a bad condition again, they would help me. Now, they can't even help themselves.” (Korçë, Male)*
- *“There is no way that improvement can come. The situation is the same as one or two years ago even. In fact, it has worsened and now a miracle is needed for the situation to improve.” (Shkodër, Female)*

A few participants in each of the discussion groups across the regions are reserving judgment. They say that Albania is moving in neither the right nor the wrong direction, but at a crossroads. They think there has not been enough time to evaluate the initiatives of the new government in order to determine if the country is yet on the right track.

- *“Perhaps it is too early to talk about, but in general I feel good and very optimistic. I don't know how things will go in the future, but I have internal optimism, and I cannot really say what is going right and what is going wrong.” (Tirana, Male)*

- *“As for the right or the wrong track, I don’t think we are going either way. And I think the problem exists in laws and regulations. In my opinion we are taking them from developed countries without adapting them to our own society.” (Tirana, Female)*
- *“We hope. I didn’t raise my hand [to indicate a direction the country is going] because for me...before the government changed, there was no right direction. I still hope, but this period has been too short for me to say whether things are going in the right direction. I am noticing change, but the period is too brief for me to be convinced.” (Fier, Female)*
- *“Well, I can’t say we are heading in the wrong direction, but some things needs to be done in a different way.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“Every party that comes to power, the first thing it does is fight corruption. Even four years ago it was the DP [Democratic Party] and the first thing it attacked was corruption. So, it remains to be seen [what the Socialist Party will be able to do in government].” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“It’s all demagoguery. They say they will do certain things, and what I see is that they don’t do most of the things they promise because of the money. The former leader said that Albania surpassed Germany in terms of economic development, while the current leader says that the state doesn’t have sufficient money. There are two contrary extremes. People live hoping it will get better. We have reached that phase where people want things to get better.”(Tirana, Male)*

In comparison to the public mood registered in NDI’s October 2012 focus group research, the public mood in December 2013 appears to be slightly more optimistic. A number of participants in each focus group across the regions identified a few reasons for optimism, including a smooth transition of power and several government initiatives.

- *“I personally think that we are going down a road of hope, because they are destroying the buildings constructed illegally. When it comes to the economy, that’s another story.” (Fier, Female)*
- *“If we refer to the society, I think that if this is not a façade, the fight against corruption seems to be going in the right direction.” (Korcë, Male)*
- *“Competitions are being organized for a [public] job vacancy, which is a good thing.” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“We think [the country is going] in the right direction, at least with this part, what we are hearing about the public order, that is very important.” (Korcë, Female)*
- *“For example, [one thing which is going in the right direction is] the wrecking of illegal construction... some like it, but some don’t. The shutdown of casinos is also a good thing. And they behave differently in the police now. They are more order in how they function.” (Shkodër, Male)*
- *“[The country is going] in a good direction. Every institution is more welcoming. There is a new kind of spirit.” (Fier, Male)*
- *“[Things are going] in the right direction. This disability allowance issue is being addressed very well. Yes, because there are some people that take pension for no reason and not the people who are in need. This is a good thing - that they are checking everything and they will enter the data into the electronic system.”(Elbasan, Female)*

- *“At least there is awareness about law enforcement - although it is a different matter whether it is implemented in the right way - but at least there is a feeling that you are under the implementation of state laws.” (Shkodër, Female)*

Several participants across all regions cite Albania’s Euro-Atlantic integration<sup>1</sup> as a positive sign and hope for a better future.

- *“What things are going in the right direction? For example integration of Albania towards the European Union, travelling without visas, all those facilities. Albania is no longer an unknown country.” (Elbasan, Male)*
- *“The only good thing is that both parties are trying so that Albania gets membership in the EU.” (Korçë, Male)*
- *“Bringing Albania closer to European countries, the free movement of people, and the pressure exercised by people travelling around the world make those political forces see people and their leadership from another viewpoint. This is a good thing.” (Elbasan, Male)*
- *“We are doing fine with enlargement [EU accession and visa liberalization]; entering NATO was not only about the process, but this also means security for the country, considering that the war mentality has been highly dominant in Albania. We should not forget that not such a long time ago, Albania was still discussing the law of war with Greece. And NATO gives us security. Free movement without visas is the right path of integration towards Europe. These are processes which have their own evolution.” (Elbasan, Male)*

All participants bemoaned the economic situation of Albania and their specific locale. Participants outside of Tirana tended to describe their respective regions as less prosperous and with fewer opportunities than the capital, or with neighboring countries.

- *“Elbasan is noted for high levels of unemployment and poverty and still continues to be like that. There are many more opportunities for work in Tirana.” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“There is no employment, no sea [port], and it’s not the capital, and has no borders with neighboring countries. Elbasan is known as the city of flowers and oranges, but now the oranges imported from Greece are dominating the market.” (Elbasan, Male)*
- *“Unemployment is worse here. I have a personal problem and even though I have the pie shop (bakery), I can’t afford to pay taxes. I am not able to have insurance for myself because I cannot afford it, I just cannot.” (Fier, Female)*
- *“Our doctors went to other cities; we had the best doctors but they chose not to work in Korçë. They went to Tirana to finish their specialization because they have other engagements and motivations.” (Korçë, Female)*
- *“If we compare Shkodër with Tirana, there is disparity in wages, here we have lower wages.” (Shkodër, Female)*

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<sup>1</sup> The EU’ Council’s December 2013 decision not to grant official candidate status to Albania was made a few days after NDI completed focus group discussions. The EU announced its intention to re-evaluate candidacy status in June 2014. Albania joined NATO in 2009.

- *“Prices are expensive here in Shkodër while in Kosovo there is a supermarket where I find things that cost 0.5 cents while here I get them for 1.5 euros.” (Shkodër, Female)*

## II. Citizen’s Priorities

When asked to name their chief concerns, participants from all five regions repeatedly mentioned the economy, corruption, and healthcare.

### THE ECONOMY

Most participants see their personal economic situation as either the same as or worse than last year. Almost all citizens hold the government accountable for the country’s poor economic performance. Few citizens express any hope that their personal economic situation is bound to change soon.

Similar to last year, the level of personal economic anxiety—over unemployment, low incomes, high prices—is closely related to participant concerns about the overall economy. Low levels of foreign and local investment to create new jobs are generally seen as driving unemployment. Low salaries were cited as insufficient to provide for basic essentials. A few participants lament the weakness of trade unions and hold the government responsible to address low incomes.

- *“I have two daughters; both are married and go about their business. Unemployment is a problem for everyone, so they are not in the position to help me. Who is that child who wants to see her parents suffer?! They are students and work a day or two per week to cover their expenses.” (Fier, Female)*
- *“You can hear on TV all the time about salaries increasing but there is no improvement in the economy.” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“Of course the economy has worsened. If yesterday we made 50,000 ALL (~\$500), today we can’t make even 10,000 ALL (~ \$100).” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“Compared to the last year, performance [of the economy] this year is very bad.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“I see at the Sheraton, for example, that many people are fired just because there are no more customers. They are even discussing lowering wages. And they say: ‘It’s up to you. If you don’t like such wage, feel free to quit.’” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“It is about the low income. We cannot afford living at this low income rate. Maybe the others have little children and they don’t feel it yet, but since I have teenagers, I can’t afford it. With two administrative wages, it’s really difficult, since prices are also rising. Plus, there is this huge gap between the poor and the rich.” (Tirana, Female)*
- *“I believe the government is responsible [for unemployment and low wages] because we don’t have trade unions, and when there are no trade unions nobody is responsible, so the government must do something. Around the world, there is someone to complain about, even to protest.” (Shkodër, Male)*
- *“The dysfunction of trade unions is also something that should be taken into account.” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“More jobs need to be created, salaries need to be raised, especially for the factory workers who work 10 hours to make 4-5 USD per day. The shoe factory for example pays*



*the employees 4-5 USD per day while a shoe in Italy is sold for 100 EUR. There are many of these situations here.” (Shkodër, Male)*

- *“More jobs should be created. My workplace used to have 100 employees, but my employer fired a lot of people and lowered salaries because there is no work.” (Korçë, Female)*
- *“If we do not consider private companies that offer opportunities, a lot of people would still be unemployed. One call center in Elbasan has 200 employees, so for those 200 young people it is a great help.” (Elbasan, Female)*

Job security in the public sector is also a concern brought up multiple times by participants during the discussions. A considerable number of citizens fear losing their jobs after the 2013 election ushered in a transition of power, citing the “wrong politics” as responsible for this phenomenon.

- *“It happens every time due to the wrong politics. If one party comes in, they fire the current employees. When the other party wins, they fire the others and so on. But the right thing is to employ the people who are able to do the work.” (Korçë, Female)*
- *“With all these connections, if you are with SP you will get a job, if you are with DP you will get replaced. If we suppose that Sali Berisha gave jobs to the people from his region, now Edi Rama gives jobs to all the people that he knows and follows the same procedure...” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“Now [after elections] all the directors will be removed, the supporters of this party will be directors, and the others will be removed.” (Korçë, Female)*
- *“If the DP comes to power they screw the SP and vice versa. They never guarantee people’s jobs.” (Fier, Male)*
- *“People are being laid off from their workplace. We are worried about our jobs.” (Korçë, Female)*

## **CORRUPTION**

As indicated in NDI’s October 2012 focus group research, most citizens who participated in discussions see corruption as widespread, depriving them of access to jobs, healthcare, and education, among other areas. The sectors considered the most corrupt are healthcare, followed by the judiciary and education.

Participants believe bribes are needed for almost everything, from gaining access to healthcare, to securing employment, to getting an educational degree, to navigating the justice system. Similar to last year, participants see corruption as prevalent and harmful, but at the same time necessary to get things done.

- *“[Corruption] is everywhere – in schools, police and healthcare.” (Shkodër, Male)*
- *“The key sectors are the most corrupt ones: healthcare, education, and courts. This has also made all the young people feel pessimistic and desire to go abroad because they think it is impossible to live and work here. Everyone is corrupt and the youth are the most pessimistic generation of all. From what I’ve seen, they want to go abroad as they can’t live in this place.” (Shkodër, Female)*

- *“Now that I go to look for a job at the education office and I have finished school, a master’s with a high GPA...from a Tirana university, I try to find a job and I cannot find it because someone else takes it, finds a friend (connection), finds a way to take that job and I remain here where I am.” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“I want to say this. Both students with good grades and bad grades must pay money to get a job, through corruption. This is not only about those with bad grades. They cannot get the job without the help of the ‘friend’ or the money.” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“[Corruption is necessary] to buy a job, to buy pills in the hospital. To do something which we should not do, but we proceed anyways.” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *Female group in Korçë:*
  - *First participant: “I graduated two years ago in teaching and I took the state exam. I was told by everyone and everywhere that my name was a priority, but I did not get a job.”*
  - *Second participant: “This is normal. In order to get a job, you need to hand an envelope with 3,000 Euros in it to the person who will provide you the job. It is another thing whether this person accepts.”*
- *“But in a way, we encouraged corruption, because if you don’t give something [bribe], he will still do his job.” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“It happens often that you pay [for a job], you get to work for a month, two months, three months, and then you get fired because another person paid more than you did.” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“We are the people who accept corruption. We are taught this way, because the first thing we do when we go to a hospital is give the money to the doctor.” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“I think that corruption has reached its limits, as not only there is corruption among people, but there is also corruption in tenders, as we have many underground resources, minerals, oil, etc.” (Female, Shkodër)*

After the healthcare sector, the judiciary is seen as the most corrupt sector across the country. Most participants claim that it is difficult to receive fair treatment in court unless one pays bribes to lawyers, prosecutors or judges.

- *“If you compare the level of corruption in police with the level of corruption in justice, corruption in police is almost zero.” (Korçë, Male)*
- *“The first one (most corrupted sectors) would be justice. Because you pay and you get out of jail.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“Times have shown that you can escape the judiciary only through money.” (Shkodër, Male)*
- *“Corruption in justice has to do with x-person having killed a certain number of people [for no reason] and you kill someone because they robbed you of four cows. You go into jail for 20 years, while the one that has killed four people, uses the help of the left wing or right wing politicians and goes to jail only for four or five years.” (Korçë, Male)*
- *“The system is corrupt when a judge takes 5,000 USD in cash to deal with the case of a convict or a murderer. These are very serious issues and the judiciary system is totally rotten. A complete reconstruction of this system has to happen in Albania.” (Fier, Male)*

- *“They (judiciary) are corrupt. For example a person is in jail. He gets a lawyer and he says I will give you this much money. It gets the criminal out of jail. And he will pay, he will pay millions.” (Elbasan, Female)*

Participants are generally supportive of the government’s campaign against corruption. But, because they view corruption as deeply rooted in society, they are skeptical of its chances for success and question its thorough implementation.

- *“As I see it, with the change of governments, I see an intense fight against corruption, which is one of the things that disturbs us.” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“I think that if this is not a façade, the fight against corruption issue seems to be going in the right direction.” (Korçë, Male)*
- *“The government is trying, but corruption cannot disappear just like that. And from what I have heard some things are changing.” (Korçë, Male)*
- *“As I see it, from what I have seen on TV there have been some arrests of those people that are corrupt. From what they have shown on TV or from what we hear from citizens themselves.” (Elbasan, Female)*

Many believe that an increase of salaries could decrease corruption because, insofar as judges, doctors, and policemen have economic stability and a secure job, they would not risk losing their job, reputation, and/or license by taking a bribe. Citizens strongly suggest law enforcement and punishment for the corrupt to fight corruption.

- *“How can we fight corruption? By enforcing the laws, being equal when it comes to law.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *Male group in Shkodër:*
  - *First participant: “I don’t know if there is any one of us who denounces corruption.”*
  - *Second participant: “Because we are not interested in fighting it.”*
  - *First participant: “Because we don’t believe they will follow up with our denunciation.”*
- *Male group in Shkodër:*
  - *First participant: “The first measure would be to increase salaries, because a policeman makes 350 USD per month, and since he is the head of a family of five or six people, his salary is not enough so he has to resort to corruption.”*
  - *Second participant: “Another thing, it is important to increase control and punish those who break the law. This is another thing, because a policeman is also not secure about himself either. He is nothing but a simple citizen who should not break the law.”*
  - *First participant: “And the law should be equal for all.”*
- *“How do you fight corruption? Implement the law. Punish whoever is caught on a corruption case, whoever, in the healthcare, education and judicial system.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“People lack trust in any institution, even the media, which can also be an institution [to help fight corruption]. We need to reinstate the trust of people, fight corruption even*

*through the internet where people can upload two or three pictures and denounce the cases.” (Korçë, Female)*

- *“They should employ only the people who are capable of doing the job, be it the doctor, the nurse or the prosecutor.” (Fier, Female)*
- *“I see another problem in individuals, which is the lack of trust in the laws and regulations. Everywhere there is a sign with all rules and regulations. Everyone breaks them, but if we all get together and say, ‘you broke the law,’ then, there will be no problem.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“The law is not implemented because there is also higher level corruption. The law must be implemented all the way to the place where the crime happens. If this is only said in the parliament and written down on papers, nothing will happen.” (Shkodër, Female)*

A number of participants admit that citizens themselves feed corruption and must take it upon themselves to stop and to report corruption cases.

- *“You [addressing a participant from the health sector] have fed corruption by yourself. I am thinking of the lady who was the last in line, and didn’t have money to pay. You let her die there.” (Fier, Female)*
- *“In my opinion, we are the ones who made these things happen by doing it ourselves. Paying large amounts of money to take our children out of jail. In my opinion we should just leave them there, as a punishment.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“I buy insulin for my husband and he used to give to the nurse two USD each time. After a while she started asking for it. One time, I went and I asked her for insulin and she asked me for money. She said that, if I don’t pay her, the insulin will cost me even more. We need to become aware and not give money anymore.” (Fier, Female)*
- *“We accept it [corruption]. We are the first ones who want corruption. You go to school and you pay for it. Even for exams. You pay for them because you are not capable to pass.” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“There are cases when we are interested in corruption, especially in the healthcare system. I, personally, work as a taxi driver and when I go to take goods to Montenegro, they immediately stop me, so I am in favor of corruption so that the police do not denounce me.” (Shkodër, Male)*
- *“It is also our fault. We give money ourselves. I went to the doctor with my husband and told him to give the doctor five USD because they never tell you what disease you are suffering from if you don’t give them any money.” (Fier, Female)*

## **HEALTHCARE AND EDUCATION**

Both health and education sectors were excessively criticized by participants, mainly for inefficiency and corruption.

The healthcare sector is seen by participants as one of the most corrupt and dysfunctional sectors in the country. Compared to last year, participants express more discontent over poor standards, low investments, and especially widespread corruption. A handful of participants mention that procedures to acquire a health insurance card for public hospitals are too complicated,

burdensome, and time-consuming. A few mention that the unemployed are unable to obtain public health insurance.

- *“The healthcare system is state-owned, which means that all the doctors, starting from the simple physician to the director, are employed by and get a salary from the state. If you, God forbid, get sick, nobody will even touch you if you don’t have money. If you don’t have 10 USD, they won’t visit you.” (Fier, Male)*
- *“[Corruption is present from] the first contact, which is important to say. The way the nurse treats you, not to mention the doctors, is scandalous. You first have to pay the guard to enter the hospital and then continue with the rest. I think these cases should be reported.” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“They don’t ask you [for money] but they let you wait endlessly until they reach the point of kicking you out. These are the various forms of psychological pressure.” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“There is also another problem with the health insurance. In order to get a health-card, you need to go a long way around many institutions and you don’t even get one if you are unemployed. In order to avoid this, you need to be enrolled at the Labor office and then the Labor office needs two months to check you out.” (Fier, Male)*
- *“The healthcare system cannot be any worse. I had personal encounters with it for my dad, who died a few months ago. The healthcare system is doomed by corruption and the doctor won’t even meet you without any money, let alone help you. They would not even give him any medication. I had to buy all the medication for him.” (Shkodër, Male)*
- *“Before an operation the doctor tells you upfront that this is how much he wants and this is how much the nurse wants. I believe this has happened to everyone.”(Shkodër, Female)*
- *“It’s terrible [the condition of healthcare]. We pay the taxes and everything and still we can’t have a simple examination or a blood test or anything for free.” (Tirana, Female)*

Participants in all regions consistently brought up the lack of medication in public hospitals; doctors that work in public hospitals but who divide their time with private clinics; and special arrangements between doctors and pharmacies whereby doctors ask patients to pay for their own medication as the main deficiencies of the healthcare system. Participants acknowledge that they get better treatment in private sector health facilities, but that few can afford it.

- *“Doctors should be prohibited during their eight-hour shifts from going to their private hospitals. If you want to open a private clinic, it’s ok, but not during the working hours [when they should be available in public clinics].” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“I also see the problem in doctors. Most doctors working in the public hospitals work in private ones as well, and most of them, when working in the public hospitals, do not offer you adequate help and services. On the contrary, they might tell you the name of another private clinic that will take good care of you.” (Tirana, Female)*
- *“You can’t go to the private healthcare provider because you don’t have the money. You can’t go to the public one either because you don’t trust them. They give you the results but they don’t carry out the tests.” (Fier, Female)*
- *“They (doctors) collaborate so the drugstore sells out the drugs, then they share profits.”(Tirana, Female)*

- *“Even these equipment pieces, scanners and all these things at the public hospital [need improvement]. I went one day at the military hospital and the scanner did not work. I called the Ministry of Health to present my complaint, but the number was nonexistent.” (Elbasan, Female)*

Several participants believe that more oversight by the government and responsible institutions, investments in infrastructure, as well as an increase in wages for medical personnel would improve the situation of the sector.

- *“Doctors’ wages should be increased because they have the lives of people in their hands. For example, when you go to the maternity ward, they don’t even touch the woman if she does not have money. And she said, exactly as I am saying ‘I will sell the cow, but please just help my daughter in law.’” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“I think there is another reason: low wages of doctors and nurses may make them act like they do. For example in a private clinic a doctor never asks for money because he has a higher wage. In private companies you can get a job without paying anything, while public administration hiring has become an auction.” (Tirana, Female)*
- *“Increase the salaries in the healthcare and education system. That way, even the doctor or the teacher with a higher salary, he would not be obliged to work [on the side] in order to send his children to school.” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“Even in the healthcare system, they [the government] can tell the doctor that he gets 1,000 USD per month and that he will be fired if he takes any extra money” (Tirana, Male)*

Almost all participants think that education standards are very poor. Corruption is seen as widespread, a sentiment also expressed in last year’s research. This is particularly true in terms of teachers from public schools offering private courses for a fee, instead of offering quality instruction during the school day. They believe fair competition for teachers’ jobs, infrastructure investments, tougher entry standards for universities, and more government supervision are needed. Participants appreciate the government’s intention to invest more in vocational education, and most see this type of education as one of the solutions to reducing corruption in the sector while simultaneously reducing youth unemployment.

- *“The state schools have been completely lacking any standards whatsoever.” (Fier, Female)*
- *“In my opinion, here in Tirana, there are stricter grading standards on the final exams in senior year, while in other cities the grading standards are really low. This makes it really hard for a good student from Tirana to be selected into a good university degree program, while students from other cities, who should have low GPAs, come to Tirana with the highest grades.” (Tirana, Female)*
- *“It is not normal that the teacher asks the student to go to private courses. I have an 11-year-old son and his teacher asks him to go to the Math courses, English courses [after school, for a fee]. Then what is she paid for? When a parent sends the kid to school what does she teach when she asks me to bring my child to [extra] private courses she conducts?” (Elbasan, Female)*

- *“My daughter is in the first grade and there are 42 pupils in her class. I went to talk to the teacher and she said my daughter is not focused. I told her that my daughter is very focused at home. She said there was nothing she could do because she has 40-something pupils.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“Yesterday, I was at the education department to conclude the paperwork for my daughter-in-law, who wanted to be hired as a teacher. They told me to go away and come back with 5,000 EUR.” (Fier, Male)*
- *“I think that Edi Rama has supported vocational schools a lot which are something that, I hope, will have impact in the future, because now all students, including the ones who finished with good grades and the one who was a failing student, go to the university and finish university through corruption. Those people that have a lower GPA should get enrolled in vocational schools.” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“The quality of the education system has decreased. I have been working in the education system for 28 years and I don’t want to say that it is being used politically, but...” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“Laws are the answer to every issue. The issue of [teachers offering] private courses [instead of offering thorough lessons during public classes] needs to be regulated by law, as well. Like an economist who wants to exercise his profession after working hours, a teacher who wants to open private courses should have his/her private license registered and pay taxes for such activity. All these need to be specified in the employment contracts of teachers.” (Korçë, Female)*
- *“This is everyone’s mania, to have a university degree. However, the university should require some criteria, not just to barely pass in high school and then be admitted somewhere.” (Elbasan, Male)*
- *“There are few young people who would want to do this kind of job. Young people want to get a diploma and don’t want to work for 200 ALL. Every profession is important today, starting from the crafts to plumbing.” (Elbasan, Male)*
- *“There is the problem of heating. The pupils go to school and they are sent back home because there is no heat.” (Korçë, Male)*
- *“Employment in the education system is rotten by corruption. It costs 7,000 EUR to get a job, and where can a recent graduate, or especially his parents, find the money? My daughter has graduated in literature and I don’t think she will be able to find a job as a literature teacher because I don’t have 7,000 EUR.” (Shkodër, Female)*

## **PUBLIC SAFETY**

Similar to last year, public safety is a concern for a majority of participants across the regions, with the exception of Korçë. An increased number of burglaries, mugging cases, and murders have led to a mounting feeling of uneasiness among citizens. Participants perceive the increased crime rate as a consequence of the poor economy and high unemployment, especially among young people.

- *“There are times when I’m scared even to go home when it’s dark, because there is a narrow and dark street in my neighborhood. Usually there are some boys standing there smoking a joint or something, and I have to tell my husband to come and pick me up.” (Tirana, Female)*

- *“Schools are not safe, houses aren’t either. Economic difficulties bring these things.” (Tirana, Female)*
- *“No, [I don’t feel safe]. I have to stay at my shop, because if I close it at night they might steal.” (Shkodër, Male)*
- *“We have reinforced doors with multiple locks. Once upon a time on my block we were keeping the doors open, now we lock them several times.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“Order means having forces available so that when you see someone having a difficulty and you call the emergency number, they immediately come. This never happens now.” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“There is no safety. When you close the door, you use a key because there is no safety. You have your neighbor but still lock the door with the key because they have 17- or 18-year-old kids that do not think at all. They do not have anything to lose. They are out of their family’s supervision and to enter in somebody’s house just to take a bottle and they think that they will have a comfortable life after this.” (Elbasan, Female)*

A number of participants believe that there have been reforms introduced in the police force and claim they have increased police performance, but results – reduced crime rates – are yet to be seen.

- *Male group in Tirana:*
  - *First participant: “There are more policemen on the streets. This is a positive tendency for the better.”*
  - *Second participant: “There are not more policemen, but they are quicker to react. They now come immediately, while before they were coming 20 minutes after a murder.”*
- *“I am happy with the police reforms, because I always depend on the police. At least they have started to react because previously they only had the suits but lacked the power. Now, things have changed.” (Korçë, Female)*
- *“There seem to be more police at first sight.” (Fier, Male)*
- *“About public order, I have seen it myself. I have had a problem, and before when I went to the police station, if you didn’t know anyone, nobody would help. But now when I called, the police came very fast.” (Korçë, Female)*

## REGIONAL CONCERNS

Specific regional concerns (outside of the economy) expressed vary from environmental pollution in Elbasan and Fier, to a lack of proper infrastructure and investments, particularly in rural areas and agriculture, in Shkodër and Korçë. Farmers in these areas claim lack of infrastructure and an absence of available markets for their products have negatively affected their agricultural production, contributing to further impoverishment of farming families.

- *“The hospital’s medical waste. This should not be gathered and burned and thrown in the same place as the city’s trash because it pollutes the environment.” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“The issue of the factory concerns us. The people who hold public positions are the ones responsible. Laws are laws and need to be respected. The issue here concerns the fauna*



*and the environment and those who are in charge of implementing the law need to be very clear about this. It is one thing to have power and another to be in charge of the office.” (Elbasan, Male)*

- *“Let’s consider the minimum – cleanliness and environment. We don’t have garbage bins in the villages.” (Shkodër, Male)*
- *“It [Elbasan] used to and still does [have an issue with environment]. Elbasan has two factories. There is one factory which is known by all [as a polluter], and there is another one which is considered a trash field.” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“I think that keeping the environment clean is the most important thing.” (Fier, Male)*
- *“From the old aqueduct in Korçë, you could water for three months. But [since it was privatized], the income was not enough to cover the expenses for the aqueduct’s electricity, the cleaning of the canals, not to mention paying for the guarding of the building with three shifts. The government did not guarantee this thing. Now there is nothing left there. They even took the bricks.” (Korçë, Male)*
- *“They [the government] told us that that when the fruit is ripe they would help us with transportation and finding the market for it, but nothing has been done so far.” (Shkodër, Male)*
- *“We produce the goods, but there is no market, so we end up selling them at ridiculous (low) prices.” (Shkodër, Male)*
- *“The municipality has done nothing. For instance in our street there is a leakage which has opened five times in a row. They fixed it, inaugurated it, and still the same problem occurs, once, twice, three times. I can only imagine what hides behind this.” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“They are not helping the village. Not even for irrigation... and the financial help is too low. The things we need we cannot have. That is all we have 5,000 square meters of land. That is not enough to maintain us.” (Korçë, Male)*

### **III. European Integration**

The majority of participants favor European integration. Similar to last year, citizens see European integration as increasing investments in the country, therefore improving their quality of life. They perceive EU membership as a tool to improve monitoring of government performance and to strengthen the rule of law. Membership is seen as leading to better education, better healthcare, and less corruption. However, citizens are aware that EU membership also confers more responsibilities and obligations—both for citizens and the state. On the down side, participants believe that membership in the EU might lead to increases in prices and taxation, as well as greater competition in the EU market.

- *“If we get the candidate status, it means that Albania has progressed. There will be less corruption, etc.” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“Entering the EU will bring some limits to us, which I consider to be good. Starting from the various legislations and economic decisions, etc. I guess this will not only bring growth and welfare, but also many changes in our legislation, in tracking problems; we will punish the perpetrators, so to say.” (Elbasan, Male)*

- *“I would say EU accession [would reduce corruption], starting from the policies which would be followed, because all the member states are monitored by the EU. One thing that the EU does is create very efficient policies which give you a hand in everything you do as a country.” (Fier, Male)*
- *“In a way, it is important because some rules are being set and you can’t go back and forth and there will be no corruption” (Fier, Female)*
- *“The people will benefit because they will feel like European citizens and they can find a job for themselves.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“Of course it is important (EU accession), because we will receive more assistance, starting first of all in the fight against poverty.” (Korçë, Female)*
- *“In my opinion, it is both a privilege and obligation. The privilege is that you can go anywhere you want, you can have the opportunity to work where you want and join the European community. There are also some other obligations, for example related to customs; they tell you not to let any foreign products enter the country until you sell the domestic products.” (Korçë, Male)*
- *“If we have the papers, we could work anywhere. For instance, if I had the documents I could have worked in Italy for one more year.” (Shkodër, Male)*
- *“We are in a bad position [regarding progress toward the EU]; we are really behind, always the last ones. The last ones in football, the last ones in this, the last ones in that. We say that things will get better, but they don’t.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“In my opinion, investors would come from abroad and would open a new plant, and we would both [meaning citizens and investors] be safer.” (Fier Female)*
- *“The young people will be employed more abroad and if they find jobs there then the economy of Albania will grow.” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“[Albania will experience] intellectual development because of the openness, the experiences, the exchanges, the education and the knowledge in other developed countries.” (Shkodër, Female)*

#### IV. Expectations of the Government

Participants’ expectations of the government and appraisal of its first initiatives are generally positive, and reveal a degree of cautious optimism. They recognize that it may be too soon to judge new initiatives, but readily mention some concrete measures that they welcome in principle: the closing of gambling sites and casinos; the demolition of illegally constructed buildings; the annulment of the previous government’s amendments to the law on integrated waste management, which had allowed for the waste import; progressive taxation; and a campaign to fight corruption.

- *“I think that you cannot give an opinion in a two-month period. I have talked to many people and we think that it is too early to give an opinion because they have been in power for only three months.” (Korçë, Male)*
- *“They [the new government] seem to me like they are all very active. They are a new force and I believe nobody is stopping them.” (Fier, Female)*
- *“They changed the head of the education department and this was a good thing. They have appointed now a good person who deserves the position.” (Fier, Female)*

- *“The police, for instance [are improved]. They managed to catch all the prisoners who escaped.” (Fier, Female)*
- *“The closing down of the casinos was a great thing they did. Men were staying in such places from the morning till the evening.” (Fier, Female)*
- *“Customs are ok. I have noticed that they have collected a lot of taxes in the last three months. I have never heard that the customs have collected one billion Lek in the past.” (Elbasan, Male)*
- *“They have assigned some kind of spies to make sure that the doctors do not take money from their patients. I know that they have opened a web page to report the cases of corruption.” (Elbasan, Male)*
- *“Another positive thing is the closing of the casinos. We all in Albania know that there is a law that requires all casinos to be outside residential areas.” (Elbasan, Male)*
- *“They are tackling the hot spots like healthcare and the judiciary.” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“It seems like they are dealing a lot with corruption, which seems like something positive. The rest is not much.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“The quick implementation of the progressive tax. I support it because the small businesses have only one employee for whom they pay this much money to the government and to the municipality respectively.” (Shkodër, Female)*

Many participants frequently expressed uncertainty that the above reforms would be effectively and/or transparently implemented. For example, participants mention cases of gambling sites that were reopened immediately after initial inspections, and were unsure why that would be. Others perceive the demolition of illegally constructed buildings as arbitrary, selective, and completed at a high cost. A number of participants also remember the government’s electoral promise to legalize informal settlements; in response, they ask for transparency in these actions, and for the government to prevent and punish new, illegal constructions. And while citizens highly regard merit-based recruitment for public administration jobs, they express skepticism that political bias will disappear.

- *“For example in my neighborhood, of five casinos, three are still open.” (Tirana, Female)*
- *“[On closing gambling shops], ok, that’s good. The small ones like mine - they closed. We had four or five machines. What about those who have 24 machines? They are still there. Now, how is it possible that the big casinos don’t damage the family? Those who want to play will move from my shop to the next one.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“It was a great thing that the government closed them [gambling shops]. But they have reopened again. This didn’t last for more than three days.” (Korçë, Female)*
- *“They [casino owners] have used bribes, and they are open again. This is what I do not like about the governments. Usually, the first things that they [the government] try to attack are the casinos and corruption.” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“I don’t agree with the destruction of illegal buildings, because the government should wage fines [instead] in order to increase the state budget.” (Korçë, Female)*
- *“I don’t like one thing about this whole demolishing thing: it has its own cost.” (Tirana, Female)*
- *“Also, destruction of illegal buildings, it’s a good thing, but all of those should be destroyed, not just some.” (Elbasan, Female)*

- *“Why are they only destroying buildings of the DP members and nothing from the SP members?” (Korçë, Female)*
- *“A war against corruption has been declared, whether or not it is going to be realized, we do not know.” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“Corruption is omnipresent everywhere, it is fake to pretend that we are fighting corruption. Much ado about nothing. Even the attempt to accuse or arrest people for doing a corrupt act is done just to grab the attention of the public. I am surprised how those who are corrupt state that they are fighting corruption. How would you fight corruption? Will you imprison yourself?” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“It has been promised that there won’t be a need to pay money for the legalization of the houses and that the process will be completed within the year, as the Prime Minister has promised.” (Elbasan, Female)*

Participants raised taxation in almost all group discussions. Most participants seem to agree with the government’s newly introduced progressive taxation system, despite the fact that the majority of participants were not completely aware of how it is supposed to work. Some participants expressed concern that higher taxes for businesses may mean job cuts in the long run.

- *[“Do you personally benefit from progressive taxation?”] “We do. If we have been paying 10 percent until now, we will start paying three percent.” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“The government has to tax big business more because their margin of profit is much higher. This is where the government should focus more.” (Fier, Male)*
- *“Let’s take taxes for example. They said that they would remove the tax for the small business, but the taxes have started to increase just like for the large businesses.” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“Another thing I would add is the tax system, which is unsatisfactory. I believe that small businesses should be helped to empower the whole economy. They need to pay smaller taxes.” (Fier, Male)*
- *“Small businesses are more burdened by taxes that are higher, and they are growing higher.” (Korçë, Female)*
- *“The more you have, the more you have to pay.” (Korçë, Male)*
- *“Everyone knows how to run their own business, but as soon as they set up their business, the burden of high taxes becomes unbearable. Like the latest news, they will shift the tax on business to houses.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“Last night I heard the business people. They said that the government will place more taxes on the big companies. And they said that if they are taxed more, they will not be able to invest and thus cannot open new vacancies.” (Korçë, Male)*

A few participants were critical of the government’s performance in its first three months, citing lack of transparency on new initiatives or decisions, including how the decision regarding dismantlement of Syrian chemical weapons in Albania was communicated. Discussion revealed confusion on whether or not this was a good decision, largely due to the lack of clear information on what it would have meant for Albania. A few others complained about the government’s proposal to raise the retirement age.

- *“Regarding the dismantlement of the Syrian chemical weapons in Albania, there was not much information, it was a blurry situation, and it was not very transparent.” (Fier, Male)*
- *“Regarding the chemical weapons, the prime minister should have come out openly and said how we would benefit as people and what the consequences would be.” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“[The government’s decision to reject chemical weapons] was the right one. We did well not to accept it.” (Shkodër, Male)*
- *“[It was the right decision] because I have read on Facebook that one drop can kill 24 people.” (Shkodër, Male)*
- *“[Dismantling the weapons] would have been good for the economy. The budget would have tripled.” (Shkodër, Male)*
- *“People should retire earlier, at the age of 60 or 65, so that other young people enter the workforce.” (Elbasan, Male)*
- *“He will raise the retirement age from 68 to 69. We are tired even at this age! Imagine when we become 69! They will do it the same as in Greece.” (Korçë, Male)*

When asked about what should be on the list of the top priorities for the government in its first year – in addition to the abovementioned concerns regarding employment, fighting corruption, improving law enforcement and ensuring public order – participants highlighted a merit-based recruitment system in public administration and supporting small businesses.

- *“At least one member of the family, the mother or the father, must be employed. It should never happen that they are both unemployed. There are families who have both parents unemployed.” (Fier, Female)*
- *“I believe in meritocracy. One thing that could be done, for example, is the placement of some higher criteria for employment. Now there are some higher criteria than before. For example, students that have finished a master degree and have good grades, they can find a job, while before a lot of people with low GPAs have been employed with the help of corruption.” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *Female group in Elbasan:*
  - *First participant: “As for the criteria issue [for public administration employment], it is absolutely positive. We have heard about the employment of the new directors, and I think it is true.”*
  - *Second participant: “Never before has this been transparent. I have never seen a director of education elected on TV. These were competitions that were transmitted [on TV]. I have never seen this before.”*
- *“Meritocracy is the solution to this problem. If there were a meritocracy, people would know that only someone who deserves the job would get it, and this way they would think of alternative solutions. I want my kids to be educated and to study whatever they think would help them in competing in the future.” (Elbasan, Male)*
- *“In the first year [the government’s priority should be]: corruption. In the second year: appointments made on meritocracy; third: property issue. Fix these for a year, then see what comes next.” (Elbasan, Male)*
- *“Actually, what was promised was that every job would be taken with a competition and based on the diploma.” (Tirana, Female)*

- *“Jobs. If they bring the Transadriatic Pipeline gas channels they will create more jobs.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“They must not place people in positions based on their political affiliations. (Shkodër, Male)*
- *One positive thing I’ve heard about this government is that the students and the teachers will never be involved in political activities.” (Shkodër, Male)*
- *“If the Prime Minister is hiring through competition, then it is a good thing. (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“They should allow foreign business to come to Albania and only pay a flat tax.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“In my opinion they [government] should relieve the businesses from debt so that they can finally breathe.” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“If they dedicate some efforts to the healthcare system, it would be good. He can start by renovating some buildings.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“The only things which can pay off right now are the public order and the judiciary system.” (Tirana, Male)*

## V. General Politics

### STATE OF POLITICS AND POLITICAL PARTIES

Discussion participants express a general distrust in politics and political parties and are skeptical that any political party is interested in solving problems that matter to citizens. Parties are seen as equally blameworthy and none in particular stand out as solution-oriented. Similar to last year’s research, participants talk about parties as putting their own interests before those of citizens, revealing a perceived disconnect between “them” and “us,” particularly outside of election periods.

- *“Political parties only exist to satisfy their own needs.” (Tirana, Female)*
- *“They are all the same.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“They should fight for the interests of the people and not for the interests of the party. And they should not spur conflicts among people with different ideas.” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“The promises that political parties make are huge compared to what they deliver.” (Fier, Male)*
- *“Parties are like a trampoline for personal benefit, not for making a career or to commit to the people, but just a trampoline for access to benefits.” (Elbasan, Male)*
- *“The trust is lost because people speak differently, act differently, and deep down think differently.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“Those people who are in politics right now are never trusted by people because it turns out they are ultra-millionaires without doing anything. Why would you follow them? What for?” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“Politics is a necessary evil. But we need them [political parties], because they compose the government and every state needs a government.” (Korçë, Male)*
- *“They act as if they hear us only when they are campaigning. Now, they don’t care.” (Fier, Male)*

- *“I think we do not have the right political class, because in a decent political party [system], there exists some kind of agreement, while here I see a war between them. And the same people come all the time.” (Elbasan, Female)*

A number of participants would like to see political parties become more transparent and open to citizens. They believe party procedures are non-inclusive and party programs fail to resonate with them. And while participants affirm that politicians knocked frequently on their doors during the electoral campaign, they have little contact at other times.

- *“Political parties are 99 percent like a bunker.” (Korçë, Male)*
- *“It is hard to influence party decisions. Membership and opinion consideration are two different things. It is easy to become a member. You take your ID, register and that’s it. You are now a member.” (Korçë, Female)*
- *“Three months before the elections they [political parties] are open, but open to your votes, not ideas. They act like they care about the people and many things like that. As soon as the election passes, the situation changes.” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“They broke our door by knocking [during the pre-electoral period].” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“It is a shame that in our society we do not have politics that sees the ideas, the common things that are in the country’s benefit. We do not have an educated politics that talks the way it should.” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“They [politicians] just come to get the votes and then show up to ask for support for the second mandate.” (Korçë, Male)*
- *“It usually happens before elections that we have been given the right to express our opinion.” (Korçë, Female)*
- *“Sometimes you become a member because you are afraid for your workplace (position). On the other hand, if another party comes to power, you may lose your job too, so you don’t want to come out openly.” (Korçë, Female)*
- *“Only when there is the election season [do we talk with parties]. During elections, everyone comes to meet you but once they are over everyone disappears and you can’t meet them.” (Shkodër, Male)*
- *“We want political parties to be transparent. We don’t know what they are doing at all. For example, we didn’t understand what Ilir Meta did then and now as the head of the parliament.” (Shkodër, Male)*
- *“We ask from the political parties not to appoint businessmen because there is a conflict of interest if they come to the parliament and vote on laws.” (Elbasan, Male)*

Some participants disapprove of political parties serving as *de facto* employment agencies to secure jobs in return for votes and support. Others seem to have a more pragmatic view and list job opportunities as the main reason for political engagement. Participants note a widespread belief that political parties should directly ensure jobs and other material benefits for citizens, instead of promoting policies that would broadly create employment. Very few participants said they would like to get involved in politics—unless they are promised a job or some other benefit.

- *“For example there is a political party in the opposition and it has an electorate helping them, so how are they going to satisfy the electorate? Of course, by employing them. And it’s a terrible thing.” (Tirana, Female)*

- *“We always start with ‘what’s in it for me?’ We never do it so that the party would move forward.” (Tirana, Female)*
- *“Yes, personally, I am more interested in employment, and the only thing I need to know is if that party is going to provide a job for me if I vote for it.” (Tirana, Female)*
- *“We always see it in the personal aspect. If people have jobs they are ok. So, yes, employment is the main thing we expect from a party.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“Employment is a priority. Of course, the party should provide us with a job. It’s normal.” (Shkodër, Male)*
- *“They [citizens] use the party to either take a job or act as if they are party members in order to keep a job.” (Fier, Female)*
- *“You have to be engaged in a political party if you are in a state job, but if you work in the private sector then it is not useful at all.” (Fier Male)*
- *Female group in Elbasan:*
  - *One participant: “Here in Albania, we see the political party as hope. Why is that? I could not afford to pay to get a job. So, in our country it works like this: you have to get involved in politics and I see this as an alternative to get employment.”*
  - *Participant two: “These are just cases. For example I have cases among my relatives. A relative of mine was involved with DP and found a job.”*
  - *Participant three: “There are among my relatives that were involved with SMI and were promised a job, but they did not get it.”*
  - *Participant one: “How is that possible? Because SMI does not let anybody go without a job. You might not have a diploma at all and SMI will find you a job.”*

A majority of participants wants politicians to be more accountable for their performance in between elections. Keeping promises is by far one of the most quoted expectations from political parties by participants across all the groups. Many participants expect political parties to listen to and consult with citizens in order to offer sound policy solutions in different areas such as the economy, healthcare, judiciary, public order, and others.

- *“[What do you expect from a political party?]For them to do what they say! To deal with the judiciary and healthcare system.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“Well they listen to you, but it depends whether they follow up or not. They promise, but they don’t deliver.” (Fier, Female)*
- *“To guarantee me that they will deliver on what they say.” (Fier, Male)*
- *“To keep their promises and not make seasonal promises.” (Shkodër, Male)*
- *“Keep their promises and implement their plans. It is pointless to talk about them if they deviate from their plans.” (Korçë, Female)*
- *“In my opinion, the political party should work for the political economy of the country. This is their major duty. And just like the others said: they should sustain order and rules.” (Korçë, Male)*
- *“They need to hear the opinion of the masses, to ask their members and not decide independently and speak on their name. At least they should listen to the opinions of the electorate.” (Korçë, Female)*
- *“They [political parties] need to hear what I have to say. Whatever problem I have! But how much they listen, it’s subject to discussion.” (Fier, Male)*



When asked about the characteristics of an ideal leader, participants cite personal values such as fairness, accountability, honesty, loyalty, willingness to listen to people and to accept criticism, modesty, determination, and vision. A number of participants believe that a good leader needs to cherish and reflect family values. In addition to personal characteristics, a high level of education is often noted as an important element defining a good leader. A majority of participants, as was clear from earlier parts of the discussion, want a leader to keep promises, though seem to think of a leader's accountability as an exceptional quality, rather than as an expected norm.

- *"[A leader should] be fair and not break laws. Be a listener and a doer."* (Tirana, Female)
- *"The relation between talking the talk and walking the walk should change."* (Tirana, Male)
- *"He/ She should respect their opponent."* (Korçë, Male)
- *"He/she should be a visionary man/woman."* (Korçë, Male)
- *"To be prepared. If they take me in his place, I can't run Albania. If he has only done four years of schooling altogether and even those part-time, what can you expect?"* (Fier, Female)
- *"Should be loyal and family oriented."* (Fier, Male)
- *"Keep his/her promises."* (Fier, Male)

#### **EXPECTATIONS OF THE OPPOSITION**

A majority of participants expect an effective opposition to propose alternative solutions and support government-proposed solutions that resolve problems and are in the interest of citizens. Participants do not think that the current opposition should focus on personal and party animosities or take an obstructive approach to every government action and proposal. They believe that one of the key roles of the opposition should be to keep an eye on the government and its decisions, holding it accountable for fulfilling its election promises and denouncing corruption.

- *"The opposition should have the primary duty of exposing the government and of asking the government to fulfill the promises it has made."* (Korçë, Male)
- *"The opposition should only attack decisions from the government when it is reasonable to do so. Otherwise, it is useless."* (Tirana, Female)
- *"Denouncing the government, the ministers. I am not going to investigate a minister, but an MP has more access to investigate."* (Fier, Male)
- *"The opposition has a great chance now. Regardless of who is the leader, he should have clear objectives if he wants to make a slow recovery. He should open competition [in the party]. When we say competition, we don't mean gathering relatives and gangs but to have a fair competition. The opposition should distance itself from its mistakes."* (Elbasan, Male)
- *"The opposition should collaborate with the majority so that the country progresses. As much collaboration as possible."* (Elbasan, Female)
- *"The opposition should catch the mistakes [of the government], but the real ones."* (Tirana, Male)

- *“They [the opposition] should pass a law when it benefits the people. Not to reject the initiative just because it comes from majority.”(Elbasan, Female)*
- *“They [the opposition] should not come up with shortcomings for every single initiative of the government. Give us the truth or say it mildly. Being part of the public, I am also mad to switch on the TV, because I don’t want to deal with politics at all.” (Fier, Female)*
- *“The opposition should push the government to move forward and deliver on their promises. For example: you have said during the campaign you would decrease the taxes for small businesses; you have said you will increase salaries, etc.”(Fier, Female)*
- *“It’s ineffective. They are trying to argue about things they also did in the past. For example, they are complaining about the government hiring militants, I mean how could they complain over something they did themselves?” (Tirana, Female)*
- *“[The opposition] is inactive, but I think that it is doing good things. For example, it does not oppose the EU.” (Korçë, Male)*
- *“They [the opposition] need to sit down and discuss what is the best thing to do and implement it. Through the new leader, they [DP] are making a new reform. Since he is young, with a good reputation and with a good position, we expect more from him than mere irritation, especially in his choice of discourse and vocabulary.” (Shkodër, Female)*

Similar to their feelings about the new government, a few participants say that it is still too early to evaluate the opposition’s work and that it is still unclear what role the opposition will play in the future. Some also expressed doubts that the opposition could do anything given that it is not in power.

- *“I think that the opposition can’t do much now, because the party in power cannot yet be judged for the three-month period of governance in order for the opposition to respond to the majority’s defects.” (Korçë, Male)*
- *“It’s only the beginning. For me, they need to agree on the common good for the best of the people.” (Shkodër, Male)*
- *“They can’t do anything because this government has been in power for only three months.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“There is no opposition yet. It is too early to speak.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“We notice that the opposition now especially does not affect the decisions of the government at all. It has been years now that the opposition doesn’t affect decision making. Laws are created and approved whether there is an opposition or not. It is a matter of respect, of how much their voice is heard.” (Korçë, Female)*
- *“Why would I contact the one [MP] in the opposition? We may contact him but he has no power.” (Shkodër, Male)*

Participants think that the Democratic Party lost the 2013 elections because it failed to keep important promises while in government. Participants readily listed several significant accomplishments of the DP government – primarily improvements in infrastructure, visa liberalization, progress toward EU accession, and NATO membership – but they also noted corruption, poverty, inadequate health services, and poor standards for infrastructure projects as shortcomings.

- Prior Government Accomplishments:
  - *“The liberalization of the visa regime.” (Shkodër, Male)*
  - *“The infrastructure, the tunnel.” (Elbasan, Female)*
  - *“NATO accession and the liberalization of visas.” (Fier, Male)*
  - *“The roads, infrastructure, and that’s it.” (Fier, Female)*
  - *“The negotiation for EU accession is one of the merits.” (Fier, Female)*
  - *“The roads, the liberalization of the visa regime.” (Shkodër, Male)*
  - *“The liberalization of visas.” (Fier, Male)*
- *“The roads are not built according to the standards and many of them are built next to the sewage canals and even two cars can’t pass. This is illegal.” (Shkodër, Male)*
- *“They [the DP] are now in opposition. You know why? Well, because they did not fulfill their promises.” (Korçë, Male)*
- *“That road [Elbasan-Tirana highway] is not safe. It was done just because it had to be inaugurated before the deadline [of the elections]. But it is not safe.” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“Corruption in healthcare and lack of medication in public hospitals [were shortcomings under Berisha’s government].” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“Infrastructure was a good thing, but then the economic situation was a disaster, so what do I need infrastructure for?” (Tirana, Female)*
- *“Lack of support for the poor [under the DP government].” (Fier, Male)*

## PARLIAMENT

The attitudes of participants toward parliament reflect their attitude toward politics. The first reactions to the parliament are often negative and dismissive. A majority of participants are unaware of how parliament works, or how it is related to their daily lives. A number of participants perceive members of parliament as disconnected from or unaware of citizens’ problems and conditions in their regions, and a significant number of participants admit that they do not know who their elected representatives are. They believe MPs represent the interests of their political parties, and not those of the citizens. Participants want all MPs to better demonstrate understanding of citizens’ daily problems.

- *“The politics is the same, the same parliament, debates; always the opposition is against the position [of the majority], there is nothing new in the parliament.” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“It [parliament] is like the ‘Portokalli<sup>2</sup>’ show, but live.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“I think that closed lists are the death of political life in Albania.” (Elbasan, Male)*
- *“Since the members are not chosen by the citizens then they don’t represent the citizens. They represent the head of the party. I don’t trust them at all.” (Tirana, Female)*
- *“The MPs have been there for 20 years and they talk the same things. It is useless.” (Fier, Male)*
- *“[Do the members of parliament represent you?] Absolutely not! They only represent their own interests.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“They don’t mention us [citizens]. They only mentioned us at the first session, and then never again.” (Shkodër, Male)*

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<sup>2</sup> Portokalli is a national humoristic show aired once a week in Albania.

- *“They do their job, for themselves. They get together and they give licenses to their friends. This is what they do.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“During the electoral campaigns you see them all, but after that they vanish.” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“An MP comes only to ask for votes. You can only see them [MPs] on TV.” (Korçë, Male)*
- *“It is easier to contact Edi Rama or Sali Berisha in social networks than the MP of your area. They have even changed their numbers temporarily not to be bothered.” (Korçë, Female)*
- *“I have no clue who’s an MP in my area.” (Fier, Male)*

Participants hold generally negative attitudes toward politics, but still want more formal and regular contact with their MPs in between elections. Some suggest that MPs open offices in their regions to create a place to discuss the concerns and problems citizens are facing. A number of participants claim that they have no idea how to contact MPs in between the elections, but are interested in doing so. Only a few participants were aware of possible ways to contact MPs, such as through email or in those constituency offices that exist, but also through accessing their MPs through mutual acquaintances.

- *“When MPs had offices in the town hall or district offices, they faced all the problems, followed the situation, despite how much they could do to solve it. Finding this boring, they adopted something in the parliament and closed all the offices. This means that the MPs don’t have direct contacts with voters and they don’t have any responsibility for the citizens.” (Elbasan, Male)*
- *“Nobody else apart from Edi [Rama] has an office. Nobody in Fier has an office.” (Fier, Male)*
- *“They don’t have offices where we can contact them.” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“We know whom to contact, but we don’t know how.” (Fier, Male)*
- *“[We can contact MPs] at the headquarters of one or the other party.” (Korçë, Male)*  
*“As far as I know, there are the municipal deputies to whom you can turn to.” (Tirana, Female)*

When asked why they would reach out to an MP, responses often mirror the issues they want government to address. A majority of participants list employment as their top priority issue they would like to discuss with an MP, followed by specific issues of importance in local communities, such as fixing irrigation systems, repairing streets, preventing or minimizing frequent electricity cuts, and public safety, among other issues.

- *“About the streets. My neighborhood was promised that the street would be fixed, but nothing has been done.” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“About employment. He has influence; he’s the MP of the area. He has made some promises or they are useless promises. For example, one thing that he promised during the campaign was that he was going to work for the opening of a tailoring factory to employ some women.” (Elbasan, Female)*

- *“I would tell him [our MP] that we are this many people in my family [who are unemployed]. My husband, me, and my daughter who has graduated from college with an 8.2 GPA. Why can’t they find her a job?” (Fier, Female)*
- *“I would also discuss the bridge of Fier, for which construction started eight years ago. I don’t know who is responsible now. Maybe the municipality.” (Fier, Female)*
- *“I have another question. If we retire but have no work experience [social insurance] previously, what will happen to us?” (Fier, Female)*
- *“As we said: about order, placing products on the market.” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“For the economy, youth, roads, and the taxes that they collect for nothing even though we pay a lot.” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“For the employment and to ask that they should regularly meet with citizens.” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“Water and irrigation of the land.” (Shkodër, Male)*
- *“Electricity which is getting cut every now and then with no reason.” (Shkodër, Male)*
- *“For the issues related to safety.” (Tirana, Male)*

## **THE 2013 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS**

Focus group participants considered the June 2013 parliamentary elections as positive and relatively improved when compared to previous electoral processes in the country. This overall impression is based on participants’ impressions that the process was calm, fair, and managed better than in the past. Participants also remark noticeably high voter turnout and a clear, uncontested result.

- *“This time, the elections were quieter and fair.” (Tirana, Female)*
- *“[The elections] were way more quiet. The counting process did not last long.” (Tirana, Female)*
- *“There was a feeling of freedom; there was no imposition, no pressure ...” (Korçë, Male)*
- *“The turnout level has been really good. The electorate has been more aware and they have gone to vote.” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“It [the election process] was much better. It was calm, without major problems.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“They [ballot counters] read what was written on the ballot. There were only minor manipulations.” (Fier, Male)*
- *“It [the election process] was normal. It was according to the rules. Everything was calmer.” (Korçë, Female)*
- *“Where I was, everything was going well. I was in Mallakstra because this is where I live, and there was no turmoil.” (Fier, Male)*
- *“I think it was a fair process. There was no corruption.” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“There was a little progress. At least for the first time election results showed that politicians have become more or less responsible.” (Elbasan, Male)*
- *“They were perfect. Elections are improving each time.” (Fier, Male)*
- *“Nobody was telling you to give the vote to them. You could vote for whoever you wanted.” (Fier, Female)*
- *“[The elections were] the best so far.” (Korçë, Male)*

- *“There were no problems when the results were announced. The result was clear.” (Korcë, Male)*

A handful of participants remain skeptical about elections in general. Trust has not been fully reestablished in the election administration. Some participants affirm that vote buying was present during the election, with most attributing it equally across all parties. A few participants in each group state that they did not vote due to the lack of decent options, and consider that the election process was not better than in previous years, citing pressuring voters and buying/selling votes as integral parts of this cycle.

- *“The Central Election Commission (CEC) had only four of its [seven] members. How could we trust it? I mean it represented only one political wing; the right wing. It [the clear cut election result] was the people’s verdict...” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“All the parties were buying votes. We have heard of it actually in the Roma community; they’d exchange flour for votes and stuff like that.” (Tirana, Female)*
- *“And it doesn’t matter which party you support, whoever offers them what they need that’s the one taking the vote.” (Tirana, Female)*
- *“They have sold the vote even for seven U.S. dollars just because of poverty...this phenomenon was also present this year.” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“My sister works in the mechanic plant in Patos and she voted this particular party because she was told to vote them to keep her job.” (Fier, Female)*
- *“Take one [person] and give him money. Then the main guy of the family will call his relatives and make them all vote for him.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“Everyone was buying votes. So much money was thrown into this. Whoever could. Anyways, even if I sell my vote to you, I vote for whoever I want.” (Shkodër, Male)*
- *“I have a relative. He was given 30 thousand lek [\$30] to vote for a certain part, together with his wife, it means 60” (Korcë, Male)*
- *“I don’t go to vote at all. [Why?] Because I don’t have anyone whom to vote for. When somebody who deserves shows up [I will vote].” (Tirana, Male)*

## VI. Women in Politics

The majority of the participants, regardless of age or gender, agree that there should be more women in politics. When asked how many women MPs there are in parliament, participants’ general perception is that there are many more women than in its previous composition, only to be surprised to hear that women’s representation has changed only marginally.<sup>3</sup> This reaction is presumed to be due to the significant increase in the number of women appointed as government ministers, which participants easily translated to the parliament. Participants across the groups and regions uniformly commended the government for appointing an unprecedented number of women ministers. In general, participants argue that there should be more women in politics as

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<sup>3</sup> When the focus groups were conducted, there were only 25 women (18.5%) in parliament, which was only two more than in the previous composition of the parliament. After several MPs who were appointed to lead government ministries subsequently resigned their seats in parliament, the number of women MPs increased to 28 by December 28. Since then, the number has dropped to 26, following the appointments and resignations of multiple women for two specific seats--Lezhe 2 and Durres 4. These seats were ultimately filled by male party colleagues.

women are better managers, higher performers, more diplomatic, less corrupt, and better connected to constituents' concerns. Participants perceive women as more issue- and policy-oriented and believe women are better able to push for policies addressing citizens' concerns. Thus, they highlight that including women's perspectives in solving problems contributes to more stable and longer term solutions.

- *“A woman is a better communicator.” (Shkodër, Male)*
- *“They have more influence. They are great diplomats, very wise.” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“Women are less corrupted.” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“I feel good [about having more women in politics] because we have seen them being lawyers, judges, or police in Europe.” (Shkodër, Male)*
- *“Women bring culture.” (Shkodër, Male)*
- *“I believe that women will work harder.” (Fier, Female)*
- *“Women are nobler. You can make a deal with a man over a coffee, but with women, this is difficult. They are more difficult to be corrupted. They are clean.” (Elbasan, Male)*
- *“I heard a TV show about who is more easily corrupted between man and women, and they said men, because they have many more requests.” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“We need more women in politics, because where there are women, there is progress. Here, if you had more women the debate would have been better.” (Elbasan, Male)*
- *“As Margaret Thatcher said, ‘If you want something done give that to a woman. If you want something heard give that to a man [sic].’” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“It is very important to have more women in politics. It brings about new policies.” (Elbasan, Male)*
- *“It is important, because a woman will see social policies from a different point of view.” (Korçë, Female)*
- *“Women are more demanding and less corrupt.” (Korçë, Male)*
- *“We need more women in politics, because a woman is stricter in the process of decision making.” (Tirana, Female)*
- *“According to some statistics, it is believed that women are less corrupted than men.” (Tirana, Female)*
- *“Her [female politicians'] ability to better represent the people is important.” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“All the people who believe in connections and money get afraid when a woman comes to power because it is more difficult to bribe her.” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“I think [parliament] has more women MPs.” (Tirana, Female)*
- *“[The new government] has appointed women. Women are capable, not corruptible, and more humane.” (Fier, Female)*
- *“I would support women. The difference is how each of them delivers his/her arguments and is able to convince you.” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“If a woman and a man have the same qualities, have finished the same university, and are approximately the same age, I would vote for the woman.” (Korçë, Male)*
- *“If they do their job properly, it doesn't matter whether they are male or female.” (Fier, Female)*

Similar to last year's findings, participants highlight the fact that, women face greater difficulties than men to engage politically, and are significantly underrepresented mostly due to the multitude of family and societal obligations placed upon women. A number of participants emphasize that women do not participate in politics because of prevailing patriarchal attitudes. Several female participants highlight that communities with particularly deep-rooted traditions hinder women living in those areas from active political engagement.

- *“The opportunities might be equal on paper, but in reality I don't think they have equal opportunities. A man might have it easier to find some friends to help him get the position. I think it is harder for a woman to call her girlfriends and make them generate votes for her.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“It's easier for men. Men see each other and hang out more often, while women do not meet that often.” (Korçë, Male)*
- *“Because of the mentality, women would get different epithets if she decides to run as a candidate.” (Tirana, Female)*
- *“A woman is busier than a man. They are mothers, educators, cleaners, cooks.” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“Women don't have the same opportunities as men.” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“This is a masculine society. Although we ask for more female representatives, there aren't. Trust is a problem, too. People have more trust in men. They trust the power of a man.” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“Men can manage better than women because women are more preoccupied with the household, kids. The man is more free in this sense.” (Korçë, Female)*
- *Their trust is based on men's physical force.” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“For example, if a woman was running for an MP, I would vote her; this is the idea, because due to the Albanian mentality the man is more capable.” (Fier Female)*
- *“I think that when it comes to choosing between a male and a female candidate, people are more predisposed to choose the man.” (Fier, Female)*
- *“It's like in a family. In the home the figure of the father is the commanding one. He is the one who takes care of the family.” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“Because the mentality is that if a woman is involved in politics, people start saying bad things about her.” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“Sometimes women give the impression that they don't have many opportunities to solve problems. It feels like, because she is a woman, she will not complete the work undertaken. On the other hand a man will finish what he starts.” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“It's important to build trust in women, because people do not trust women.” (Shkodër, Female)*

A handful of male participants from multiple groups noted that women's underrepresentation in political parties regrettably mirrors the situation in society. These participants perceive the institutional barriers that women face in gaining access to leadership and decision-making roles in political parties, which are the primary gateways to elected office. They blame political parties, and more specifically party leaders, for closed candidate selection procedures, which in particular make it difficult for women to get elected.

- *“Women should be given more space in political parties.” (Korçë, Male)*



- *“None of the parties have reached the gender quota. The minimum was 30 percent and they haven’t even reached that.” (Elbasan, Male)*
- *“The negative side of these elections is that they make party lists and put whoever they want. In my opinion, I want to vote for the MP not for the list.” (Elbasan, Male)*
- *“This is where the difference is made [in how candidate lists are composed], plus, the competition within the parties themselves is so fierce that it is hard for a woman to advance.” (Elbasan, Male)*

In a few cases, mostly among male participant groups, conservative attitudes concerning women’s engagement in public and political life prevail. These participants believe that women have the same opportunities as men in politics, and, as was found in last year’s research, a few participants, predominantly male, do not support women’s participation in political and public life and views women’s primary role as domestic caretakers.

- *“It doesn’t really matter. One woman more or four more doesn’t change anything.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“In fact, women cause trouble, do you understand? [...Addressing the moderator:] don’t worsen this discussion [by asking about women]. Women have never done better in the Albanian history of women. Women go out to bars, but who will wash the dishes?” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“Women are inefficient. I vote for men, because they have more authority than women.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“A woman can become harsher from the [political] environment, do you understand? It is good that they are there, but the problem is that when the woman becomes harsher she becomes much worse than a man.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“For one reason [men are better suited for politics]: men move a little more, they have more connections. The Albanian society is like that, the society is like that.” (Korçë, Male)*
- *“No, they are not, because women have to stay more at home with the family.” (Korçë, Male)*
- *“She prepares meals, she does the house work.” (Korçë, Male)*
- *“We do not acknowledge her [women elected to parliament], at least me, because she has not been directly elected. It’s exactly like the gentleman said it. She is recommended by the party.” (Korçë, Male)*
- *“The man is a real leader, sets thing straight. The woman is more volatile and flexible.” (Fier, Male)*

When asked if they are aware of the existence of structures or organizations specifically for women within political parties and civil society, some participants responded positively. Of those aware of women’s forums within political parties, very few believe that they are a good place to discuss issues of concern to women and that issues raised and discussed at the level of women’s forums should be raised to higher decision-making levels. However, most of those aware of women’s forums in parties believe that while they may formally exist within party structures, they currently have no practical function. Still more participants claim to have very little information on the existence of women’s forums or NGOs supporting women’s issues. Male participants were particularly unaware of the existence of women’s structures within the parties.

Generally, participants show little understanding of the role these organizations could play in a party or in promoting women's representation in general. They believe that women's structures, if well organized, could bring issues of concern to women to parliament.

- *"I think it's a positive thing if there is a place where one can talk about women's problems. What bothers them? To raise the voice. If one raises the voice at this forum, later it will raise the voice among people in higher positions."* (Elbasan, Female)
- *"It's important to raise discussions because then they [women's forums] can take that further."* (Fier, Female)
- *"In these [women's] forums, there are a lot of women but when it comes to MPs, I don't know how the selection is made."* (Tirana, Female)
- *"I think women's forums are just a formality, because they don't solve anything. They raise the problems but they don't do anything, so I think it is just a formality."* (Fier, Female)
- *"Well they exist, they gather, and what do they do?"* (Shkoder, Female)
- *"They don't have the power to do anything in reality."* (Fier, Female)
- *"Can they do anything about domestic violence?"* (Fier, Female)

Participants generally have quite limited information on the work of civil society organizations dealing with women's issues, and only mention groups working on domestic violence and supporting Roma women.

- *"We don't know any specific names but there is this NGO which deals with the rights of the Roma women."* (Tirana, Male)
- *"We know about an organization here in Elbasan, which deals with the violence against women."* (Elbasan, Female)
- *"For example, the centers on violence against women are not functional. I know a lot of people that ask these centers for help but they say they have no funds. Or they train raped women, for doing hairdressing, and offer them shelter."* (Elbasan, Female)
- *"I've been in a training, it was organized by an organization fighting violence towards women."* (Tirana, Female)

Though it was formed only a month before focus group discussions took place, when asked about the Alliance of Women Deputies (the Alliance) – a women's caucus in the Albanian Parliament – a number of participants were aware of its existence and believe it may be a good forum to promote the inclusion of women's concerns on the parliamentary agenda and provide for solutions to those concerns. A few participants noted that the Alliance should focus more on promoting gender issues in the public arena, and suggested that the Alliance should push for some concrete measures related to combating violence against women. They also believe that the Alliance may contribute to lowering tensions during the parliamentary sessions.

- *"Since women are a minority in the parliament, by getting together their voice is heard more. I mean, despite the political wing they belong to, they could, together, raise the voice for the problems women in general have."* (Elbasan, Female)
- *"We heard some news about Mesila Doda being selected as the leader of the women in the parliament."* (Tirana, Male)

- *“Nowadays, we hear a lot about the violence against women, which has drastically increased recently. And we don’t just hear about cases when a husband is violent against his wife. We have heard of cases when they are violent with their pregnant wife. They are violent with their kids. I myself heard of a case when a man had been violent against his little kid – two years old. I wish the Alliance [of women lawmakers] raises its voice for this problem.”*(Elbasan, Female)
- *“To raise the voice for this problem... to pass tougher laws for violence against women.”* (Elbasan, Female)
- *“It is good they established [the Alliance] because they will be able to protect their rights a bit more.”* (Tirana, Male)
- *“They established it [the Alliance] in order to protect the rights of violated women.”* (Tirana, Male)
- *“[The Alliance] is contingent on the DP. The DP uses it to gather more women.”* (Tirana, Male)
- *“It’s a sign of women’s emancipation. A positive message meaning that although ideologies take as apart from each other, we still can get together around the issues of importance to women.”* (Shkodër, Female)

## VII. Civic Activism

Participants generally admit that they are not active in their communities. They claim there is a weak sense of community in Albania, or specifically within their neighborhoods, and awareness of civic activism is very low. According to the focus group participants, community culture has deteriorated. Participants discuss time constraints, poor living standards, little sense of volunteerism for the good of the community and lack of leadership as primarily reasons for their personal lack of civic engagement.

- *“Nobody in the village looks further than his own backyard.”* (Shkodër, Male)
- *“We are not active, we just care about our own area.”* (Korçë, Male)
- *“We are lacking the community. In Albania we don’t look beyond our doorstep. We even don’t pay for the hall cleaning fees.”* (Tirana, Male)
- *“The state has nothing to do with it. It has to do with 10 people getting together and reaching an agreement. The people in the block will gather to decide who the leader of the block is. This doesn’t happen because the ones living on the second floor say that they don’t need the elevator. Another says they don’t need a cleaning lady. This is what we should discuss. This is what community is.”* (Tirana, Male)
- *“Now everything has become individual. Because life has become too fast now, and no one has the time.”* (Tirana, Female)
- *“The organization of the community is not what it used to be. Let’s be realistic.”* (Elbasan, Male)
- *“People are not ready to take on responsibility. They are not willing to be involved in voluntary work. They are always used to paid work.”* (Elbasan, Male)
- *“When you don’t have incomes and you are unemployed, you have nothing to offer only but moral support.”* (Elbasan, Female)

- *“We are not active, for example if we start gathering plastic bags, other people will start laughing at us.”(Elbasan, Female)*
- *“The thing is that if we don’t get a reward, nobody would take any initiative. If I don’t get money I don’t have to do this.” (Elbasan, Female)*

When asked what might help increase civic engagement, participants mention needing appropriate spaces to gather and clear leadership and willpower to organize citizens.

- *“Every neighborhood should have a place, room, where they come together and organize, have a leader who will share the work.” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“There is nobody to whom the people of the village may raise their problems.” (Korçë, Male)*
- *“We are aware, we are conscious for everything but I don’t see myself powerful enough to fix something in my neighborhood for example.” (Elbasan, Male)*
- *“There should be an initiative for gathering the waste, to clean the environment.”(Elbasan, Female)*
- *“Physical engagement doesn’t cost anything to the society. If there is a plan, I’m ready to go and get some work done.” (Fier, Male)*
- *“I think that keeping the environment clean is the most important thing, but you don’t know who to turn to, where you should go, where you would participate.” (Fier, Male)*
- *“We lack cooperation. We need a hand. [Moderator asks from whom] From the municipality because we lack initiative.” (Korçë, Female)*

Participants generally express distrust of NGOs and most participants claim to be aware of only a few, if any, civic groups active in their communities. For those that are aware of NGOs, a few participants question some of the groups’ independence. Most participants affirm that civil society is not well organized and that their results are not sufficiently visible.

- *“Only a few [civic organizations exist] and they are not active.” (Shkodër, Male)*
- *“I do not feel it. There are NGOs but they are not visible.” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“Nothing here in Fier. Nobody asks us what problems we have.” (Fier, Female)*
- *“No, they don’t do any work. We do not know on whom they depend...they do money laundering for foreigners from different countries.” (Shkodër, Female)*
- *“I believe NGOs in the Albanian society are run by the politicians. I doubt they are independent.” (Tirana, Male)*
- *“From what I’ve heard these organizations only do seminars and activities to fill in their pockets, but nothing is being done. They speak about violence against children, for this and that, but in the end, nothing works.” (Korçë, Female)*

In contrast to last year’s focus group research, a few participants claim community activism has improved, with a very small handful of participants mentioning that they have personally been involved in community initiatives and a few more discussing projects in which they would like to be engaged. These are largely oriented toward neighborhood infrastructure or cleanliness issues. And a handful of participants – more predominantly in Fier and Korçë than other regions – could name examples of civic organizations involved in their communities. Those mentioned work on disability rights; poverty issues, particularly affecting Roma communities; the

environment; and domestic violence. Other participants raised religious groups active in the country.

- *“Well, there has been an Islamic NGO which has built a bridge over a big river and a health center.” (Shkodër, Male)*
- *“Well two months ago, I paved two kilometers of the road because it was in a horrible condition. If someone would be dying he could not be taken to the hospital so we paved the road.” (Fier, Female)*
- *“Yes, I’m taking as an example what I did during the day of cleaning green areas. As a staff we did some awareness campaign focusing on this particular issue, starting with the trash bags and the cleaning of the courtyard.” (Fier, Male)*
- *“The municipality planted some trees around but not near our block. So we asked for trees, and my neighbor and I planted them and take care of them.” (Fier, Female)*
- *“There should be an organization similar to the youth organization in Elbasan that supports the Roma community. I also would support their cause.” (Elbasan, Female)*
- *“Maybe we can help sick women with cancer, because they are more burdened in their lives.” (Korçë, Female)*
- *“Like on November 22, when we were organized to clean and everyone went out [in response to the government’s Let’s Clean Albania in a Day initiative]. They should organize the day of poverty for example so that we all go and help with what we can.” (Korçë, Female)*

## Appendix A

The findings of this study are based on ten focus group discussions conducted as below:

Number	Location	Urban/Rural	Employment	Gender	Age	Date
1	<b>Tirana</b>	Semi Urban	Unemployed/ Public	Female	20-40	December 9, 2013
2	<b>Tirana</b>	Urban	Private Sec/Self employed	Male	36-65	December 9, 2013
3	<b>Shkodër</b>	Rural	Unemployed/Private	Male	22-40	December 10, 2013
4	<b>Shkodër</b>	Urban	Unemployed/Pubic	Female	40+	December 10, 2013
5	<b>Korçë</b>	Rural	Unemployed/Private	Male	41-65	December 11, 2013
6	<b>Korçë</b>	Semi Urban	Private/Public institutions	Female	22-40	December 11, 2013
7	<b>Elbasan</b>	Urban	Unemployed/Pubic	Male	36- 65	December 12, 2013
8	<b>Elbasan</b>	Semi Urban	Unemployed	Female	22-40	December 12, 2013
9	<b>Fier</b>	Urban	Private/Public	Male	22-40	December 13, 2013
10	<b>Fier</b>	Semi Urban	Unemployed/Private	Female	40-65	December 13, 2013

## **PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT**

Participants in each of the selected sites were recruited through IDRA's vast network of enumerators based on predefined recruitment criteria. In order to obtain the desired demographic profile, representative of the population of each site, a specific screener form was developed and used during the recruitment process. Overall the screener form included questions aimed at identifying potential participants who met (i) gender; (ii) age; (iii) employment status; (iv) income level; and (v) political affiliation criteria. The overall objective of the whole recruitment process was to include only participants falling in the general profile of "ordinary citizens." Two important issues need to be elaborated in this regard:

Particular attention was placed on excluding politically involved people (party militants) from focus group discussions. The main reason for the exclusion of this group is that often, this particular segment of citizens offers views that are heavily biased by political agendas. As a consequence, the information provided by this population segment is at risk of extremism and not necessarily representing that of most citizens. In close cooperation with NDI, IDRA has decided to dismiss citizens belonging to this category from the lists of potential participants.

There was an initial concern regarding the inclusion of public administration employees in focus group discussions, due to prevailing assumptions that public administration employees are usually politically affiliated. However, since public administration employees constitute a significant proportion of country's population, NDI and IDRA decided not to exclude them. Nevertheless, particular attention was paid to exclude party militants from this group as well.

A vast number of citizens were initially screened in the field by IDRA interviewers based on a preliminary survey with the aim of identifying potential focus group participants matching desired recruitment criteria. These citizens were then screened a second time, in a process conducted through phone interviews in order to make sure that they met all predefined recruitment criteria. Potential participants were offered monetary honorariums for their time.

## **FOCUS GROUP INSTRUMENT DEVELOPMENT**

A comprehensive discussion guide, including specific topics to be explored during focus group discussions was developed by NDI. After initial reviewing and editing from IDRA, the guide was tested in a pilot focus group discussion. The purpose of the pilot group was to ascertain whether information gathered during the discussion complied with the objectives of the study. It also determined the appropriateness of the topics and identified questions that needed to be edited or deleted.

The moderation guide was slightly modified based on the outcome of the pilot focus group. The final instrument contained seven key discussion topics: (i) General mood and country direction, (ii) Citizens' priorities, (iii) European integration, (iv) Government expectations, (v) General politics, including parliament, political parties, and the elections, (vi) Women in politics, and (vii) Civic activism.





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