



“Putting People First”
Views and Comments from Albania
on Politics and Citizens’ Priorities

Findings from Focus Group Research in Albania
Conducted October 10 to 18, 2012



December 2012

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National Democratic Institute

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) 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 local partners have worked to support and strengthen 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 members and volunteer political practitioners from more than 100 nations, NDI brings together individuals and groups to share ideas, knowledge, experiences and expertise. Partners receive broad exposure to 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 are shared by all democracies. The Institute's work upholds the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It also promotes the development of institutionalized channels of communications among citizens, political institutions and elected officials, and strengthens their ability 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 fostering the development of political parties and emerging political leaders. NDI believes that equitable participation of women in politics and government is essential to building and sustaining democracy, as democracy cannot truly deliver for all of its citizens if half of the population remains underrepresented in the political arena. Since 2007, NDI's program in Albania has worked with women to advance their political participation and assert their voices into policy discussions and decision-making. The Institute's participants have been women from across the political spectrum, whom NDI has helped to acquire the tools necessary to participate successfully in all aspects of the political process. Additionally, NDI works to support cross-party dialogue and the inclusion of broader segments of society in the political arena, and to bring citizens' concerns directly to political leaders through public opinion research in advance of the June 2013 parliamentary elections. NDI also plans to conduct a pre-election assessment to provide political parties, civic organizations, and the public at-large with an impartial assessment of the electoral preparedness and with a review of the broader political environment, as well as to examine factors that could affect the integrity of the electoral process and offer recommendations that could increase the prospect for credible elections and promote public confidence in the process.

For more information about NDI, please visit www.ndi.org.

Introduction

Despite the significant progress Albania has made at many levels towards Euroatlantic integration – joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 2009, obtaining European visa liberalization in 2010, and most recently receiving a recommendation for a conditional European Union (EU) candidacy status from the European Commission – NDI has witnessed the degeneration of political discourse in Albania, which has increasingly marred politics since the 2009 parliamentary elections. Characterized by severe polarization and antagonism, political debate in Albania leaves little room for constructive communication and building consensus. Ordinary citizens have been, to the greatest extent, excluded from meaningful participation in shaping policy decisions important for their own and their country's wellbeing. Thus, this report intends to articulate the voices of those on the outside of policy-making processes.

In order to provide the public, political and civic leaders in Albania with timely and objective information about citizens' priorities and prior to the 2013 general elections, NDI led a qualitative public opinion study in four cities throughout Albania from October 10 to 18, 2012. The study comprised 10 focus group discussions and aims to:

- Identify and communicate citizens' concerns to political leaders in advance of the elections to assist them in better shaping their policies;
- Gather and analyze citizens' perceptions regarding the current political environment and their opinions and concerns about the electoral process and upcoming elections;
- Examine citizens' attitudes towards the performance of state institutions and the role of political parties and civil society; and
- Determine citizens' views of gender equality and women's political participation.

NDI engaged IDRA Research & Consulting, an agency for market, media and social research, to organize the study in Tirana, Shkodër, Fier, and Korçë. NDI selected target cities based on their population size and geographical location. In order to gather perceptions of a variety of citizens, characteristics such as gender, age, income level, employment status and political affiliation were taken into account and reflected in the recruitment of focus group discussants. Focus groups comprised eight to 10 participants. In order to accomplish the goal of the research, NDI designed a focus group guide and finalized it in close cooperation with IDRA to facilitate group discussions. For a more detailed account of the methodology of the study including participants' recruitment process and the development of the research instrument, please refer to Appendix A.

Focus Group Results and Usage. Focus groups are semi-structured group discussions guided by a moderator who follows a pre-set guideline. Unless otherwise noted, the conclusions presented throughout the report represent views commonly and repeatedly cited during the group discussions. Minority views exist and are communicated in this report only when they are significant or can highlight an illustrative alternate opinion. The interaction between participants in a focus group provides insight into how citizens think and feel and is a helpful means of understanding why those attitudes exist. 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.

A Qualitative Research Tool. In public opinion research, focus groups seek to develop insight and direction, rather than quantitatively precise or absolute measures. The purpose of focus group research is to understand the attitudes, opinions, and experiences of participants who are recruited for the discussions. Focus groups are particularly useful in gaining a deeper appreciation of the motivations, feelings, and values behind participants' reactions. Because of the limited number of respondents and the restrictions of recruiting, this research must be considered in a qualitative frame of reference. Although focus groups are a method of understanding the meanings behind commonly held attitudes, the total number of participants in a focus group study is always relatively small. Attempts are made to ensure the groups represent a broad cross-section of society. For this study, particular attention was placed to exclude politically involved people (or party militants), whose views are often: heavily biased by political agendas, extremist, and not necessarily representative of most citizens. As such, this report reflects the opinions of those citizens of Albania who participated in this study and is not statistically representative of the larger population. 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.

A Snapshot of Public Opinion. Any public opinion research, including focus group discussions, is only a snapshot of opinion at the moment the research is undertaken. Public opinion is dynamic and evolves as people experience and react to major events. Therefore, the conclusions of this report only represent opinions when the research was undertaken, from October 10 to 18, 2012. With this in mind, we remind the readers that the first focus groups were held on the day when the European Commission officially granted Albania conditional EU candidate status. Several other incidents and events, which were heavily featured in the news during this time, significantly influenced focus group discussions, namely the gruesome killing of a young girl in the suburbs of Durres, the murder of the Chief of Police in Shijak, and the hunger strike of formerly persecuted people.

Participant Perceptions vs. Political Realities. The perceptions of participants in these focus groups do not necessarily reflect the reality of the situation on the ground. Ordinary citizens often judge progress based on the change in their own lives. Improvements in areas outside their immediate interests (although important in the greater context) are not always viewed as progress by the average person. People sometimes get their facts wrong and often form their opinions based on inaccurate or semi-accurate readings of the world around them. Nevertheless, even if their perceptions do not represent reality, there is power in these perceptions, as citizens make decisions based on what they believe. Without knowledge of these perceptions, policy-makers and other political actors will not be able to address them. Therefore, the goal of this research is to report the perceptions and opinions of participants, regardless of their factual accuracy, to political and civil society leaders as well as the international community so they may better understand and respond to the concerns of the general populace.

This report shows that Albanian citizens, represented by the participants in the focus groups, have a clear understanding of what they want - a future where laws are respected, rules are applied fairly to everyone, living standards are higher, and a system of values is restored and honored. They see Albania's accession to the EU as a guarantee of this better, more secure

future. Yet, they clearly say that the country's political system falls far short of their expectations and fails to address their most basic needs. They especially bemoan the distance they feel between themselves ("we") and politicians ("them"), and they want all politicians to better demonstrate their understanding of citizens' problems. They clearly ask for more accountability for promises made and are ready to support those who offer meaningful and realistic policy solutions to their burning issues and needs. They ask politicians to stop quarrelling and start listening to each other for the sake of offering a better future to their citizens.

After cameras turned off, participants in nearly every group expressed their appreciation for having an opportunity to air their concerns and ideas, and it is NDI's hope that political actors will listen to the wisdom and voice of the ordinary citizens who have shared their opinions in this report.

Executive Summary

The conclusions of this public opinion research report are drawn from 10 focus group discussions conducted from October 10 to 18, 2012, in four regions of Albania, including Tirana, Shkodër, Fier, and Korçë. A total of 83 citizens participated in the discussions. Conclusions within the executive summary are explored more in the Principal Findings section of this report, where quotes from participants illuminate citizens' opinions on the key issues highlighted here.

I. GENERAL PUBLIC MOOD

- ***Most participants in focus group discussions hold largely negative views of the current situation in Albania.*** With few exceptions, the majority of participants think that the country is headed in the wrong direction primarily due to the bad economic situation characterized by chronic unemployment, the rising cost of living, and low salaries. A majority of participants expressed concerns over the uncertain future for younger generations mainly due to the lack of job opportunities, while older participants emphasized their poor living conditions due to low pensions and high cost of living.
- Despite overwhelming pessimism and frustration, some participants note signs of optimism and improvements and feel that the country is on the right track. ***The European Commission's conditional recommendation to offer Albania candidacy status for EU accession is generally cited as one of the main indications that Albania is headed in the right direction.*** Many participants, including those who assert that the country is headed in the wrong direction, acknowledge positive developments, including improvements in road infrastructure, schools, and electricity supply in the last few years.

II. CITIZENS' PRIORITIES

- ***The country's economic performance is mostly viewed through the prism of participants' personal financial situations, across age, gender, employment status, and geographic lines. Economic concerns including high unemployment and the inability to provide for the life essentials due to rising prices and insufficient salaries are by far the most cited priority issues by the discussions' participants.*** Overall feelings of distress over their families' living standards seem to be negatively affecting participants' outlook on other aspects of the country's development.
- ***The current situations in the healthcare and education sectors are also consistently cited as reasons for citizens' poor quality of life.*** These two crucial sectors are repeatedly criticized for widespread corruption, inefficiency, as well as a persistent lack of quality services and professionalism.
- ***Because of the perceived recent surge in crime, personal safety has become one of the greatest concerns for participants, especially for those residing in Tirana.*** Participants acknowledge that such concerns have been fuelled, to a certain extent, by the media's extensive coverage of crime.

III. PERFORMANCE OF GOVERNING INSTITUTIONS

- *A majority of participants largely blame “those in power” in general for the dismal economic situation in the country, as it represents “the most pressing issue of their daily lives.” Still, a few participants justify the difficult national economic situation by the global economic crisis affecting much stronger European economies. Governing authorities also seem to be getting particularly low marks on job creation and the fight against corruption. Politicians – in ruling and opposition political parties alike – are viewed, by participants across all surveyed demographic groups, as focusing solely on personal and party interests, rather than finding solutions to citizens’ pressing problems.*
- *When asked about the performance of the local self-government in their respective municipalities, the majority of participants talks about concrete issues and note low quality of service delivery, which directly affects the quality of their daily lives in their respective communities. Though issues varied across the four municipalities, in each, participants readily pointed out improvements as well as areas of dissatisfaction. Overwhelmingly, across all four municipalities, local authorities are repeatedly criticized for not paying enough attention to environmental issues, including the need to reduce littering, prevent and clean river pollution, and enlarge green spaces.*

IV. EUROPEAN UNION INTEGRATION

- *In participants’ views, the EU represents the country’s main aspiration and their personal hope for a better future. Participants view the EU as a mechanism to mitigate all existing problems in the country through its strict monitoring and supervisory role. They think that once Albania becomes a member state, the EU will help it to secure a stable direction of development, mostly by “obliging” the country to adhere to rules and “punishing” it anytime it deviates from the “right path.”*
- *While nearly all participants enthusiastically support EU accession, many see the road towards integration as long and bumpy. They recognize the need for deeper reforms that would lead to real socio-economic improvements and the strengthening of the rule of law and believe that Albania requires more time for meaningful reforms. While a number of participants were unclear about the benefits that the EU integration would bring into their lives, some suspected that Albania is not ready to enter the EU given the slow pace of development.*

V. CORRUPTION AND THE RULE OF LAW

- *Almost all focus groups participants are able to tell a personal story where they had to bribe a policeman, nurse, teacher, or other public administration employee in order to access basic services. Corruption seems to be an integral part of citizens’ everyday life, often regarded as “a necessary tool” to get things done.*
- *Aside from everyday episodes, corruption is perceived to occur in a more organized, systemic form within the political establishment. All politicians, rather than the*

government alone, are accused, almost on equal footing, of being involved in abusive practices and corruption. The widespread perception that all politicians are equally corrupted and the belief that all institutions are under this control, instigates a feeling of powerlessness that little could be done to change things. The feeling that they are not able to hold their public officials and elected representatives accountable further undermines trust in public institutions.

- *Corruption is seen to be the product of a general unwillingness to fight it.* Many discussants point to a lack of political will and perceive the largely inefficient and profoundly corrupted judiciary system as severely failing in the war against the phenomenon. *However, a significant number of participants also recognize that their own behavior contributes to the perpetuation of corruption, with several referencing the benefits of being able to pay off public officials to speed up an administrative process or avoid legal penalties, and others describing citizens' general reluctance to demand more decisive action against corruption.* They see the solution in the full and fair implementation of laws, under which all people are treated equally regardless of their positions or personal and/or political connections.

VI. POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

- *Participants express deep bitterness and profound disappointment with the country's politicians and the current political scene in Albania. There is a deep sense of mistrust towards all politicians, who seem to aspire to power and public offices only as a means of personal gain and profit.*
- *While participants agree that politics has a major impact on their everyday life, they feel largely disconnected from their elected representatives and bemoan the meager interaction politicians have with their communities outside of electoral periods.* Participants believe that politicians have failed to show genuine interest in people's everyday problems and have almost always disappointed them by breaking their electoral promises. They appeal to politicians to demonstrate better understanding of their concerns and ask for more accountability for promises given and decisions made.
- *Also, participants across all demographic groups feel frustrated by the overly antagonistic and unconstructive political rhetoric in the country. Instead of discussing and exploring ways to solve citizens' pressing issues, they see Albanian politicians as engaged in highly personal and worthless debates over issues of no real interest to citizens. The lack of civil discourse in the political arena was noted in almost all focus group discussions as a distinguishing feature of Albanian politics, which inevitably contributes to the further polarization of society.*

VII. 2013 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

- *While all participants demonstrate great interest in the major issues facing the country, they seriously question their ability to achieve meaningful change through their ballot given widespread concerns over election manipulation.* Their skepticism partially derives

from perceived violations of legal procedures that have damaged the fairness and credibility of electoral results in recent years. Multiple contested elections during Albania's short period of political pluralism seem to have profoundly impacted citizens' faith in politicians' willingness to hold free and fair elections.

- ***The majority of participants still intend to vote in the upcoming elections, including those who hold firm beliefs that their vote has little to no impact.*** A number of participants proudly state they are determined to exercise their vote as a basic right as citizens of a democracy, and few describe voting as an opportunity to hold political representatives accountable. Conversely, some participants describe feeling pressure or obligation to vote, often when their families' wellbeing is tied to the party in power, and consider it as a duty or "investment" in a more secure future for their families. A small number of participants were undecided and said they would decide to vote at the last minute.
- ***Despite believing that the general public is swayed by parties' propaganda, most participants agree that the political agenda and platform of a party or candidate is important to them. They would be supportive of any party or candidate that brings forth a realistic program for development and shows commitment and capacity to improve the status quo.***

VIII. WOMEN IN POLITICS

- ***Regardless of their gender, regional, and social background, almost all participants agree that women are underrepresented in Albanian politics and express willingness to see more women engaged in politics. However, participants point to pervasive gender inequality throughout society, conservative views among the public, the aggressive character of Albanian politics, and male dominance in political leadership as key obstacles to women in politics.***
- Most participants perceive the benefits of women's political engagement in many ways as an extension of the roles they have traditionally played as mothers and caregivers. The participants consider the tendency of women to have a relational focus and express concern for social issues as their greatest assets. Focus group participants drew parallels between the women's responsibility and leadership outside the political realm and the great potential they have as political actors. ***There is a general perception among the participants that women politicians tend to be less prone to corruption and are more hardworking and empathetic. They also believe that if women would be more represented, political discourse would become more constructive and ethical.***
- ***When asked whether they would like to become involved in politics, women participants seem to be reluctant.*** They justify their lack of interest with the argument that the political atmosphere today is overly aggressive and too corrupt to be appealing to them.

IX. CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

- *Based on the feedback from the focus groups, a prevailing deep sense of mistrust towards political organizations, civil society, and “others” in general, has led citizens to isolate themselves from their communities and focus only on their own personal and family’s interests.* Many participants admit, not without a sense of disappointment and bitterness, that a sense of community is very weak for many citizens.
- *Participants perceive the role of civil society as very limited in having any meaningful contributions in their communities. The majority of the participants display low levels of awareness and understanding regarding the role and functioning of civil society organizations.* When asked if they were able to name any civic organizations in the country, the great majority of participants claimed that they could not. *In addition, participants do not consider civil society as an independent actor, which, beyond the government and opposition, should influence and inform policy and public debate in Albania.*
- *Many participants believe that civil society is fragmented, disorganized, and even politically motivated or controlled. A few participants bemoaned the lack of activism and noted their own interest in engagement. However, these reasons, coupled with fear that any kind of unconventional exposure could negatively affect one’s life and the belief that the isolated efforts of an individual are not enough to bring about social change, dissuaded them.*

Principal Findings

The findings outlined below are based on 10 focus group discussions with 83 participants. The discussions were conducted with participants both from rural and urban locations across four regions of Albania. Group discussions were conducted with men and women of various age groups, employment statuses, and education levels. Focus groups are recruited to be as homogeneous as possible to enhance the comfort level of the participants and to clarify the views of a particular sub-group, therefore men's groups and women's groups were held separately. Consult Appendix A for further information on locations and group composition.

I. General Public Mood

Anxiety about the country's poor economic situation, enduring unemployment, the rising cost of living, and low salaries drive a majority of participants in the focus groups to say that Albania is headed in the wrong direction.

Participants in all of the groups, regardless of age, gender, employment status, or geographic lines, expressed general dissatisfaction with the current situation in Albania. When asked to identify the issue of greatest concern that Albania faced today, the majority of participants cited the economy as the top problem in the country. **A negative perception of the country's economic performance came up in all groups as a key reason for deeming the country on the wrong track.** When asked to reflect over the situation in the country, the majority of participants contextualized it with their personal economic situation and the economic hardships currently faced by their families. Simply stated, participants perceive Albania's current situation to be gloomy because of their gloomy personal economic conditions.

"[The country is going] in the wrong direction. There is so much unemployment. It's very hard to sustain one's family." (Female, Fier)

"If we look at the economic situation, we are seeing the impact of the crises. The debt is very high, so is inflation." (Male, Tirana)

"The situation has become catastrophic here in Albania. Unemployment keeps rising and many businesses are going bankrupt." (Male, Fier)

"The economic situation is very poor. Food is very expensive, salaries are low, and unemployment is high." (Male, Shkodër)

"A lot of things are headed in the wrong direction, for example prices are very high and because of this, it is becoming very difficult for people to save [money]. It is not only about being able to afford bread, people also have other needs. For example they want to be able to go on vacations in the summer." (Male, Fier)

"I think people make a lot of efforts to push things into the right direction but the problem is that not all the things depend on us. I don't think we are going in the right direction. We try, but with no results in fact. In appearance everything seems to be ok but actually this is not true." (Female, Korçë)

“If my family needs something, I spend a lot of time thinking about that...you need to think each expenditure through. You need to think about how the money will be rationed.” (Male, Tirana)

“The [economic] crises is very severe... it has impacted us to the bone. I feel its impact on my family as well. I work just so that I can afford bread. I can barely afford to have a cup of coffee with a friend.” (Male, Fier)

“The economic situation is dire. Look at us for example. Me and my husband we are both unemployed and one of our children is a student and everyone here knows how many things a student needs.” (Female, Fier)

Despite the general pessimistic outlook, some participants still feel that the country is headed in the right direction. The attainment of EU candidate status, conditionally linked to the fulfillment of criteria set by the EU, serves as clear sign to a smaller number of participants that the country is on the right track.

“One of the most positive things is that we are progressing towards the EU because we obtained the status. Despite the conditionalities, we did manage to get it.” (Female, Shkodër)

“The attainment of the status is very good news.” (Male, Tirana)

“The economy is bad but Albania has experienced significant development. We would not have managed to obtain the status otherwise.” (Male, Shkodër)

“Yes, principally we are in the right way. Visa liberalization is good progress because it gives to people the opportunity to reunite. This is very positive.” (Male, Fier)

“It is positive that we are fulfilling the [EU] standards.” (Female, Shkodër)

“We have made some progress since we obtained the [EU candidacy] status, even though it is conditional.” (Male, Tirana)

“Things are changing in a positive direction. We are on the right path because we are closer to [EU] integration.” (Female, Tirana)

- **Participants are appreciative of the government’s investments in the country’s infrastructure.** Indeed, in almost all focus group discussions, participants, including those who hold negative views over the country’s direction, pointed out that a great deal has been done to improve the inter-city road network as well as local roads. In addition, participants are supportive of government investments in improving current schools’ infrastructure as well as building new schools. Participants also are thankful for the significant improvements in the country’s electricity supply.

“They [the government] have been working hard on improving roads, for example the Elbasan highway.” (Female, Tirana)

“I like that they are focused in one direction. They have focused on building schools and roads.” (Male, Fier)

"Once upon a time, we used to have problems with electricity. Now, half of the streets have been paved." (Male, Shkodër)

"I think that the socio-economic situation in Albania has changed for the better - meaning, integration, opening up to democracy, etc. The right to education, the right to free movement, a market economy. People are free. There are a lot bad things, such as corruption, or [few] employment opportunities but I think we are going in the right direction. In general we are moving in the right direction. The rest belongs to the government." (Male, Korçë)

"Roads have been built, especially the ones connecting cities." (Female, Fier)

"There is a visible change in road infrastructure. Even rural roads within the communes have been paved." (Male, Fier)

"The infrastructure has significantly improved in all rural areas...roads have been paved." (Male, Korçë)

"We have electricity now and roads have been paved." (Female, Tirana)

Though many participants state that the country has experienced positive developments since the fall of communism, they also say that Albanians should look forward and evaluate progress against European countries, instead of comparing the country's progress to that of the 1990's. For many participants, including those who state that the country is headed in the right direction, the pace of progress is very slow and the results are too often insufficient.

"When my parents tell me about their living conditions [when they were young], I understand that we have made a lot of progress compared to the previous years." (Female, Korçë)

"In my opinion, we are going in the right direction, regardless, every country has its own difficulties. But, we have to follow the model of the developed countries, because we have only 20 years of democracy. We have unemployment, bad infrastructure problems, etc., but I think we are going forward." (Male, Fier)

"The transition has been going on forever. The pace of progress has been very slow and this is to be blamed on governmental policies we have had so far." (Male, Korçë)

"It's ok, I understand that the economic situation in Greece isn't good now and that the crisis has swept all of Europe, but, as a country, we've been passing through the same situation for years now, and this is how the situation will always be because things are too expensive and people don't have money. Where to find the money? People are under stress because they have no incomes to live on. Food prices have increased and you are obliged to buy because you have no other choice. This situation makes people feel psychologically down." (Female, Fier)

"Other countries have also experienced periods of transitions, but ours has been going on for 22 years now." (Female, Shkodër)

"We should be so much better because so many years have passed. We have not progressed as much as we should have. We have been doing five steps forwards and four steps backwards." (Female, Korçë)

“...There have been changes, progress, but [now] we are passing through a difficult economic situation.” (Female, Fier)

“What I am mostly concerned about is the pace of development. If we turn our head back, all economies have developed one way or another. Even Sudan has made improvements. Enver Hoxha used to compare Albania with 1939 during the whole duration of his regime, and kept telling us that we were doing great. Even nowadays, politicians compare us to 1990, whereas they should compare everything to how good they live.” (Female, Tirana)

“We are going in the right direction but we are moving too slowly. Unemployment has increased, misery as well. Health and education problems are present everywhere, these point out that progress is slow.” (Male, Fier)

Two other concerns – pervasive corruption and a perceived rise in crime – are featured heavily in the participants’ negative assessment of the country’s direction. Corruption is often cited as a reason for the slow pace of development, while the increase in crime, especially theft, is noted as a consequence.

- **Corruption and the lack of rule of law are frequently mentioned by participants as major challenges facing the country.** While the topic will be explored in more detail in a later section, it is important to note that corruption is seen as an endemic problem infecting almost all institutional aspects of the country’s life. Participants note corrupt practices in the education sector, health sector, judiciary system, and in high political ranks. Laws are perceived to be current and satisfactory on paper, but ineffective in the face of chronic corruption.

“Yet corruption today is happening right in front of everyone, right in the middle of the day.” (Female, Tirana)

“At the school desks, we are all the same, but when it comes to finding a job, whoever has “friends” and money found a job. This is corruption. This is how bribes are obtained. This is why innocent people are penalized.” (Male, Korçë)

“There are laws in this country, but laws here can also be bought with money. Criminals are getting out of prison, innocent people are going to prison because somebody paid some money. This is not a state.” (Female, Fier)

“The main problem is that there are laws, but laws are not being implemented. How can you expect the law to be implemented when the whole system is corrupted?” (Male, Tirana)

“Several positive steps have been undertaken in the field of legislation, and this is all to be admired. But when it comes to the implementation, it is often insufficient.” (Male, Korçë)

- **A perceived rise in crime has also increased anxiety among citizens about the country's direction. Some discussants feel that the rise in crime, particularly thefts, is a direct result of unemployment, while others worry that this, and pervasive corruption, portend declining standards of morality.** This particularly pessimistic view seems to be exacerbated by widespread media coverage at the time of the focus groups of a macabre murder of an 18-year old girl by her 80-year old abuser. At the time the groups were held, this specific murder incident was on front news in most media outlets in the country, and the incident was brought up in almost all focus group discussions suggesting that it had heavily affected participants.

"Hearing that an 81-year old man decapitated an 18-year old girl...it's a nightmare!" (Female, Fier)

"We have never heard of these kinds of crimes before, but they have become very frequent recently." (Female, Shkodër)

"Every day we are hearing about all sorts of crimes. People do not know what to do anymore." (Male, Fier)

"I also mentioned earlier about the stealing. If there was employment, there [would be] no need for these things. It has happened to me that someone hit me with a bike only to steal my purse. It makes you feel insecure walking on the road." (Female, Shkodër)

"I do not see anything as positive in the country right now. Everything is getting worse, we are hearing about murders and all sorts of other cruel crimes." (Male, Fier)

"The new phenomena today are only negative, resulting in negative things. You don't hear young boys gathering together to do something positive to the city, something good, only bad things. [They] gather together to approach women to steal their purses." (Female, Shkodër)

"...Drug abuse has massively spread in Korçë in the late hours, in apartment building corners. You can expect anything from those people under the effect of drugs." (Male, Korçë)

"We are hearing about a lot of macabre crimes lately, in TV as well as in our daily life." (Female, Shkodër)

"It's been three months now that we hear about two murders every single day." (Male, Fier)

II. Citizens' Priorities

THE ECONOMY: CITIZENS' TOP CONCERN

When asked to identify the most important issue that they personally or their families face today, nearly all participants identify the economy as their top concern. The majority of focus group discussants express concern over the deterioration of their family's living standards. According to them, the economic crisis has affected their day-to-day life, and life has become significantly more difficult. The inability to provide for the life essentials due to rising prices and insufficient salaries, in conjunction with high unemployment, are by far cited as the most burning economic issues by participants. Almost all participants claim that

their living costs have increased considerably due to rising consumer good prices. Concerns about skyrocketing food prices, as well as jumps in gasoline prices, have been mentioned in almost all focus group discussions.

“Prices are increasing every single day. Gas has become very expensive.” (Female, Fier)

“If you check all the stores in my neighborhood, everyone gets food on lists.”¹ (Male, Korçë)

“...the increase in prices...fuel prices have reached as high as 200 ALL per liter.” (Male, Fier)

“We see the increase in prices every day! The cost of bread has increased by 15 ALL in the last three months...the cost of vegetable oil by 50 ALL.” (Male, Shkodër)

“We are experiencing a difficult economic situation in our families. It’s all about the prices now. Prices are higher.” (Male, Fier)

“A liter of oil costs 230 ALL now, an egg costs 15 ALL...this is a scandal! Prices are skyrocketing and unemployment is so high...” (Male, Shkodër)

- **Majority also complain about low salaries, which in their view are insufficient to cope with the very high living costs, while older participants emphasized their poor living conditions due to low pensions and the high cost of living.** This is relevant also for school teachers and nurses, whose recent salary increases (based on a recent Minister Council’s decision), according to participants, has had very little impact in improving their standard of living..

“The biggest concern for my family is [our] insufficient income. There is nothing you can do if you lack the money... [...] ...you cannot educate your children; you cannot fulfill your family’s needs. This makes for an unhappy family...” (Female, Korçë)

“It’s true we had a salary increase, but with the prices increase we still are in the same situation because all the additional money will be spent in buying products which now are more expensive.” (Female, Fier)

“We need to be realistic...we are talking only about a 1500 ALL increase here.” (Male, Fier)

“We have not even felt the salary increase...prices have increased much more than that ...” (Female, Shkodër)

“There is a salary augmentation but the price augmentation has surpassed the salary augmentation.” (Female, Korçë)

“Maybe our prices are not as high as in Greece and Italy, but if we compare them to our wages...” (Male, Fier)

“Prices are gone up, so that wage increase will mean nothing. The cost of living has gone up.” (Male, Korçë)

¹ “Food on lists” is a common Albanian idiom referring to the phenomenon of obtaining food by leaving one’s name on storeowners’ lists of non-payers. The trend originates from the inability of poor people to pay on the spot, thus receiving the food on credit and paying for it whenever money becomes available.

“Wages have barely increased by 500 ALL, while prices are skyrocketing.” (Female, Tirana)

“Also the pensions in general, as well as pensions for disabled people, apart from low, they weren’t paying it for 5 months and they were telling me to go and complain to Tirana, wherever.” (Male, Fier)

“Take the pensioners for example. They receive ridiculously low amounts.” (Female, Shkodër)

“The oldest people problems have to do with their pension which is too low, whereas youth are more concerned about their education.” Male, Tirana

- **Small business owners participating in focus group discussions also express concern about decreasing revenues and increasing taxes, which, in their view have negatively affected their businesses in the last few years.**

“The economy is so bad. I can feel it in my own business...a year ago I used to make 10,000 ALL per day in profit...now I can barely make 5000 ALL.” (Male, Fier)

“I have not felt the increase in my salary, because of the inflation. I don’t quite understand by how much my salary has gone up.” (Female, Tirana)

“Taxes have sky-rocketed, for example for my minimarket during 2009-2010, I used to pay 47,000 ALL in taxes...now I have to pay 83,000 ALL.” (Male, Fier)

“Together with my husband I wanted to open a small business, but we got scared, as taxes are too high.” (Female, Tirana)

“I opened my coffee shop in 2001. People used to have more money at that time. Now people can barely afford to have a coffee.” (Male, Tirana)

UNEMPLOYMENT: A MAJOR CONCERN FOR FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Closely linked to the economy, and often discussed hand in hand with it, unemployment was brought up as a major personal concern for the majority of the participants across all demographic groups. While they admit that getting a job has always been a hurdle in Albania, according to them the situation has been severely exacerbated by the current economic crisis. This seems to be especially true for non-Tirana citizens as employment opportunities outside Tirana have historically been scarcer.

- **While a particularly pressing issue for the younger generation, a majority of participants of all ages expressed their concern for the uncertain future of younger generations mainly due to high unemployment and few job opportunities, even for those with university degrees. Many young participants perceive the inability of young university graduates to find work as a clear indication of the weak job market.**

“There is so much unemployment right now. I am not talking only about myself, but also about my friends who have graduated from university and still cannot find a job.” (Female, Tirana)

“Unemployment is the source of everything else. If someone has no employment, then he doesn’t have health insurance.” (Female, Korçë)

“When most of your family members are unemployed, the only real problem is going to be the economy. I have been a teacher for the last 37 years, and I still don’t own my own house. I rent one because it is impossible. I was able to provide my kids with education, but they are unemployed now.” (Male, Korçë)

“How can we accept the fact that there are people with even two diplomas and they are still unemployed?” (Male, Shkodër)

“So many students graduate university and they do not feel secure that they will find jobs. There are no jobs.” (Female, Korçë)

“We are feeling insecure because there are no jobs. We have children and grandchildren that have graduated university with very good grades and they are still unemployed.” (Female, Tirana)

“There are no job positions even for those that have graduated university...there are no jobs.” (Female, Shkodër)

- Though the overall poor economy is a predominant factor contributing to high unemployment, participants also perceive unemployment to be the result of a job positions being given to people with the **“right acquaintances” and the “right political affiliation”** rather than those who have the appropriate skills or education.

“Chances for employment are not equal...things do not work on a merit basis....they work on a ‘friends’ basis.” (Female, Korçë)

“[When it comes to] employment in the education sector, it is happening more and more that only people who support the party in power are getting hired. For example, if I supported the left or if I just supported no one, I could never be hired, because the right is governing right now.” (Female, Tirana)

“If there is an available job position, applicants are first considered from a political affiliation perspective, then from a “friends” perspective and finally on a “money” perspective. Inequality [of citizens] originates in these three [factors].” (Male, Fier)

“If you do not have the right political support, you will be fired. They do not even provide you with reasons for that.” (Female, Tirana)

“Unemployment is dominating in Shkodër. If you support the party in power, you are bound to survive. If you don’t, you will remain unemployed.” (Male, Shkodër)

“Take the education sector for example: people are hired based on “political colors.” People are also fired based on “political colors.” (Male, Fier)

“All of us are witnesses of how people that are incapable and unskilled to do the job are being hired using their friends or money.” (Female, Korçë)

- **Participants point to frequent violations of employees’ rights, which, they say, have increased as employers can find others among the cast of unemployed to work for less,**

and the state fails to punish such practices. Based on focus group discussions, violations such as uninsured employment and less-than-minimum-wage salaries are quite common in the labor market.

“I work in a private company....[they pay my social benefits] at minimum wage, even though I get [paid] a bit more...Why should the government allow this? Do you think they do not know? Of course they do...It is just that my employer is “somebody” and he can tell you, “if you want you can stay, if you don’t want to, you can just leave.” He can find somebody else in the blink of an eye because of the high unemployment.” (Female, Fier)

“From what I have seen, almost all private businesses in Shkodër pay their employees under the table.” (Male, Shkodër)

“When there is not much work, the employer tells us to stay home. Sometimes he allows us to take annual leave and sometimes he doesn’t.” (Female, Tirana)

“Employers rarely respect norms. You get part of the wage “on the table” and part of it “under the table.” (Male, Fier)

“We are not speaking about an average wage, we are talking about 15,000 ALL per month here. Working 8 hours per day, changing two buses just to get there. It is very difficult to work for a private employer.” (Female, Tirana)

HIGHER QUALITY EDUCATION AND HEALTHCARE: ESSENTIAL FOR BETTER LIFE

The quality of public services, particularly in health and education, also came up in multiple groups as priority concerns of citizens, and were often mentioned in discussions about the country being on the wrong track.

- **While a few participants point to recent investments in school infrastructure, the great majority of group discussants are quite dissatisfied with the education system in the country.** Group discussants express concerns particularly over the tertiary education system. The higher education system in Albania is perceived to be characterized by widespread corruption materializing itself mostly in the form of bribes obtained by professors in exchange for better grades.

“There is also corruption among young professors just as much as among older ones.” (Female student, Korçë)

“To me school education is a major problem. State schools are second-rate schools, their intention is to enlarge the number of students in private schools. We have no money to afford our childrens’ education in private schools and as a result our children don’t get the indispensable education. The best teachers give private lessons which only those who have money can afford.” (Female, Fier)

“If you have to deal with a corrupted professor you have to be corrupted as well in the sense that you have to pay to get the grade you deserve.” (Female student, Korçë)

“Students never show up to class, they only come to exams ready to pay bribes to pass the class.” (Male student, Fier)

"I think the major problem in education is incompetency. I think people should be very responsible, capable in things they do. We are aware of the fact that inefficient people are being employed in different posts even why they are not qualified for deserving the position they have." (Female student, Korçë)

"Some professors will never let you pass the class until you bribe them." (Female student, Tirana)

"I think politics should be out of health and education because in both two cases you risk a lot. They both have to do with people's life although in two different manners. It's a pity to hear that there are teachers who are not up to that profession. They are there due to corruption, due to their political point of views." (Male, Fier)

- **The proliferation of private universities perceived to be granting diplomas of a dubious quality is viewed as a major problem of the higher education system in Albania.** According to some participants, the majority of private universities are simply companies in the "education business" with the intent to equip anyone with a diploma who is willing to pay for it, regardless of merit.

"...they [private universities] recruit an infinite number of students....how absurd! The great majority enrolled in these universities graduate just because they have money. It makes me feel sorry for myself...after all my studying to finish university, I am treated on an equal basis with someone who graduated from university [without studying]." (Female, Tirana)

"A bad high school student can't be a good student in the university. This leads universities to degradation. They did a real chaos with education by allowing every student to be part of universities even without deserving it. In private schools you pay in order to overpass an exam this is obvious, compared to national universities the difference is that in national universities there is not the same visibility of giving money." (Female, Korçë)

"They [private universities] have turned into businesses...students attending private universities are not receiving quality educations." (Male, Fier)

Based on group discussions, concerns about the health care system in Albania seem to be equal to concerns about education. Participants seem to be quite dissatisfied with public health services in the country, which were frequently critized for incompetence, inefficiency, and widespread corruption. Specifically, although public health care is free under social insurance coverage in Albania, participants claim that expenditures for public health services are quite high. Bribing doctors and nurses, who participants claim are often otherwise unwilling to perform their duties, for services provided in public hospitals or clinics seems to be quite a widespread phenomenon. In addition, participants claim that public hospitals and clinics often lack medicine and even the most basic medical equipment, forcing them to seek private clinics to perform medical tests and purchase drugs for patients in hospitals out of their own pockets.

"I had to bring my sister to the emergency once...the doctor wrote me a prescription and told me to go to the drug store outside to buy the medicine for injections. Shouldn't public hospitals provide at least injections at the emergency?" (Female, Fier)

“We had to bring one of my relatives to the hospital. Until we bribed the nurses, they wouldn’t even touch him.” (Male, Tirana)

“If you refuse to bribe them [medical personnel], they will refuse to serve you, or you will get very poor service...[...]...I am saying this from my personal experience because I had to bribe them so that I could enter the operation room.” (Female, Shkodër)

“You need to negotiate the price before entering the operation room.” (Male, Tirana)

“MRI machines and CT scanners are all broken in public hospitals...they are all working perfectly fine in private clinics. Doctors’ always suggest to go to the private clinic right next to the public hospital.” (Male, Shkodër)

- **Claims of medical malpractice arising as a result of alleged incompetence of public healthcare service providers are also quite common.** Recruitment of healthcare workers based on nepotism, political affiliations, or bribes rather than actual skills are frequently mentioned by focus group participants as possible causes of medical malpractice.

“There are cases when they fire specialists with 20 years of experience in order to hire recent graduates. Firing somebody with experience in order to hire a graduate just because he has the right friends? How absurd!” (Female, Tirana)

“I was at the hospital three days ago and I saw for myself what is going on there. I was not sure about my diagnosis. They [doctors] told me I had appendix, but at the end it resulted to be a completely different thing.” (Male, Tirana)

“They [hospitals] lack competent staff. And if they lack specialized staff, there is no point to complain about the lack of new medical equipment.” (Male, Korçë)

- **The lack of basic infrastructure and limited investments in the public healthcare system are other frequently mentioned issues of this sector.** Participants from rural areas, especially in Fier, highlighted poor healthcare facilities and limited access to healthcare services.

“Walls are falling off and the furniture is all broken in public hospitals.” (Male, Tirana)

“There are a lot of private hospitals with all the necessary commodities but we cannot afford them. Public hospitals are in an abysmal state, especially surgery departments.” (Female, Tirana)

“Investments in public hospitals are minimal and we have to find the reason why. Maybe what we pay for insurance is not enough? Maybe because there are a lot of people who are not insured?” (Male, Korçë)

“The doctor shows up only at 9 and leaves very early...we do not even have a clinic.” (Female, Fier)

PERSONAL SAFETY: AN INCREASING CONCERN FOR CITIZENS

Significant increase in street crime rates during the last few months has made personal safety another great concern for citizens, especially for those residing in Tirana. Though none of the focus group participants from Tirana had personally been a victim of crime, quite a few had heard stories about victims of assaults or robberies. Safety concerns seem to be milder among residents of Shkodër, Korçë, and Fier. However, participants acknowledged that their concerns have been fuelled to a certain extent by the media and its recent, perceived, increased focus on incidents of street crimes. Participants mostly blame the recent spike in crime rates on two main factors - the increasingly difficult economic situation combined with high unemployment rates and the corrupt and malfunctioning judiciary system.

“Nothing has happened to me personally, but a woman was robbed of her gold necklace in my neighborhood right in the middle of the day.” (Female, Tirana)

“I have heard that house burglaries have massively increased.” (Female, Tirana)

“We hear the news, and we fear criminals will appear from everywhere. Terrible things are happening nowadays. We fear for our wives to go out late to the supermarket, for example, because of youth consuming drugs in the neighborhood. We suffer from insecurity. This problem should absolutely be in the focus of the next leading party.” (Male, Fier)

“It’s been two months since I don’t wear my golden necklaces anymore.” (Female, Tirana)

“I am scared even to hold my wallet in my hands when I go out on the streets.” (Female, Tirana)

“I might feel safe in my neighborhood, but with what I hear I am starting to feel very unsafe.” (Male, Shkodër)

“Most important of all [problems], the streets are unsafe.” (Female, Tirana)

“Safety is a major problem of our daily life. We hear about drunken people, decapitated girls ... [...] ...An armored door is the only thing that makes us feel safe at this point.” (Male, Fier)

III. Performance of Governing Authorities

Across all focus group discussions, participants expressed dissatisfaction with the way the country is being governed. A majority of participants largely blame “those in power” in general for the dismal economic situation in the country, which represents “the most pressing issue of their daily lives.” Participants seem to be particularly sensitive to a few declarations made by government officials claiming high economic growth rates in the country, which are perceived as “insensitive to the suffering of ordinary citizens.” However, a few participants justify the difficult national economic situation within context of the global economic crisis which has affected much stronger European economies.

“I do not like the assertions on Albania’s economic growth. They say that we have the same economic growth as Germany, while figures tell a completely different story. I do not like this.” (Female, Tirana)

“Why does the Prime Minister say that we are having an economic boom when the economy is so bad?” (Male, Fier)

“The Prime Minister declares that the economy has been growing, but I think that the only thing that has been growing so far is his own salary.” (Male, Shkodër)

“I think that [the situation in the country] is so-so. We’re moving very slowly, but still we’re good. We know that the whole of Europe is in crisis. And if more powerful countries are experiencing the economic crisis, it is normal that it affects Albania as well.” (Male, Fier)

- **The government seems to be receiving particularly low marks on the hot-button issues of job creation and the fight against corruption, as well as the privatization of publicly owned companies and other public properties.** Rather than a necessary process to increase efficiency and revitalize the economy, privatization of public property is mostly viewed as a painful process benefiting foreign companies rather than the Albanian people.

“They are selling the country away, and we get nothing. That is the state’s property, it is not the property of the government. They should use public properties to benefit the Albanian people, not sell them out like they have done so far.” (Male, Fier)

“There are no job opportunities even for graduating students. There are no jobs.” (Female, Shkodër)

“Everything [public properties] is being sold out here. Our Prime Minister is privatizing everything and selling everything according to his will. He privatized Albtelecom, the Albanian Energy Corporation, the local water supply companies, he even wants to sell away the sea now! (Male, Korçë)

“The foreigners are taking over our resources and our oil and we will end up with nothing.” (Female, Fier)

“The government needs to be more persistent. It should impose a rule on foreigners to hire Albanian workers for every project they undertake. In the Kalimashi project, only 60% of the workers were Albanian; the other 40% were Turkish.” (Male, Fier)

Politicians in ruling and opposition political parties alike are viewed by participants across all demographics as focusing solely on personal and party interests, rather than finding solutions to citizens’ pressing problems.

“Everybody is corrupt and we all know it, still nobody is doing anything to fight it as they should.” (Female Tirana)

“The government is indecisive in the war against corruption.” (Male, Korçë)

“Those in power do not fear justice. They own half the businesses and their wealth is beyond limits.” (Male, Tirana)

“The seacoast is in the politicians’ hands. People just don’t admit the fact they know how things really are. Government has the seacoast, has oil, has all the most popular businesses. We have nothing.” (Female, Fier)

“The state itself is very associated with corruption, and laws do not function. [Those in power] are supposed to obey the laws but in fact they do the contrary. This means these people don’t deserve their positions.” (Female, Korçë)

“Justice here - it is in the government’s hands. Prosecutors here are stuck because government doesn’t permit justice to function properly.” (Male, Fier)

“I think that corruption has been around for way too long, and the speed of development is very low. This is a result of different policies applied by governments, be it the left or the right. In my neighborhood, everyone gets groceries by lists and there is no sense of solidarity.” (Male, Korçë)

When asked about the performance of the local self-government in their respective municipalities, the majority of participants talk about concrete issues and note low quality of service delivery, which directly affects the quality of their daily lives in their respective communities. Though issues varied across the four municipalities, in each, participants readily pointed out improvements as well as areas of dissatisfaction.

- **The majority of participants across all four municipalities stress that the local government has generally done a good job in improving the infrastructure in the city centers (mostly in respect to building roads and developing main city squares), but have often neglected the rural areas and city outskirts.** Young residents of Korça are particularly appreciative of the municipality’s efforts to promote an active cultural life in the city, while other positive aspects occasionally mentioned in discussions in different cities include improvements in public transportation and, in the case of Tirana, increased transparency regarding decision-making.

“They are focusing too much on the center of the city. Nothing has improved in the suburbs and neighborhoods where we actually live. There are a lot of problems with infrastructure.” (Female, Tirana)

“The municipality is only fixing main roads. It has not done anything for my neighborhood for example.” (Female, Korçë)

“The municipality is focusing only on the center of the city.” (Female, Korçë)

“It is good that they are organizing parties, for example the beer fest, or the carnivals. This has a positive impact. It creates a positive atmosphere.” (Female, Korçë)

“Yes I do see some positive things. For instance, public transportation has improved.” (Female, Tirana)

“There is more transparency. At least they provide some information now, talk about things, and show what will happen with our money.” (Female, Tirana)

- **Overwhelmingly, across all four municipalities, local authorities are repeatedly criticized for not paying enough attention to environmental issues, including the need to reduce littering, prevent and clean river pollution, and enlarge green areas.** Increasing public green spaces is the most mentioned priority on which local authorities should focus,

according to focus group discussants in all municipalities. Participants also often mentioned dissatisfaction with the malfunctioning city sewerage system, which according to them is inefficient in cases of heavy rains. Additionally, participants complain of pollution, littering and unsatisfactory cleaning services.

“There are no parks...there are no spaces for children to play.” (Male, Tirana)

“The most important thing a mayor should do is preserve the green spaces of the city. There are no green spaces in Tirana now.” (Male, Tirana)

“The most negative thing is that there are no parks where the elderly, children, and young people could spend their time.” (Female, Shkodër)

“You can barely find a single tree in the city. And within neighborhoods there is no sewage system, no proper lightning. Streets are not paved.” (Male, Korçë)

“The sewage system is not efficient; we have a flood anytime it rains even a little.” (Female, Shkodër)

“Even when they try to fix the sewerage system, they do not do it properly. The streets were fixed two years ago, but now they are opening them up again [to fix the sewerage system]. It’s a pity to do the same thing twice. They work without a plan.” (Female, Shkodër)

“Streets are not clean. The municipality owns all the necessary machinery to clean the streets properly, but we never see them do that. There is much pollution.” (Male, Fier)

“Every municipality needs to have a plan in regards to construction. Apartments buildings here have only three meters of distance from each other.” (Male, Fier)

“The river Gjanica is extremely polluted. It is also contaminating other dwellings. The first thing I would do is clean the river.” (Male, Fier)

IV. European Union Integration

When discussing the values of the European Union and the significance of membership, all the participants take a comparative approach by defining the EU from what is missing in Albania. They mainly believe that being in the EU will bring a better future – one where laws are respected, citizens are respectful of one another, rules are applied fairly to everyone, living standards are improved, corruption is reduced, and a system of values is honored.

“Each citizen in Europe is free and has his own right to demand water and electricity, while I cannot hold anyone accountable. We are not free in any aspect.” (Female, Fier)

“For me [Europe] means respect for human rights. There is no such thing in Albania.” (Female, Tirana)

“[If we become part of the EU, the Albanian] mentality will change over time. It will take on some of the European way of thinking.” (Male, Fier)

“Integration into the EU means to respect the law.” (Male, Korçë)

“If we see for example a man with an earring here [in Albania], we would mock him. If this person were abroad, there would not be such problems, because they [Europeans] have a different mentality. And if the mentalities merge, the most common one will prevail and the smaller one will slowly fade away.” (Male, Fier)

“Humanism is the first European value. It all started with humanism and this is how we came till here. Integration means that the structures function like they function in Europe, the same mechanism, the same tax collection policies and government. They say a country dies when the rights are disrespected and if you do not complain when your rights are not protected, that’s where the massacre begins.” (Male, Tirana)

“For me integration means the emancipation of the Albanian family, to have European culture, for people to respect each other, to respect the law, and the law to be equal for all, because this is the core of democracy – the respect for human rights...” (Male, Korçë)

“It [EU membership] means that the constitutional laws should be quite similar to EU countries; living standards should be approximate to other countries; and [the country would] give equal rights to people despite their origin, ethnicity, or religion.” (Male, Shkodër)

“If we manage to get the European mentality it means we are progressing, if we don’t, it means we are stuck.” (Male, Tirana)

“For me to feel European is related to a feeling of civilization. We lack civilization. We are living in a society that is scarcely getting rid of civilized ideals.” (Female, Korçë)

- **For most of the participants, the EU is perceived as an external supervisor, which would enforce and monitor the country’s respect for and implementation of laws.** They think that once Albania becomes a member state, the EU will direct its path of development by “obliging” the country to adhere to rules and “punishing” it anytime it deviates from the “right path.” For some participants, adherence to the EU’s rules will bring improved socioeconomic standards.

“We are going to take the best things from Europe and leave aside the negative things that characterize us, because no one will keep us otherwise [in the EU]. If we don’t behave properly, they will throw us out.” (Male, Tirana)

“[Albania] would be a country of hell if it was not for Europe. Our politicians say the living standard has improved. But who improved our living standards: Sali, Edi or Fatos? None of them did. My son worked abroad for 15 years, he worked painfully, and he built our house and improved our well-being.” (Male, Shkodër)

“I think it will be better if we join the EU because we will have to be equal with Europe. Wages for example will have to increase...” (Female, Tirana)

“If we want to enter the EU, we have to play by its rules. Our infrastructure has to be like the infrastructure of the EU. Our living standards have to be the same as the EU’s living standards. The EU has already set up its regulations and we have to abide by them.” (Male, Tirana)

“By becoming a member, they [EU] will prompt us to become like them. Culture is shaped by the rule of law. Thus, if the EU imposes its rules on us, we will have to become a bit more civilized.” (Male, Tirana)

- **Many participants, especially the younger ones, often mentioned the ability to travel and work abroad and new economic opportunities as the main advantages of EU membership.** Many young participants admitted that they would consider emigrating if they had the chance.

“It would be legal to stay abroad and work there. I would try to.” (Male, Korçë)

“How I understand it [EU membership]: we will be free to go abroad and do as we please, maybe even find a job in EU countries.” (Female, Tirana)

“As for European integration, I think the only positive aspect will be investments. If there will be investments, people will be able to work and so the economy will increase. This is positive.” (Male, Fier)

“I can’t really think of any personal benefit for me. The only solution would be to go work abroad.” (Male, Korçë)

“It’s a very good thing because you can go abroad and find a job, you don’t need to get back [home] in three months.” (Female, Fier)

“I have relatives working in Italy and I’m sure I can go and work there too, which will increase my income and make my life better.” (Female, Tirana)

“The only benefit is that all Albanians will have the possibility to leave Albania.” (Male, Fier)

“If we enter EU, we will not pay taxes on our imports. It will also be easier to export.” (Male, Fier)

“There will be more opportunities for business development...” (Male, Fier)

- **No one doubts that Albania’s future is in the EU, but many said that the most important aspect of integration is the adoption of democratic values and standards, rather than the membership status itself. They recognize the need for deeper reforms that would lead to real socio-economic improvements and strengthened rule of law, and they believe that Albania will not be ready to enter the EU for a long time due to the slow pace of reform.** They wish to earn the status when the country manages to achieve actual results in the fight against corruption and more determined implementation of reforms.

“The status is not so important, it is not even important when we will enter the EU. The important thing is democracy and how democratic Albania is. And when the time comes to accede to the EU, we should not do it as beggars, subverted to other countries. We should enter with dignity. We should enter as a democratic country.” (Male, Fier)

“I can’t say in specific terms because I don’t have much education. For ordinary people EU is a good thing because [it is] a new world is in their eyes to be explored. But I think, here [in Albania], the EU is a question of trading, to get more votes. I don’t think that a country

whose people don't have money to buy a plane ticket can aspire to join the EU. A country, where the living standard is low and corruption is high, can't aspire to join the EU." (Male, Shkodër)

"...With the conditions we have right now, I do not think that gaining EU membership is the most important thing. If we want to be part of this group...oh there is so much work we need to do! There are so many things we need to fix. It cannot be done one in one or two years, so much more time is needed! Perhaps we will not even live to see that." (Female, Tirana)

"We are not ready yet [to enter the EU]. We don't have the culture, the communication, it is obvious." (Female, Shkodër)

"We will feel as Europeans when all our family members will be employed, when we will have health insurance. When health services will function for real. The same thing stands for the education system, and when corruption is drastically minimized. I think that this will require so much time..." (Female, Korçë)

"If we consider the situation in Albania, we are far from being ready to enter EU." (Female, Tirana)

"It is impossible to accede to the EU with the current living standards here in Albania." (Male, Shkodër)

- **Despite the overwhelming support for Albania's EU membership, most participants' attitudes are based on limited information, and several complain about the insufficient information provided about what membership in the EU means.** The general lack of understanding naturally extends to the EU integration process as well, with participants being very unclear about the steps the country has to follow and the requirements it has to fulfill to gain EU membership. Furthermore, many participants seem to be unaware of the true advantages and disadvantages that integration will bring as well as the responsibilities it entails.

"I understand the word integration...but I don't really understand what this integration is supposed to bring. It will be beneficial most probably because all this propaganda about joining EU, I think, is done for people's benefit. It cannot be negative because I do not think that the government intends to lead this country into degradation." (Female, Shkodër)

"Since no politician so far has objected to the EU integration of Albania, it means that it is a positive thing right?" (Male, Korçë)

"A lot of people feel uninformed. TV channels have provided no information about it [gaining the EU Candidate status]. People still think it is all about free movement." (Male, Fier)

"I hear that they are talking and talking about it [EU candidate status], but I have not heard anyone talking about the benefits arising from it." (Female, Korçë)

V. Corruption and the Rule of Law

Almost all focus groups participants are able to tell a personal story where they had to bribe a policeman, nurse, teacher or other public administration employee in order to access basic services. Corruption seems to be an integral part of citizens' everyday lives, often regarded as a normal phenomenon necessary to get things done.

"Corruption is everywhere: at the municipality, at the civil registry. Everywhere, for every single thing, for every little document you need to pay. If you do not give them 200 ALL or 500 ALL, they [public employees] will not get anything done and you will have to go back over and over again." (Female, Shkodër)

"[Corruption is] in every institution, starting from our universities, then health[care]. Corruption is really bad in health[care]. Nobody will take care of you if you don't give money." (Female, Korçë)

"To cut it short: four years ago I had to pay to get the job position I have now. No one cared about the field I had graduated from or how many foreign languages I spoke. I just had to give "the envelope" and I got the job. This is how it works, just to be realistic about it." (Female, Tirana)

"Corruption is everywhere: in governing; the health system; the educational system; in everyday life." (Male, Shkodër)

"The whole society is affected by corruption. Just to provide a simple example: you take a minibus, and it's stopped by the police on the way. The driver of the minivan will always give policemen money together with his driver's license. These things happen every day." (Male, Tirana)

"Me, I had three surgeries. When the nurse used to come to my room she expected me to give money to her, but where could I find the money? The third surgery I had was made possible due to my brother because we ourselves didn't have money to afford these expenses." (Female, Fier)

- **Besides being perceived as a necessary tool to access basic public services, corruption and bribes are also becoming increasingly important in finding job positions.** According to participants, the "purchase of job positions" has become an increasingly prevalent phenomenon in public administration.

"The worst thing is that we are hearing that employees are being appointed in exchange for money. They are asking for money in exchange for jobs." (Male, Fier)

"You need to pay 7,000 euros to get hired as a teacher and the following year they can still fire you, so the job position is not even secure." (Male, Shkodër)

"In order to start working as a teacher, you need to pay 500 000 ALL..." (Female, Shkodër)

"Whoever is ready to pay is hired." (Male, Fier)

“The economic situation is very poor....if you want to get a job, you need to pay in order to be hired.” (Male, Shkodër)

- **According to many participants, all citizens in general are to be blamed for fuelling a system in which bribes or “friends” are mandatory “to get things done.”** In their opinion, instead of rebelling and refusing to comply with this abusive system, citizens reinforce it by resorting to bribes or “friends” every time they have a problem. Citizens understand that they are part of the problem and are responsible for consistently complying with the corruptive system.

“I am the first one that should be blamed...for as long as I refuse to wait in a queue and I am ready to pay under the table in order to be finished.” (Female, Tirana)

“Corruption weighs on the conscience of every Albanian citizen! We all resort to bribes when we have to solve a problem. If we say that there is corruption in the healthcare sector, we have to keep in mind that citizens themselves bribe doctors, even though we all know the law says you shouldn’t. When we apply for a job position, it is still us that try to bribe someone in order to get it...Why?” (Male, Fier)

“I think we deserve this country plagued by corruption, because we don’t respect our rights and in this case, we don’t know where to go and where to complain. We are to blame.” (Female student, Korçë)

“It is also our fault. In many cases, we are the first one to bribe public employees, just to get things done.” (Female, Tirana)

“We [citizens] really like corruption. I remember when I was six or seven and we had to wait in line to get our passports. You could often see people bribing other citizens to get their spot in the queue. It is very easy for us to bribe just not to stay in the queue.” (Male, Fier)

“We would give doctors money even if they say no...it has become a habit.” (Male, Shkodër)

“Corruption is part of all us. We want to solve our problems with money. When we have the need to find a job, for example, we give money. If we hadn’t acted like this, corruption wouldn’t have existed. Having the same needs, if we collaborate with each other, we will be able to achieve something positive, but if we are passive, no result will be achieved.” (Male, Fier)

- **Aside from everyday episodes, corruption is perceived to occur in a more organized, system form among politicians and government. Interestingly enough, all politicians – government and opposition alike – are accused, almost on equal footing of being involved in abusive practices and corruption.** The attempt to win elections and gain power, in this sense, is perceived as a fight to gain the opportunity to enhance personal wealth by means of abusive practices. The widespread perception that all politicians are equally corrupted and the belief that all institutions are under this control, instigates a feeling of powerlessness that little could be done to change things. The feeling that they are not able to hold their public officials and elected representatives accountable further undermines trust in public institutions.

“Political corruption is the source where all other anomalies stem from.” (Male, Tirana)

“Politicians own the entire seaside, all oil reservespeople pretend they do not know because there is nothing they can do.” (Female, Fier)

“They are all involved equally...the DP as well as the SP...both of them are involved in corruption.” (Female, Shkodër)

“Corruption has significantly weakened the state, has weakened the trust in the judiciary system, and has weakened the trust in all the institutions.” (Male, Fier)

- **Focus group participants in general are very skeptical about the country’s ability to fight corruption. When asked if there is any person, group of people, institution, or organization in the country which they see as capable of combating corruption, the answer in almost all focus group discussions was a simple, staggering “No.”** As previously noted, political parties are inherently distrusted and not likely to take up the task since, according to participants, they seek power only for personal gain through corrupt means. A few participants point out that media could be a very effective tool in the fight against corruption. However, the perceived recent polarization of the media seems to have deeply affected citizens’ trust in it and its ability to increase transparency.

“It is one thing to declare that you will fight corruption and another thing to really do it. If you really do it, you will lose all support because if you have made promises, then you will be obliged to accept bribes. Or if you have made a promise to 10 people, you will be obliged to hire them when you are in power.” (Male, Fier)

“The only means to fighting corruption is that all institutions whose duty it is to fight corruption should be under the lead of the opposition, whoever it is. The media can help in the fight against corruption. But we see that here, the media is also being bought by political parties.” (Male, Tirana)

“The state itself is very associated with corruption, with the non-functioning of the laws. They are supposed to obey laws, but, in fact, they do the contrary. This means these people don’t deserve their positions.” (Female, Korçë)

“We hear them [politicians] talk about fighting corruption all the time on TV, but they are all the same. We feel disappointed by all of them.” (Female, Fier).

“They say they removed the immunity [of members of parliament], but still they will find a way [to avoid prosecution]. A son of an MP was driving very fast and the police wanted to take action, but when they saw who he was, they just did nothing.” (Female, Shkodër)

“The government should do something about it...but the government itself is corrupt. The government controls all the institutions including the judiciary system.” (Male, Fier)

“I think they don’t even care about fighting corruption because they are so rich that can do as they please regardless. They do not fear the justice [system]. They own half the businesses and their wealth is beyond limits.” (Female, Tirana)

“The opposition might do it [fight corruption] ...but the opposition is scared because the opposition MPs are just as corrupt as the government MPs.” (Male, Fier)

“We need to analyze this situation better and ask why they act like this. Abroad, doctors are very well paid, whereas here they don’t earn very much. Doctors should be better evaluated for the job they do – saving lives. If he doesn’t earn enough, it is normal he will try to find another solution in order to earn more.” (Female, Korçë)

“Only the law can change this. If one MP will be fired after being involved in corruption, others will fear the same destiny, so they won’t make the same mistake.” (Female, Fier)

“None of the actual people in power do anything to fight corruption.” (Female, Tirana)

PERCEPTIONS ON THE JUDICIARY SYSTEM

According to focus group participants, widespread corruption in the judiciary system in particular, is seriously hobbling Albania’s attempts to fight the phenomenon. Albanian courts are viewed as inherently corrupted and largely inefficient. They are accused of promoting a culture of impunity since, according to participants, once a criminal is brought to court by the police and prosecution, the courts set them free in exchange for bribes or other illegal benefits. The recent murder of the Shijak Chief of Police by a well-known criminal, who was set free by an Albanian court² not long before, was brought up in several focus group discussions as an example of the judiciary system malfunctioning.

“Courts, which were supposed to be independent institutions, have become the symbol of corruption.” (Male, Fier)

“Please just give me one example during which Albania has fought corruption or mention one person that has been punished for corrupt practices.” (Male, Tirana)

“There is so much corruption among the judiciary system. Starting from the very first of them! The higher one[’s position] is in the judicial system, the more corrupt one is. This is true because I myself have seen and experienced this! My trial was fake! You get to know the outcome of the trial even before the date of the trial has been set!” (Female, Shkodër)

“Don’t you remember the son of that famous politician who killed someone and how the court immediately released him just because he was the son of an MP? He would have ended up in prison if he were the son of any one of us!” (Female, Shkodër)

“Whoever is the most powerful, has the “friends,” and the money, wins in every trial.” (Male, Shkodër)

“Every day we are hearing about the law being broken and unjustified trial decisions! The current judiciary system makes me feel scared!” (Female, Tirana)

“If you are the son of someone with a certain position in the government, you are basically allowed to do everything you want and nobody can say anything to you. We see that in Korçë often enough, with these guys driving around, and the police are too afraid of writing them off with a fine.” (Male, Korçë)

² The murder of Shijak Chief of Police had gained wide media coverage at the time the focus groups were held.

- **According to participants, efforts to reform the judiciary system have been inefficient so far because there is no genuine political will to fight corruption.** Although courts are intended to be independent according to the Constitution, in practice they are perceived to be very vulnerable to political pressures.

“In the parliament, all MPs talk about reforms in the judiciary, but in practice nothing is being done about it. For as long as a criminal goes to the court and is set free, nothing is being done.” (Male, Tirana)

“All judges have been appointed by politicians...” (Male, Tirana)

“The judiciary system is totally dependent on the government. Courts do whatever the government wants them to do. ” (Male, Fier)

“The most recent case is the one of the Meta-Prifti recording. American experts came up with some conclusions and, of course, they would not accept them. They wanted Albanian experts, who came up with completely different conclusions. “Surprisingly” all judiciary processes that have made it to the headlines are over now. We are not even surprised by these decisions anymore...every single time we just know how it is going to end.” (Female, Tirana)

“Theoretically the judiciary should have been independent. But it has ended up being a tool in the hands of whoever is in power.” (Female, Tirana)

VI. Political Environment

An overwhelming majority of participants in all focus group discussions expresses deep bitterness, contempt, and profound disappointment with Albanian politicians and the current Albanian political scene. When asked to describe Albanian politics in one word, participants portrayed it as “moldy,” “incapable,” “clownish,” “inconsistent,” “a dictatorship,” “polemical,” “self-absorbed,” “tense,” “worn-out,” “a theater,” “unfocused,” “pathological,” “self-centered,” “a huge mess,” and “has no future,” among other negative adjectives.

- **Albanian politicians are perceived to be self-centered and largely corrupt, interested above all in their own personal gain rather than the concerns of the people they are supposed to represent.**

“All politicians in Albania think solely about themselves and their own people [family, friends]!” (Female, Korçë)

“They [politicians] are not there to help us. They are there to help their own bank accounts.” (Male, Korçë)

“I see none of them [politicians] arguing for our interests...they only argue about their own interests.” (Female, Shkodër)

“Each of them [politicians] is only focusing on their own personal interest. Not only is there complete disregard for people’s problems, but they only offend each other and engage in useless debates. At the end, nothing comes out for the people.” (Female, Korçë)

"It [politics] has not changed anything over years. It's the same spirit, and all politicians want is to get rich. The previous leaders gave a bad example of governing, and the followers, taking them [their predecessors] as an example, will aim to get rich." (Male, Shkodër)

"They approve the laws themselves; they take all the decisions themselves; they only care about their own pockets." (Female, Tirana)

"They [politicians] won't give up the "throne." They only fight for that power for their own interests." (Male, Korçë)

"They are only getting richer." (Female, Tirana)

"The primary goal is to accomplish their own interests, and then the interest of their own people..." (Female, Tirana)

"When they [politicians] come to power, they abandon all sorts of principles and think only about fulfilling their personal needs and get as rich as they can." (Female, Korçë)

While participants agree that politics has a major impact on their everyday life, they feel largely disconnected from their elected representatives. It is interesting to notice that, in almost all focus groups discussions, participants refer to themselves as *"us"* – the people – as opposed to *"them"* – the politicians. **Participants do not feel represented by their elected leaders, who, according to them, have failed to show genuine interest in people's everyday problems and have almost always disappointed them in keeping their electoral promises.**

"I have never seen them [political representatives] go out in electoral campaigns with the aim of helping people find jobs or help them to get out of poverty. Nobody is talking about these things." (Female, Fier)

"Yes, they [politicians] do talk about unemployment but those are only words...there is no action. I would gladly vote for anybody that would have managed to keep promises. But I cannot think of any politician who ever did." (Female, Korçë)

"Only during electoral campaigns do they [political leaders] focus on the problems that really matter to people." (Male, Korçë)

"They [local officials] promised to build the new road, they promised to light up the center [of the city] and they have not kept any of those promises. Since the elections, they have not done anything." (Male, Fier)

"They [politicians] will keep saying whatever they have always been saying just to gain votes in June and nothing more." (Female, Tirana)

"They will start talking about those [problems that really matter to people] as soon as the campaign starts...they will pretend they sympathize with us." (Male, Tirana)

"They say a lot of things before the elections. They make a lot of promises that they have never kept." (Male, Fier)

- **Aside from a lack of focus on citizens' real issues, citizens complain about the meager interaction politicians have with their communities outside of electoral periods. After gaining power, elected representatives, in general, not only fail to follow-through on**

delivering results from their electoral promises, but they also fail to maintain contact with their communities in a meaningful way.

“We have MPs with double personalities. One [personality] is of an MP before the elections whereas the other one is the MP after the elections. Before the elections, they try to be near the citizens, they promise to take into consideration their needs, but after they are totally indifferent to our needs.” (Male, Fier)

“We see them [political representatives] during campaigns. Later on, the MP of the area never shows up...” (Female, Tirana)

“After MPs gain their vote and are elected, they never show up anymore. You are lucky if you see them every couple of months.” (Female, Fier)

“They are unreachable afterwards [after gaining power].” (Female, Korçë)

“They were promising employment, infrastructure, roads, electricity, the center to be fixed with lighting and everything. They have done nothing. Nothing at all since the elections took place.” (Male, Fier)

“They are all the same (MPs). It’s not that I say this because of anger or malice but before coming into power they keep promising too many things: they promise to decrease unemployment, to ease our living conditions. In the end no one remembers the promises; they think only for themselves and their wealth. We are guilty too for [contributing to] this situation.” (Female, Korçë)

“They [politicians] just want us to vote them, after that is done, they disappear.” (Female, Fier)

“I think they perfectly know our reality. While they discuss about our actual problems you keep thinking that they are conscious about our situation and they are going to do something in order to help our situation, but we always get confused and don’t know if we can trust them or not. Then there are others who make a lot of promises. They inaugurate infrastructure projects [projects] in order to make us believe they differ from the others but this happens before the elections because after they all disappear. After the elections, all they started doing remains incomplete.” (Female, Korçë)

“It’s very difficult to trust them after what we have seen. Personally, I find difficulties in deciding if a party is persuasive or not. It would be hard to take into consideration what they say because we are disappointed and it is hard to believe that they truly mean it. I would trust them only after seeing they are doing something.” (Female, Korçë)

“During the election, all of the promises are so beautiful and you kind of want to believe because of the moment and the cheers and the leader talking so much about an ideal program. So afterwards, you vote for them even though you know that nothing is going to happen and the problems will still be there.” (Male, Tirana)

- **In a few participants’ views, the change in the electoral systems, from a mixed-member system to a closed-list proportional system, is to be blamed for the perceived, increasing distance between MPs and their communities.** Participants claim that the old electoral system where MPs were directly elected by the people created positive incentives for them to

be responsive to the needs of their own communities and personally accountable to their voters. According to them, with the new electoral system, MPs are more inclined to act in accordance with the leadership of their parties than respond to the needs of their citizens.

“It was better when we were voting for MPs directly because they were inclined to do something for the community; they used to work a bit more for the community at that time. It was better when they were elected by us rather than the party.” (Male, Fier)

“It used to be a better system. MPs used to work more for the community, they were more respectful...” (Male, Shkodër)

“In Albania, we vote for the party, and the MP is selected by the party only. It means that the leader of the right-wing or left-wing party is the one selecting candidates. If [MPs] would be faced directly with people, people would be better at voting directly for the best candidate.” (Male, Fier)

“If we as people knew the candidate, we might support him. If he is appointed only by the leader of the party then we have no connection to him.” (Male, Fier)

Participants feel frustrated by the overly antagonistic and unconstructive political rhetoric in the country. Instead of discussing policy issues of concern to citizens, they see Albanian politicians as engaged in worthless debates over issues of no real interest to them. In the participants' view, the establishment of effective communication channels and constructive political dialogue is absolutely essential to the wellbeing of citizens.

“There is so much tension. Today is the right time that the two main parties unite and solve all the problems facing the country instead of fighting and offending each other. They should know that [aside from their militants] there is a significant part of the population who is suffering, drawn as they are, in their problems.” (Male, Korçë)

“They should get together and talk, just like us here today. They should talk about our problems, not about their ‘chairs.’” (Male, Fier)

“Instead of trying to cooperate in order to solve the country's problems, they only fight...Of course they do not have time to solve our problems. They waste their time offending and quarreling with each other.” (Male, Korçë)

“Here the leaders don't collaborate in order to achieve good results. Their aim is to extend their power and individual wealth. Corruption wouldn't exist if it wasn't for politicians being so individualistic. Corruption is the essential problem of this country, it is present everywhere.” (Male, Fier)

“Their [politicians'] main problem is they do not know how to listen to each other. They never stop speaking and giving orders in order to be able to listen. They do not know how to engage in political dialogues, exchange opinions and thoughts.” (Female, Tirana)

- **The lack of civil discourse in the political arena was noted in almost all focus group discussions as a distinguishing feature of Albanian politics.** Participants repeatedly criticized political representatives for disrespecting each other and using offensive language during public debates in the parliament.

“Every single debate is transformed into a personal issue for them. They offend and curse each other. Why should I be listening to all those things about their personal lives? All I am interested in is their professional capabilities.” (Female, Korçë)

“It is a shame to hear them speak! Imagine having your daughter in front of the TV while they use those offensive words. They don’t even care that there are women present in the parliament as well.” (Male, Shkodër)

“There is no policy-making here [in Albania]. Here we have only curses, such as criminal, thief!” (Female, Tirana)

“I would tell the politicians to let each other finish their statements first before interrupting. This is the minimum basis for communication!” (Female, Korçë)

“It is obscene! They just fight and offend each other with vulgar words even on TV!” (Female, Shkodër)

“Any time a law has to be discussed and approved in the parliament, we prepare to hear the most indecent offenses about parliamentarians’ family members.” (Female, Tirana)

“It is a shame to hear those words even in the street! If we only think about the fact that we are hearing them in the parliament!” (Female, Tirana)

- **According to focus group participants, the aggressiveness, bigotry and continuous bickering conveyed in Albanian political discourse is deplorable and inevitably contributes to the further polarization of society.**

“Whether they want it or not, they represent models of communication for all Albanians. That is why we are so intolerant towards each other.” (Male, Fier)

“If we think of them [politicians] as the parents that are supposed to educate us, chances are we will end up just like them.” (Female, Korçë)

“What kind of example are they [setting] for us simple people when the only thing we can notice [in parliamentary debates] is a lack of communication, culture, and respect?” (Female, Korçë)

“They [politicians] seem like they are hooligans. They are the worst example...” (Male, Korçë)

“It has become very easy for any of us to offend others. We have learned from our MPs” (Male, Fier)

VII. 2013 Parliamentary Elections – Concerns and Expectations

Through their lively engagement in focus group discussions, the participants’ concerns for the major issues facing the country is clear. However, they seriously question their ability to achieve meaningful change by voting due to widespread concerns over election manipulation. Their skepticism partially derives from violations of electoral procedures in recent years that have damaged the fairness and credibility of electoral results. Multiple contested elections during Albania’s short period of political pluralism seem to have profoundly impacted citizens’ faith in politicians’ will to hold free and fair elections.

“Trust in the election process is over for us, because we often hear how votes have been manipulated and stolen. This has a major impact on me as a voter, because why would I go to vote when everyone knows the outcome [of the elections]?” (Male, Fier)

“It will be the first time I vote, and I have mixed feelings about it. Sometimes I think, “what is the point of it?” when the same story of manipulations will be repeated.” (Female student, Korçë)

“In fact they [elections] are important, but things are starting to get monotonous and we are losing interest in them. It seems like we are wasting our time, also because, in many occasions, people’s votes “are lost.” Our voice is not being heard because elections are being manipulated.” (Male, Tirana)

“I am not entirely sure [I will participate in the elections]. I do not know where my vote will go...that’s why.” (Female, Tirana)

“People are very annoyed with the manipulation of elections. Elections are becoming increasingly less credible.” (Female, Korçë)

“My family and relatives are less interested in the elections...they are all disappointed.” (Female, Tirana)

- **The majority of participants in discussions state they intend to vote in the upcoming elections, including those participants who hold firm beliefs that their vote has little to no power of change.** Few, however, describe feeling pressure or obligation to vote, often when their families’ wellbeing is tied to the party in power, and consider it as a duty or “investment” in a more secure future for their families.

“There is this general feeling that, whether we go to vote or not, it will be exactly the same.” (Female, Tirana)

“You vote for someone [public official] and you get no solution, you vote for someone else and still you get no solution...so what is the point of going to vote?” (Male, Shkodër)

“There is a feeling of skepticism now and it will become even less likely that people will go and vote...[...]...We will choose the best alternative at the end...we will see the programs and vote for whomever was the best in lying.” (Male, Tirana)

“You can vote for anyone...at the end everyone knows who will win. It’s always the same people, the same faces.” (Female, Shkodër)

“As long as you vote for different alternatives, but all of them fail to provide solutions why should I still keep voting for them?” (Male, Shkodër)

“Nothing has changed. It’s always the same approach, the same people! All of them [politicians] only want to be rich! It does not make any sense to go and vote.” (Male, Shkodër)

- **Conversely, a number of participants proudly state they are determined to exercise their vote as a basic right as citizens of a democracy.** Casting a ballot is viewed as a fundamental duty, and the outmost expression of a citizen’s voice.

“When it comes to the moment of voting, every citizen in the world, not only Albanian citizens, should go and cast their vote because that is the only moment when citizens can elect, by their own will, those who will govern them....[....]...to vote means to change...” (Male, Fier)

“I will keep casting my vote....I will keep doing the right thing, independently of how justice is implemented [in this country] ...I will keep doing my job...” (Female, Korçë)

“Ballots represent our voice. I cannot simply stay home and not vote because it would be like I would cease existing in this aspect. I will most definitely vote because this is a civic obligation.” (Female, Tirana)

“To vote means to respect yourself, respect your family, respect your community, and respect your country. To vote means to be socially integrated.” (Male, Korçë)

- **Voting is also described as an opportunity to hold political representatives accountable for their decisions and actions while in office.** In context of participants’ overwhelming feelings of disappointment with their political representatives, few describe voting as “a weapon” and as people’s only “mechanism” to instigate change by removing inept politicians from office. However, most participants agree that the relationship between voting and accountability is only theoretical win Albania.

“It [voting] is my only weapon to provide support or oppose a party. If I do not see my vote as an opportunity to change, there is no other hope. Based on my political convictions, I will hope for a change in my life.”(Male, Korçë)

“In the system we have built, people’s only mechanism [for accountability] is the vote....The ballot is the only force we have...” (Male, Tirana)

“If one does not cast a vote, one has no right to complain about politics. Everyone has a legitimate right to vote. I might have cast an absentee ballot in the past, but I still did go to vote.” (Male, Korçë)

- Most participants agree that, in general, the public falls for the propaganda of one party or another. Nevertheless, they emphasize that the political agenda and the policy program of the party or the candidate matters to them. **They would be supportive of any candidate or**

party that brings forth a realistic program for development and shows commitment and capacity to improve the status quo.

“More than the programs, we base [our decision] on their propaganda. The importance of the programs should be reconsidered.” (Male, Korçë)

“The program of a party [would make me vote for one party instead of another]. I would be very interested if a party’s program would include my priorities and it would be concrete, down to earth, and realistic. It should comprise promises that can actually be kept.” (Female, Tirana)

“I would vote for that party which would bring devoted people willing to implement their program.” (Female, Shkodër)

“[I would vote for a party] if they would do something to deserve my ballot beforehand.” (Male, Fier)

“The most important thing is the leadership. If their leadership manages to convince me [I would vote for them]. If this person demonstrates to defend our interests, does what s/he promises to do...if this person implements the party’s program, then I would vote for him/her.” (Male, Fier)

“[I would vote for the party] which proves to be the most serious in terms of objectives, the work they do and the way they communicate.” (Female, Korçë)

VIII. Women in Politics

Regardless of their gender, regional, and social background, almost all participants agree that women are currently underrepresented in Albanian politics, and they perceive the political class as being male-dominated and as not providing enough access for women to participate in politics and for their voice to be heard.

“Albanian women are badly and poorly represented in politics.” (Female, Tirana)

“Women are not entrusted enough [power], and not because they do not deserve it, but because even those who get involved do so artificially, or because of the required quota.” (Male, Fier)

“We have so few women in politics today.” (Female, Korçë)

“We are a population led by men.” (Male, Fier)

“[I vote for more men than women] because there aren’t enough women’s names [on candidate lists].” (Male, Shkodër)

“In my opinion, women are currently being used in Albanian politics. They are not being represented as they should.” (Male, Tirana)

- **Many participants pointed out that the low level of women’s involvement in politics reflects the pervasiveness of gender inequality throughout society.** Some of them emphasized that discussing the issue of political representation is premature in a society

where women are not considered equal. **Even though they are strong proponents of women's engagement in politics, they acknowledge that women in Albania face many barriers to political engagement, including: conservative public attitudes towards women's engagement in public and political life; lack of access to education and career opportunities; and housekeeping and child-rearing roles and responsibilities traditionally assigned to women.**

"It would be better not to have females at all [in politics], because they are fragile and can't act toward a man who can insult her." (Male, Shkodër)

"Men are more successful in politics than women because I think it's a field of work that requires a lot of effort, and it is also a very tough environment for women." (Male, Tirana)

"For me, it would be better to evaluate the role of the woman in general at first. Since we have not yet reached gender equality, it is better not to discuss this issue [women in politics]." (Female, Korçë)

"Shkodër still functions based on the code of Kanun, which sees the female as inferior to the man, does not accept that the woman is very capable, that the woman brings love, delicacy, etc." (Female, Shkodër)

- However, some participants perceive the benefits of women's political engagement in many ways as an extension of the roles they have traditionally played as mothers and caregivers. **Most of the participants consider the tendency of women to have a relational focus and express concern for social issues as their greatest assets. Participants drew parallels between women's responsibility and leadership outside the political realm and the great potential they have as political actors. They also believe that if women would be more represented, the political discourse would become more constructive and ethical.** There is a general perception among the participants that women politicians tend to be less prone to corruption, less egocentric, and more hardworking and empathetic, and that women could help foster political dialogue and reconciliation across party lines.

"[Women] do not see politics just as it is, but they harmonize it with the family." (Female, Shkodër)

"They are better managers even in real life. Women are better managers of the economy. In this aspect, there should be more women [in politics]." (Male, Korçë)

"They do not make politics profitable for themselves, but for the country. But they are few and their voice is not being heard much." (Female, Shkodër)

"[Women] are worthy...It would be better if there were more women in politics. They have ideas. They judge in a different way." (Male, Shkodër)

"It would be very good to have more women in politics. The political situation would be less tense." (Male, Tirana)

"Maybe politics would be milder if the [male/female] ratio would be 50/50. Maybe politics would not be as harsh as it is." (Female, Korçë)

“Even a man in the presence of women will use a better vocabulary, more controlled.” (Male, Tirana)

“Women would be very good at smoothing out the political environment because they are mothers.” (Male, Tirana)

“Studies show that a woman is harder to bribe and given this she would be more suitable for politics and managerial positions.” (Female, Korçë)

- **Many participants characterize the country’s harsh and antagonistic political arena as a prohibitive environment for women political leaders to enter. While they acknowledge that the few women active in politics today are working hard to reach their goals, participants note a number of challenges that the male-dominated environment presents to women candidates and elected leaders seeking to access power. And while they describe a number of unique perspectives and traits that women leaders may bring to political life, they regret that these benefits are often lost as women are compelled to mimic the – often aggressive – behavior of their male colleagues in politics.**

“I think that [women’s underrepresentation] is mostly due to the political environment dominated by men, thus since the [Communist] dictatorship till today, the woman has been more distant. The environment has been very harsh and the woman has not found herself in predominantly male surroundings.” (Female, Korçë)

“Maybe the male-dominated environment makes them [aggressive], because if a woman maintains her delicacy, she will lose power. You have to be strong and with a manly character to compete with men.” (Female, Tirana)

“To me, the [political] environment seems too harsh, competing with people who do not have principles and do not act based on principles but on interests aiming solely at stepping on you.” (Female, Tirana)

“The way elections in Albania have been carried out in the last 20 years has led to the annexation of women, especially since the parties have mostly relied upon the militants and not the intellectual strata. A woman finds it harder to be represented in the Albanian environment because even the party leader wants stronger men.” (Male, Tirana)

“It seems that as soon as they enter politics they turn into men. I used to be in favor of women in politics. The only problem is that many of these women change once they become part of politics.” (Male, Tirana)

- **A significant majority of participants, including men and women, think that the patriarchal and male-driven mentality in Albania is hindering women’s representation in public office and access to political life.** Some participants, especially from rural areas, point out that men view women’s primary role as domestic caretakers and thus undervalue their potential contributions to political life. A few women participants spoke of their own families discouraging them from running for public office. Furthermore, some participants emphasize that even though women constitute half of the Albanian population, they do not vote for their own gender because their political choices are determined by their families and husbands.

“We vote for women, but we know they will not win, because of the mentality.” (Female, Fier)

“The mentality stops women from getting involved in politics – their husband, their children – the mentality is such.” (Female, Fier)

“I think men here in Albania are all masculine – they give more priority to men.” (Male, Fier)

“The man thinks that he is the most gifted in every life aspect and between a male and female candidate, he will choose the man, thinking that he will do the job better. This belief still exists.” (Male, Korçë)

“Women do not have the same freedom that men have. If they get home late, they may have problems in their families.” (Female, Fier)

“Women are more involved in the household. They need to be supported strongly by the family, but [if they get involved in politics], they will leave the family behind.” (Female, Shkodër)

“If the family leader says to vote for someone, everyone will vote for him.” (Male, Fier)

“The pattern of family voting still exists here. The leader of the family votes.” (Male, Korçë)

“I was once involved with the Republican Party, but gave up because my family did not support me.” (Female, Shkodër)

“The female lacks family support. She is more focused on the family. This is her first role, because if you deal with politics, the family is left behind.” (Female, Shkodër)

“We know women actually getting out of politics because of the pressure, I guess.” (Female, Tirana)

- **Almost all the participants agree that gender should not be the primary reason for electing someone in power.**

“I think it would be wrong to vote for someone only because she is a woman. I think other criteria are more important.” (Male, Tirana)

“If we were to list some attributes that a candidate should have, there are other more important ones than gender.” (Male, Tirana)

“I don’t think that it matters if a politician is male or female. I think it’s all about having the right people.” (Female, Korçë)

“I don’t think it makes a difference if the person we are voting for is a male or a female. Actually, I think we are civilized enough to accept females’ integration. We are more focused on the values of the people we are going to vote for.” (Male, Fier)

- **When asked whether they would like to become involved in politics, women seem to be reluctant. Only three out of 34 women participants expressed their desire to become actively involved in politics, but they are skeptical of the chances of succeeding. The rest**

justified their lack of interest with the argument that the political atmosphere today is too aggressive and corrupt to be appealing to them. The prevailing perception among women is that once a woman enters politics, her only way of succeeding is to act more masculine.

“I don’t like politics because it has so many problems...” (Female, Fier)

“The desire [to get involved in politics] exists, but the road seems very hard. They [Albanian politicians] seem like wolves and even if you decide to enter, you wonder if you can confront them.” (Female, Tirana)

“I am not sure that if I get involved in politics I would be close to the people’s problems, because politics changes you.” (Female, Korçë)

“I do not seem to find the courage [to enter politics].” (Female, Shkodër)

“The way politics has been performed these last 20 years, and the links of politicians with organized and street crime has prevented women from becoming more active in this field.” (Female, Tirana)

IX. Civic Engagement and Youth Activism

Based on the feedback from the focus groups, a prevailing deep sense of mistrust towards political institutions, civil society, and “others” in general, has led citizens to isolate from their communities and focus only on their own and lives of their family members. During the discussions, many participants admitted, not without a sense of disappointment and bitterness, that a sense of community is very weak for many citizens: their concern goes as far as their doorstep and they are skeptical of any involvement in issues that do not directly affect them. Additionally, participants across the groups show a significant degree of pessimism when it comes to their own ability to change the *status quo* and make their voices heard. However, they blame themselves and society as a whole for not reacting against problems they see or speaking up for issues they care about.

“In general nobody gets involved. If your interest is not directly touched, then nobody bothers to complain.” (Male, Korçë)

“Except for my floor in my apartment block, I do not care any further...” (Female, Tirana)

“If I don’t see it in my personal interest, no [I do not want to be involved]. Because even those who are involved see it as an opportunity of employment or some other benefit in the future.” (Female, Tirana)

“If people are not touched in their personal interests, they will never complain.” (Male, Korçë)

“I have the impression that we are very individualistic and do not see beyond our doorstep. Today the sense of community is dead.” (Female, Tirana)

“We are very individualistic, disinterested, and take care only for ourselves.” (Female, Tirana)

“We are the cause and the victim of all this...We are responsible because we vote for them and elect them...we are responsible for keeping up with everything they do.” (Male, Tirana)

"We as people are to be blamed too...What we could do is raise our voice...we should not be so quiet..." (Female, Korçë)

"The problem is that we are so used to all this [corruption, wrongdoings etc.] that we are not impressed by them anymore...This is unacceptable!" (Female, Tirana)

"People are passive, that is the Albanians' problem." (Female, Fier)

"Despite government, we are also to blame. We keep complaining all the time, but in reality we still don't react. People should be more active if they want to achieve something. So it is necessary for people to be active and to make efforts to get together in order to achieve their goals and save themselves." (Female, Korçë)

"Civil society is almost nonexistent. People who are part of civil society organizations are usually afraid of facing this or that public official. Others just want to focus on their business. We are stuck in apathy for most of the time." (Male, Korçë)

- **Participants perceive the role of civil society as very limited in having any meaningful contributions in their communities. The majority of the participants display low levels of awareness and understanding regarding the role and functioning of civil society organizations.** When asked if they were able to name any civic organizations in the country, the great majority of participants claimed that they could not. A few participants mentioned "Mjaft!" as a civic movement that they thought to have managed to actively engage citizens and gain their support. However, after the perceived fading of the movement, **it appears that the participants do not consider civil society as a third-party actor capable of influencing or informing political debate in Albania.**

"We don't know any organizations. So, we can't say we don't trust them, we just don't know any of them." (Female, Fier)

"Some organizations have tried, some religious ones, something for the elderly. But a little. They try, but have no funds. [There are some organizations] also for education, and handicaps, and families in need." (Female, Shkodër)

"Mjaft! had a lot of supporters because they were against the state, against all political parties!" (Male, Fier)

"There was once the Mjaft! Movement, but I haven't heard their name anymore. They were neutral and defending social causes, but now their enthusiasm has faded and I haven't heard about them anymore." (Female, Shkodër)

"People used to like Mjaft! because they used to put the government in an uncomfortable position. Mjaft! managed to do something for a certain period of time. At least they managed to transmit some trust to people, somewhere around 2004. I really liked that organization. I could see myself in that organization." (Male, Fier)

"I do not see them [civil society] as having any kind of influence. They have to work hard in order to convince people of what they are doing. Even political parties don't seem to be interested at all in listening to this civil society." (Male, Tirana)

"I have heard about two or three women's organizations that mostly deal with issues of domestic violence, or with issues of women that have been trafficked. But I think they have

not been provided with much space either, because News on TV mostly focuses on political parties. But I know they have been working on these issues." (Female, Tirana)

- For many participants, civil society is fragmented, disorganized, and even politically motivated or controlled. **For the few participants who bemoaned the lack of activism and noted their own interest in engagement, these reasons, coupled with fear that any kind of unconventional exposure could negatively affect one's life and the belief that the isolated efforts of an individual are not enough to bring about social change, dissuaded them.**

"Civil society in my opinion is fragmented...even when it is organized, it is fragmented and nobody raises his voice. This is the problem with Albania." (Male, Fier)

"Civil society is disorganized and has no influence. For me, it [their influence] is equal to zero. The political parties don't care about the [nongovernmental organizations] NGOs. They don't even consider them. Their opinion does not count for anything. They are never called in for anything." (Male, Tirana)

"The trade unions can't have power as their funds are depended on the budget of the government. They are forced to do what the government wants. Trade unions have never solved anything. Everyday miners in Bulqiza get drowned." (Male, Shkodër)

"Behind them [civil society] is always the government. It is not worth to discuss, because whoever you are, no one takes your opinion into consideration." (Male, Shkodër)

"Most of these organizations are funded by the government, and thus work for it. So, it is impossible for them to go against the government, because they risk having their money cut." (Male, Korca)

"We are supposed to live in a democratic society but in fact it doesn't seem like this. Everything is under examination. If government sees that you are interfering in their business, they block your activity and you have no way out." (Female, Korçë)

"We do not dare [to act]. Because nothing can be done alone. Many people need to raise their voices together for a certain issue." (Female, Shkodër)

"I would like to be part of a serious organization which indeed seeks to help people and to protect their interests, without fearing anything, but we don't have the possibilities to act." (Female, Korçë)

"It is scary to raise your voice, to appear on the media, and to say all the things you don't like about the government." (Female, Shkodër)

"We are supposed to live in a democratic society but in fact it doesn't seem like this. Everything is under examination. If government sees that you are interfering in their business, they block your activity and you have no way out." (Female, Korçë)

- **To some extent, the limited role of civil society in the country seems to be connected with citizens' feelings of mistrust towards it and subsequent lack of support.** While the participants display deep distrust towards most institutions in general, doubts about civil society's political neutrality and skepticism over civic activists' goals color any role it could

play in shaping policy in Albania. Participants mention Mjaft! and the Red and Black Alliance as examples of movements they perceive to have used civic platforms to hide hidden, electoral agendas. Others are suspicious of civil society activists' motivations, and believe personal, financial gain drives their actions. Most cite lack of evidence of civil society's impact as justification that civil society's pursuits are not genuine.

"NGOs have disappointed us. Their leaders have abandoned them only to create political parties...what a pity. People now trust none. Even these organizations that initially pretend to care about people's interests at the end prove that they care only about themselves." (Female, Fier)

"The bad thing is that, at some point, they are transformed into political parties, just like Mjaft! or the Red and Black Alliance." (Female, Korçë)

"At the beginning, people like them...but then when they acquire political colors people get disappointed." (Male, Fier)

"There could be tendencies for the creation of such groups, like the Mjaft! movement, but the problem is that there will come a day when they will end up becoming political parties." (Female, Korçë)

"To tell you the truth we have lost trust, because we have more than twenty years seeing the same things happening and we cannot trust not even an individual, an organization, none." (Female, Shkodër)

"I have worked with a few NGOs, but I don't think they were politicized. Their only goal was to use the funds coming from abroad for their own salaries." (Female, Tirana)

"Who cares what they [NGOs] think? They get our opinion, but we don't know if our opinion is taken in consideration, because we have never seen anything concrete. They can't function if they are not financed by the government, which means, they should support it." (Female, Shkodër)

"The problem with every movement in Albania is that whenever they reach some kind of success they turn into a political party. Just like Erjon Veliaj did, or Kreshnik Spahiu." (Female, Tirana)

"They seem like they've been trying, but it is hard to tell. They sure do say that they are on people's side, but I think they are using the power for their own interest." (Male, Tirana)

- **When asked about an independent actor which they see as able to influence political discourse in the country, participants mostly refer to the international community instead of civic organizations.** Foreign ambassadors are often described as highly influential third-actors, who are actively participating in the political scene and affecting political debate while preserving political neutrality. In this sense, in the eyes of Albanian citizens, it seems that foreign ambassadors, to a certain degree, are playing a role where civil society is absent.

"[United States Ambassador Alexander] Arvizu has always tried to help us. These last few years [EU Enlargement Commissioner] Stefan Fuele and [EU Ambassador Ettore] Sequi have also had a great impact." (Male, Fier)

"If not decisive...they do play an orienting role." (Female, Tirana)

"I think they are important....they play the role of negotiators." (Female, Tirana)

"In each political debate that has taken place....if they have intervened the deal is done." (Male, Tirana)

"I do find them [NGOs] useful, too. But, if we consider the American Embassy as one of them, I do think that the [United States] Ambassador takes no political sides and is doing a great job." (Female, Tirana)

Several young people expressed frustration over what they describe as overwhelming civic apathy in the country and citizens' feelings of subjection and indifference towards corruption, weak rule of law, poverty, and other major problems. However, while some of the young people participating in the focus group discussions expressed a clear desire to actively engage in improving the situation in the country, most acknowledged a lack of information and skills to organize and achieve their advocacy goals.

"I am not seeing people react in my country. We've all been to Greece and Italy, but in these countries I have never seen a government representative, mayor, or some other powerful person do whatever they do here. And we still don't react." (Male, Korçë)

"I see that in my country people do not react. I feel like we are in a dictatorship again because we [the people] are subjected. I want to be able to loudly oppose something that I see as unfair, not because I do not love my country, but simply because it is wrong!" (Female, Tirana)

"Abroad people feel free to react against whoever is in power, without any differences. Whereas here, if the right-wing is in power, people with right-wing views would never react against the government, against ever-increasing prices. I do not understand why militants never react. At the end, their interests are being affected as well."

"I am really worried because we, as the Albanian people, do not react anymore! If things in the country get resolved fairly we are fine with it, but if they don't, we are still fine! I feel like we are back to communism again." (Male, Fier)

"How to organize? Should we all gather in the neighborhood square, or what?" (Female, Tirana)

"I would like to change something regarding the free time we have. There are no entertainment places for us, we need to do something different from the ordinary (Female, Korçë)

"[I am not active] because I do not see any kind of support! We keep talking and complaining in coffee shops and at home but we do not do anything about it! I want to do something [about the country's problems] but I cannot do it alone! I see nobody defending the same ideals as me." (Female, Korçë)

Appendix A

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

Nr.	Location	Urban/Rural	Employment	Gender	Age	No. of Participants	Date
1	Tirana	Urban	Unemployed/ Public Sec.	Female	36-65	8-10	October 10 th 2012
2	Tirana	Semi-urban	Private Sec.	Male	36-65	8-10	October 11 th 2012
3	Tirana	Mix	Unemployed/ Employed	Female	18-35	8-10	October 11 th 2012
4	Shkodër	Rural	Unemployed/Private Sec.	Male	18-65	8-10	October 12 th 2012
5	Shkodër	Urban	Unemployed/Pubic Sec.	Female	18-65	8-10	October 12 th 2012
6	Fier	Rural	Unemployed/Private Sec.	Female	36-65	8-10	October 15 th 2012
7	Fier	Mix	Unemployed/ Employed	Male	18-35	8-10	October 15 th 2012
8	Fier	Urban	Unemployed/Pubic Sec.	Male	36-65	8-10	October 16 th 2012
9	Korça	Mix	Students	Female	18-23	8-10	October 19 th 2012
10	Korça	Urban	Unemployed/Public Sec.	Male	24-65	8-10	October 19 th 2012

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 discussants.

- 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 with the aim of identifying potential focus group participants. 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 eight key discussion topics: (i) general mood and country direction, (ii) citizens' priorities, (iii) European integration, (iv) state institutions, (v) general politics and political parties, (vi) the 2013 parliamentary elections, (vii) women's political participation, and, in select groups, (viii) youth activism.



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