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# **Research on voter education and motivation prior to the June 2015 local elections in Albania**

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*Opinions and views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).*

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## I. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Local elections will take place in Albania on 21 June 2015. These elections will be different from previous local elections, in that citizens will vote in 61 new municipalities, for both Mayor and Municipal Council.<sup>1</sup> UNDP, as part of its Strengthening Electoral Processes in Albania (SEPIA) project, initiated this research to discern the most significant informational and educational needs of citizens in the final few months before Election Day.

Focus group discussions consisting of voting age citizens took place in early April in different regions of the country.<sup>2</sup> The discussions attempted to explore general issues in voter education and awareness, the reasons for supporting a candidate or party, attitudes toward women's participation in voting and standing for office, understanding of electoral violations and sanctions, and the affects or impact of the recent territorial administrative reform on voter behavior. The discussions also examined motivating factors behind voting, and what ideas or messages best resonate with citizens in encouraging them to participate in elections.

## II. METHODOLOGY

UNDP contracted Partners Albania to carry out a series of eight focus groups in a combination of rural and urban locations in Northern, Central and Southern Albania. In particular, UNDP asked Partners Albania to focus on areas that might be most affected (in terms of elections and voting behavior) by the recent Territorial Administrative reform. This included those Communes and Municipalities which were being merged with others and "losing" their current status and locally elected Mayors and Councils, and those that were becoming the center of a new Municipality and "acquiring" other villages and towns.

Together with UNDP, Partners Albania prepared a plan of all activities, including locations, timeline, venues and length and format of discussion. Key staff of Partners Albania drafted a Discussion Guide in close consultation with the Project Manager and Chief Technical Advisor of UNDP. Participants were selected through contacts and databases developed as part of Partners Albania ongoing work with various local civil society organizations, governments, business and professional associations, academic institutions, and journalist networks in the selected localities. Participants were all local citizens of the Municipality or Commune where the focus groups were organized, or from immediately surrounding villages. Participants had different educational, ethnic, economic and cultural backgrounds, and included citizens from 17 to 72 years of age, with approximately equal numbers of men and women. An emphasis was placed on citizens likely to have less access to information or experience with elections and public affairs, such as youth, ethnic minorities, unemployed or seasonally employed, returned migrants, housewives, and pensioners).

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<sup>1</sup>Previously Albania had been organized in 373 local government units, consisting of 64 Municipalities (generally urban settlements) and 309 Communes (settlements consisting of multiple villages or small towns). Tirana, the capital, was also divided into 11 sub-municipal units, each of which also had its own Mayor-like figure and Council.

<sup>2</sup>Focus groups took place from April 3-10 in Vora, Rubik, Orikum, Ura Vajgurore, Ndroq, Mbrostar, Dropull, and Bushat.

Focus groups' venues were in privately owned spaces in the respective localities, in order to make the participants comfortable and relaxed during the discussion and free of any form of influence from local government representatives. Focus groups lasted approximately 2 hours each.

A moderator from Partners Albania facilitated the discussions, directing questions to the participants, keeping to a Discussion Guide and time schedule. Efforts were made to ensure everyone had an equal opportunity to speak on each issue. A note taker recorded the statements, declarations, opinions and understandings of the participants, and also made an audio recording of the discussions with the participants' consent. Partners Albania also provided an observer who monitored the focus groups to make note of the behaviors and non verbal communication among participants. UNDP staff also observed select focus group discussions.

### **III. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS**

#### **a. Awareness of key election and civic issues**

- There was near universal awareness of basic facts: there is an election on 21 June for local government, voting will be for Council and Mayor, and there is territorial reorganization of the municipalities.
- There was little knowledge of the candidates for either Mayor or Council. This was somewhat to be expected given the early stage in the election calendar, but the added and protracted process for settling on a Mayoral candidate seems to have had an affect on voter awareness at this stage of the election vis-à-vis earlier years.
- Participants doubted they would ever learn who was standing for the Councils; they felt that citizens rarely had this information prior to Election Day.
- There was almost no knowledge of more advanced electoral or civic topics regarding the municipal Councils, such as how the Council was to be elected, the numbers elected to the Council, the length of the mandate of the Council, etc.
- There were virtually no concerns about voter lists; participants seemed to be very familiar with the process of verification prior to Election Day.
- Participants showed a high degree of awareness concerning the secrecy of vote and for when voters may help others cast a vote, and what is considered improper assistance with voting.
- While participants indicated that family voting practices, where a man casts the ballot for his family members, was a "thing of the past" in Albania, there was some acceptance of the practice where the head of household decides for all family members how they should vote.
- There was little awareness of penalties for voter fraud and any application of such penalties in previous elections.

## **b. Motivations for voting and supporting candidates or parties**

- Participants expressed considerable apathy and doubted as to whether their vote will “make a change”; there was also considerable lack of trust in the electoral process.
- Participants felt the election process needed to be more transparent, and that the results should be more immediate. The absence of such conditions has decreased enthusiasm for voting.
- These negative impressions notwithstanding, the general feeling of participants was that they will go and vote, with some respondents saying they will not vote if they don’t like the parties’ candidates.
- The reasons that seemed to resonate the most as to why citizens should vote were ones that concerned the civic duty or responsibility as a citizen. Still resonating, but not everywhere, was that voting gives you a chance to affect change in your community.
- Youth and first time voters professed the most enthusiasm for voting and belief in its importance.
- Most participants said party affiliation was less important to them than in the past. High disappointment levels in parties contributed to wanting to choose candidates on reputation, morals, achievements, family life and other personal attributes rather than purely by party.
- Besides candidate qualities, the proposed platform and other ideas he or she has are the second most cited reason for supporting candidates.
- Youth expressed more interest in social policies of candidates, such as education, culture, assistance for persons with disabilities, etc.
- Most participants cited greater motivation to vote for a woman candidate as opposed to a man, as they consider a woman to be more careful in economic matters, devoted to work, responsible by nature, and less prone to corruption.

## **c. Influences on voter motivation and attitudes related to the Territorial Administrative reform**

- Participant opinions varied on whether their vote is less or more important now because of the recent reorganization of the territory and how it affects the likelihood of voting. There was a positive correlation between general dissatisfaction in the reform and confusion in how it would work out for their respective community, and being less likely to vote on Election Day.
- Most participants from the smaller communities expressed a lesser motivation to vote because they will be unable to get (or as easily get) basic services from their elected leaders. A common sentiment was that these communities would be “lost” in a larger municipal unit and neglected.
- Those in a larger town – at the center of the new Municipality – also said they felt less inclined to vote because their resources will now be disproportionately divided with the smaller

Communes, and that the expanded territory will have a negative impact on providing solutions to problems of residents.

- Participants also cited the lack of community's representation in the new local government as a demotivating factor.
- Some participants did feel they would be more inclined to vote, as there are real chances now for improvements in the community stemming from the fact that they will be part of a larger unit with more funds. Such participants also felt the Mayor will be more serious and responsible, the administration will be less costly, and there would be less local corruption.
- There was considerable need for information on how the new administrative units (within the new Municipality) would function, and how they would be selected.

## IV. COMPLETE FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

### a. General Voter Education and Awareness

There are several types or classifications of voter education: on voting procedures and important information on enfranchisement; on choices available to voters and their platforms; on awareness raising and motivation of the electorate; and others. UNDP placed an emphasis on topics that have been traditionally the subject of voter education programs in Albania. Indeed, many of these topics are part of the approved CEC Voter Education Plan for these elections.<sup>3</sup>

- ***Political choice***

There appeared from the discussions a fairly consistent level of basic voter understanding and awareness in Albania: almost all participants in the focus groups were informed about the type, purpose and date of the elections taking place in June. Participants uniformly knew that they were going to vote for the election of the Mayor and the members of the Municipal Councils, although a few (less than 5%) claimed not to know about the changes in the local territorial organization, and that they would no longer be voting for the head of their Commune (Mbrostar and Dropull). A few participants also requested information on who selects the candidates for Mayor, and the percentage of votes needed to be elected Mayor. Regarding the political choices available to the electorate, the situation was far less clear. Participants, at the time the focus groups took place, felt that citizens had little to no information on the respective candidates for Mayor. There were a number of rumors in different areas on names of candidates (for example in Vora, Ura Vajgurore, and Rubik). It was only in one area, Bushat, that participants felt confident on the left coalition's choice of its candidate. Admittedly, the candidates had not been registered, or for the most part even officially announced, at the time of the focus group discussions, so this is not necessarily a cause for concern.<sup>4</sup> However, it could be construed that the added uncertainty of choosing one candidate to represent multiple "former local government units",

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<sup>3</sup> Available at <http://www2.cec.org.al/sq-al/>

<sup>4</sup> In pluralistic and free societies, typically the competing parties ensure the voting public is well informed about such choices, and there will likely be considerable increase in candidate and party information in Albania in the coming weeks.

and the protracted negotiations on the choice of a party's candidate, likely contributed to greater voter uncertainty on the candidates at this stage of the electoral process than in previous years.

With regards to the candidates for the Councils, the situation was much worse. Participants had no information at all, official or otherwise. Many participants expressed the belief that they would not get this information before the elections, based on the experience of previous elections. Participants maintained that citizens would like to know their candidates before Election Day, in order to make an assessment based on their experience, contributions to society and the community, and the programs proposed.

- ***Voter lists***

Voter list accuracy has historically been an issue in Albania, and considerable efforts have been taken to both improve voter lists and the awareness of a citizen's right and responsibility to verify the accuracy of voter eligibility information in the period before an election. It is one of the topics the CEC will be addressing in its 2015 educational campaign.

Participants in the focus groups expressed virtually no concerns about either themselves or their family members being included in the voter lists. Participants felt citizens were aware that they should check their name in the voting lists, and that these lists are published in public spaces, which are also well-known to citizens. Participants listed the Municipality or Commune building, the health care center, schools, bars, public buildings, and the voting centers as places where lists are posted. In some locations, (Mbrostar, Dropull, Ura Vajgurore, Rubik, and Orikum) focus group participants could personally confirm that voter lists were published, having already checked the lists and verified their name and the names of their family members. Other participants also reported that verification of voter lists had taken place in their locations. Participants mentioned either receiving a letter in their homes with the names of their family members to check if all were included in the voter lists, and to report any omissions, or had been visited at home by representatives of the Municipality to check their names on the voter lists and to orient them on their voting center.

In almost all focus groups, younger and first-time voters were less familiar with the publication and checking of voter lists, and, as some of them declared, there is one member of the family, usually the head of family, that check the names for the whole family. The idea of one member checking for the whole family was repeated across several focus groups. One participant (Bushat) felt that there was insufficient time to verify voter information.

- ***Secrecy of vote***

The guarantee of the secrecy of the vote is an important and necessary condition in any democratic election. The secrecy aspect of voting will be stressed in the majority of CEC television and radio spots according to the CEC Voter Education Plan – in messages on voting procedures, in messages targeting persons with disabilities, and in messages designed specifically for women voters. These spots focus mostly on the act of casting the ballot, with the exception of the spot designed for women voters that also covers other systemic issues relating to privacy of the vote and family voting.

All participants in focus groups were aware that the vote is secret and personal; no one else can vote for you, nor can they (participants) vote for someone else. This notwithstanding, several of the discussions focused on the fact that they are small localities and people usually talk openly with each other about their personal political beliefs, thus it is known for which candidate they have voted. Participants widely

agreed that a family member may complete the ballot for another voter who requires assistance, but without influencing the vote, such as in cases of blind or elderly people.<sup>5</sup>

With regards to family voting, most participants felt that it belongs to the past, and there were no cases in their knowledge when this actually happens.<sup>6</sup> According to some participants, it can happen in remote, rural areas; however, they had no real evidence of this taking place. At the same time, most of the participants agreed that there is influence among family members regarding for whom to vote. The scenario frequently described was that the head of the family might not cast the ballot for the other members of the family, but he dictates on how everyone in the family votes.

Young and first time voters among the participants were particularly eager and resolute to vote for themselves, as they considered the vote a personal right to express their opinion without interference or influence. One participant drew interesting connections between the decrease in family voting with the growing apathy of voters, and the increasing responsibility of voting commissioners to the secrecy of the vote.

- ***Sanctions***

Participants widely agreed that there are cases of electoral fraud in the forms of physical and psychological threats, threats by employers, and the exchange of votes for money or material goods. Almost all (over 95%) of the participants, however, were not aware that there were penalties for electoral fraud, nor were they aware of any person being punished for such acts. Only a few participants were able to cite the types of punitive measures, ranging from fines to imprisonment.

When asked what measures or factors might stop such fraud, participants largely believed it is the responsibility of the state through the adoption and implementation of legislation on electoral fraud, as well as through the organization of the voting process. The most common examples of the types of such actions were (in order of popularity): replacing the commissioners from political parties by nonpartisan and professional commissioners; better enforcement of laws; increased citizen awareness and education on fraud; improving the socio-economic conditions (to decrease the attraction of selling one's vote); and punishment of candidates who buy votes.

Participants cited a general need for more information on this issue. One participant (in Rubik) interestingly remarked that while there were signs in the voting centers on prohibited acts like carrying guns and smoking, there were no such signs about committing electoral fraud.

## **b. Motivations for Voting and Supporting a Party or Candidate**

Different factors motivate different people to participate in elections – from a sense of performing one's civic duty, to supporting a particular candidate or cause, to fear of losing one's say in the affairs of the community. As voter motivation will be a major part of outreach and educational programs of the CEC and various stakeholders, UNDP wanted to learn about what drives voters to participate in Albania's elections, and in particular local elections. As local elections bring candidates considerably closer to the electorate, there was also an interest in what makes a voter support a particular candidate.

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<sup>5</sup> In actuality the Electoral Code permits assistance to a voter who is unable to vote independently for physical reasons by a family member or another voter on the voter list for that polling unit (Article 108).

<sup>6</sup> Family voting as defined here referred to the physical casting of a ballot for another family member.

- ***Rationales behind voting***

When asked if by voting one can make a difference in the community, participants were generally pessimistic. Participants expressed disappointment in previous and current elected leaders, and they are not convinced that their vote will bring any change to the status quo of the last four years. Only a few participants (in one focus group, Dropull) expressed at least a hope that this would change after these elections. This being said, when participants were then asked what were the important reasons to vote, around half stated to have a better future, or to bring change. Other reasons frequently given included: to select the candidate that will represent them; to perform their civic duty; to take a decision for themselves; to not give opportunity for vote manipulation; and to have municipal services.

Participants felt that the main reasons people did not vote involved dissatisfaction with the elected leaders and the lack of trust in the candidates, and that their vote really did not matter. There is considerable disappointment in the unfulfilled promises of previous elected officials, and little change or improvement in their lives as a result of the political process. Participants in Orikum and Ura Vaigore were the most pessimistic, saying that most citizens were fed up with broken promises and the lack of investment, and had lost faith in public institutions and the local administration. Only in Dropull did participants feel that there were no significant issues affecting voter turnout, and that indeed most all citizens of age will vote in the upcoming election.

First time and younger voters clearly expressed greater motivation and interest to vote when compared with other demographic groups.

Participants were given a series of statements or stimuli and asked how each appealed to them and whether or not it would describe their motivation to vote. Responses were largely mixed both throughout the country and amongst individual focus groups.

The statement ***voting gives you a chance to influence the decisions of your local community*** was often regarded as important, but participants felt there has been no evidence of this actually happening and therefore questioned its value. More than one discussion pointed out that once elected, voters will not see the officials again until the next election. The statement was however the most compelling reason (of those given) to the participants in Rubik and Vora. In Mbrostar and Ndroq, by contrast, citizens did not agree with this statement at all. ***Voting is your civic duty that must be taken seriously*** was actually the most compelling and convincing of all the statements, resonating best with the majority of participants across all groups. The idea that ***previous local elections have been decided by only a few votes*** was not as appealing. Only in one location did this concept have any credence (Vora). In some locations (Bushat and Mbrostar) they did not see it as relevant as the Mayors were always determined by a wide majority. When participants were asked whether the fact that you will be able to ***see how your village or local community voted for Mayor and Council by watching the results on TV or website of the CEC on election night*** is a positive incentive to vote, participants largely agreed that if this happens it would be great, but up to now it has taken long time before announcing the winning candidate. In their opinion this delay causes people to lose faith in the results and transparency of the process, further fueling apathy towards participating in voting.

There were several effects on voter motivation resulting from the recent Territorial Administrative reform. As these are new factors that perhaps will for the first time bear influence on voter behavior and choice, they are explored in the section following.

- ***Candidate preferences***

Participants in the focus groups admitted that in past elections they have been mostly driven by political affiliation of the candidates in deciding for whom to cast their vote. However, they declared that due to general disappointment with elected Mayors, heads of Communes and member of Councils, they will be mostly driven by the integrity and attributes of a candidate and what he or she stands for, as opposed to the political force he or she represents. A majority of the participants in all focus groups declared that they will choose a candidate based on personal attributes, such as reputation, morals, experience, family life, background, and education. Of secondary importance was the candidate's (party's) program and platform and proposed changes that he or she will bring to the community. This may be due to the commonly expressed sentiment that the candidates make a lot of promises during the elections that they do not keep once elected. This would then also explain why first time and younger voters (who would be less disenchanted by previous elections) were more inclined to cite such reasons compared to the other participants. Younger participants were also interested in the candidate positions and proposals on education, youth, and culture. While almost all participants fell into one of the rationales listed above, a few did state that they will vote based on political affiliation of the candidate, or based on a balance between political affiliation and trust in the individual.

In regards to what they wanted to see in party and candidate platforms, participants mentioned several issues which generally pertained to everyday and specific problems faced by citizens in their localities. All the focus groups centered around two key areas: employment opportunities and creation of new jobs; and infrastructure, including roads, canalization, electricity, and water supply. Also mentioned by a number of participants were health care provision and services, issues related to safety and security (crime prevention, etc.), and green spaces and parks (places for kids and families).

When asked if it matters whether a candidate is a man or woman, participants overwhelmingly stated that this is not an important factor in political choices. More important to citizens is the integrity, personality, skills, abilities, and the professionalism of the candidate. When pressed further, arguments favoring both female and male candidates did emerge. Many participants said that citizens would feel more motivated to vote for a female candidate, as they consider a woman to be less corrupted, more careful with the management of the economy, more devoted to work, sensitive towards citizens needs, better understands the needs of the community, and is more responsible by nature. Participants also stated that they would feel better and more represented by a woman political leader. A minority of participants by contrast expressed the belief that a Mayor should be a man because he has more energy for work, is generally a more powerful figure, and can take decisions more easily.

### **c. Influences on Voter Behavior Resulting from Territorial Administrative Reform**

Over the past year and half the government of Albania initiated a reform program to consolidate the existing 373 Municipalities and Communes into the new 61 municipalities. As that process has taken place only very recently, and citizens will vote in what are essentially entirely new geographic constituencies, there are questions about the impact of this reform on their voting behavior.

- ***Awareness of Territorial Administrative reform***

As mentioned above, almost all participants were aware that there had been a reform of the territorial administration and organization of the country. Although not a focus of the research, it was impossible

to isolate from the discussions the many questions and concerns about the process and impact of the Territorial Administrative reform on daily life of the participants.

Participants felt citizens needed more information on the borders of the new Municipality, all the villages and towns within the Municipality, the number of citizens, the functions of the Municipality and (sub-municipal) administrative units, and services delivered to the citizens. Participants wanted to know how exactly services will be delivered to citizens, whether there would be government offices in their locality, and if so, how will it function and what services it will deliver. Participants were not clear on what the government or administration of their current Commune would be after the reform (*i.e.*, who will run the sub-municipal administrative units within the new Municipalities) and how that process is decided. For example, participants knew they will vote for a Mayor that will govern several current Municipalities and Communes, but wanted to know whether there will be a representative of the new Mayor or some other administrative structure to replace governance functions they currently have at the Commune level. They also expressed a concern that it would be difficult to get attention from the new Mayor (and thus solve problems), as the government unit would be considerably larger than before. These concerns were mainly raised by the participants in localities that were going to merge with others, where the center of the new Municipality will be elsewhere.

Several participants expressed their concerns with regards to the process of the Territorial Administrative reform. They felt citizens were not asked and consulted during the process or on the decisions made.

- ***Affect on the importance of voting***

When compared to previous elections in Albania, participants were evenly divided in believing that their vote will be more, or less important. Why the vote was *less* important to vote now was largely related to the changes in local government units (and their local Mayors and Council members) stemming from the Territorial Administrative reform. However, there were several other reasons offered relating to general voter apathy and disappointment in elected leaders. Of those participants that felt it was now *more* important to vote, the reasons were wholly related to the recent Territorial Administrative reform and the changes that it will bring in local administration and distribution of resources.

The most common reason given for why voting was less important to participants now, had to do with belonging to a larger Municipality and consequently having fewer chances to benefit from its services. Participants felt that being more distant from the Mayor and the Municipality center will make it more difficult for them to address their needs and solve their problems. Participants from smaller Communes that will now be attached to a bigger Municipality felt they will be left aside and neglected; resources will be invested at the center of the Municipality and not distributed fairly with the other, smaller locations. Participants from larger Communes or municipalities fear the opposite: that their resources will be divided now with the other smaller units that are to be a part of their new Municipality. Such small Communes will thus benefit without really contributing to the Municipality.

A decrease in the relevance of the vote to participants also tended to correlate with how dissatisfied they were with the reform process and results. Some participants felt that their vote is less important simply because of the disappointment with the current local government leaders and administration that have not addressed the community's problems. Consequently they feel nothing will change and the vote is meaningless.

Participants who considered their vote will be more important reasoned that being part of a larger municipal unit would afford the community more funds and more qualified professional staff, which will

be better able to address and respond to their needs and problems. There was also expressed a sense that the new Mayor would have to govern with a greater sense of responsibility and accountability toward the (larger) community that has elected him or her. These participants also believed that the local administration will be less expensive for the combined budget of the new Municipality, and as a result there would be more funds for infrastructure and other investments.

A few participants declared that their vote will be equally important as before, reasoning that the opinion of a citizen, and thus the vote, is very important. First time voters had no reference point against which to compare the importance of the vote in this election. However, as mentioned earlier, they generally felt the vote was very important and were eager to participate in the election.

- ***Affects on motivation to vote***

Despite being divided on the *importance* of their vote in the local elections, a plurality of participants felt less *motivated* to vote in this election. Only in Mbrostar did participants generally feel greater motivation to vote, in Dropull and Ura Vjgurore most participants felt it was equally important. The majority of reasons – for those both less and more motivated to vote – were often related to the reform.

Rational for feeling less or more inclined to vote roughly mirrors that of the importance of voting. These include disagreement with the reform process and being merged with another (larger) Commune, and the fear that most of the investments will go to the bigger communities within the new Municipality. Participants also feel less motivated due to a fear of lack of representation within the new office of Mayor and Council members. In one focus group (Orikum) three-quarters of the participants felt less motivated to vote now, but claimed that they will go to vote anyway because their existing local government unit has done little to improve the situation in the city and they need change.

About a fifth of all participants did say they were more motivated to vote than previously. This they attributed to belief that they could bring some changes to the community and that the territorial changes will bring more opportunities and resources (especially financial) for the new elected Mayor. They also believed the reform could improve accountability of public officials toward citizens, as they would be accountable to many more people than before. Again, first time voters and young voters amongst all focus groups felt more motivated to vote compared with other groups.

- ***Affects on identification with the candidates***

As mentioned at the outset of this report, among all groups there was confusion regarding the candidates for Mayor and Council. Participants cited the delay in announcing Mayoral candidates and their platforms in this election as a demotivating factor. Participants believed they would feel less connected to the Mayor, regardless of who will be the candidate. Almost all participants also associated a lack of connection with the fact that the territory of the Municipality will be expanded. Regarding municipal Councils, participants felt citizens had no knowledge of candidates to the Council, as cited earlier. A majority of participants expressed the view that if they would have an opportunity to directly elect the individual members of the Council (as opposed to party lists), they would feel more connected and represented in the new Municipality.

## **V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **a. Awareness of key election issues**

Based on the participants' responses to questions and issues raised within the focus groups, it is possible to surmise a number of conclusions on behavior of the Albanian electorate and on what may be some of the current information gaps. These findings suggest areas where both civic and voter education programs might focus in the 2015 election campaign, and also in the longer term, *i.e.*, between elections. While the patterns of responses were fairly consistent throughout this study, additional research should be undertaken to strengthen the confidence level of the findings when time and resources permit.

### **b. General voter and civic education**

There is a fairly high degree of awareness of elections and politics in Albania. People are also generally informed on major initiatives of the government, such as the Territorial Administrative reform. However, it appears such understanding does not often go beyond the "basics", and more advanced civic and electoral education could be useful. Voter education efforts should focus on explaining how candidates are elected (particularly to the Councils), and the roles of the elected officials. There is also a need for information on candidates within the party lists for municipal Councils.

There are some areas of voter education that various organizations have focused heavily on in recent years. Some of these areas, such as verification in the voter lists or the secrecy of the vote, while still very important, appear to be very well understood in Albania. Organizations carrying out voter education should consider this possibility when they plan their voter education messages and allocate limited resources to such campaigns.

While the practice of casting ballots for other members of the family is purportedly on the decline in Albania, there is still a certain degree of acceptance of the practice of the head of household (typically a male) deciding how the family will vote. To affect such sentiment and behavior will require longer term civic education approaches; election regulations, sanctions and voter education initiatives will unfortunately have limited impact on this behavior.

There was a marked lack of awareness of penalties for voter fraud. Those conducting voter education programs might consider emphasizing existing sanctions for acts such as voting for someone else, falsifying electoral documents, intimidating supporters of a candidate or voters, etc. The threat of punishment or negative reinforcement can prove an effective educational stimulus. Of course, messages to this effect need to be backed up by enforcement of sanctions when acts of fraud take place, or they will have far less impact on people.

### **c. Motivation for voting**

There was considerable lack of motivation for voting reported in the focus groups; however, it was hard to say just how and if this will actually translate into voters staying home on Election Day, or if citizens will nevertheless vote out of a sense of civic duty.

Considering that most participants expressed a lack of trust in the electoral process in general, it might be advisable to devote some pre-election education to the process and institutions (the CEC, Electoral College) themselves. For example, it might be helpful to explain to citizens what happens after they cast

their ballot (how a ballot is counted), when turnout and results should be expected, and how mandates are allocated.

It appeared that messages with the most resonance with voters might be those that appeal to a sense of civic responsibility or affecting change in one's community. While young and first-time voters have an obvious need for information on the process of voting, motivating them to participate in elections may not be as significant an issue. More research on young voter participation would certainly be warranted.

While most participants claimed that party affiliation is less important than in the past, this will only happen if citizens have a decent amount of information on the candidates and parties on which to form their choices. There may be an opening to encourage more thought-out and informed choices by making sure that information on candidates is readily available to the electorate – particularly on the parties' and individuals' platforms, records and other attributes. While political subjects can be expected to canvas with increasing intensity over the coming months and weeks, other entities, such as the CEC and nongovernmental organizations, may be able to provide easy-to-access and comprehensive information in this area. Without such information, those who vote may be more likely to fall back on their other main reference point – political party identity and affiliations.

The need for information on the candidates for municipal Council is clearly great.

#### **d. Territorial Administrative reform influences on voter motivation**

There is a connection between the recent Territorial Administrative reform and the feelings of citizens going into Election Day. The exact nature of this connection is somewhat complex. It appears, for example, that people claim a decreased motivation to vote simply because of the dissatisfaction in the process or results of the reform, or the uncertainty of what exactly the reform means for their daily lives. Whether confusion and negative sentiment concerning one thing (the reform) will directly translate into negative approaches to another (electoral participation) is difficult to say. Despite dissatisfaction or unfamiliarity with candidates for the new government structures, participants still professed a desire to vote and the reasons for doing so, and for supporting parties and candidates.

Judging by participant responses, there is definitely greater cause for concern about voter apathy in municipalities that will be on the "periphery", *i.e.*, not at the seat of the local government. Partially this is a result of confusion on how they will obtain government services and fear that they will be neglected by the "core" community, but can also be attributed to a lack of knowledge about candidates, particularly to the Councils.

There is an obvious need for significant civic education on the new powers of the Municipality, how services are obtained, how the new administrative units within the Municipality will function and be run (and by whom), the distribution of resources, and other related issues. The electoral period and key electoral bodies like the CEC are not always the best time and institutions to deliver such information. However, the CEC and others can at a minimum provide detailed information to citizens on the candidates and parties and their platforms, how they are elected, and to what they are elected.

This being said, there were a minority of participants in the focus groups who cited several positives and good arguments for the potential benefits of the reform, for example spending less money on government administration and pooling of resources. Such arguments should be taken into account when constructing public information campaigns and civic education on the new system of local self governance and its relation to citizens.