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ELECTION BRIEFING NO 56
EUROPE AND THE ALBANIAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION OF JUNE 2009[1]

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Key points:

- The Berisha-led Democratic Party won the June 2009 parliamentary election by a slim margin; however, it had no chance of forming a government alone.
- Though the Socialist Party lost the election, it won a substantially greater number of votes and seats than it did in the previous election.
- In spite of a turbulent past relationship, the Democratic Party and the Socialist Movement for Integration formed a coalition government, the very first coalition of its kind in Albania.
- The Socialist Party contested the fairness of the election, and demanded a review of the ballots.
- The new electoral system produced a bi-polar parliament, proving that it greatly favoured the two biggest parties over smaller parties vying for seats in parliament.
- The 2009 election proved that European integration and visa liberalisation issues top the agenda of Albanian party politics.

Background/Context

In 2009, Albania held its seventh post-communist parliamentary election. Albania, a parliamentary republic, has a National Assembly that is the only governing body directly

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elected by the people. The National Assembly is unicameral with 140 members. Its primary powers include appointing the government and President and adopting laws. In terms of constitutional powers, the National Assembly is the most powerful branch of government, having both legislative and political appointment powers.

The Democratic Party and the Socialist Party have dominated the Albanian political scene since the fall of communism in 1991. As a rule, one or the other has been in government during the last twenty years. In principle, the Democratic Party represents the right-wing of Albanian party politics, the Socialist Party the left. Though identified as parties of the right and left, their ideological profiles have often shifted, and now both are close to the centre politically. Currently, the Democratic Party can be viewed as centre-right, and the Socialist Party as centre-left. From a historical perspective, the Democratic Party arose from opposition to communism and was mainly comprised of those who dissented against the communist authorities. On the other side, the Socialist Party was established by and comprised former communist elites that reformed the party with a new membership structure.

The Democratic Party won the 1992 elections after losing the first post-communist elections in 1991. However, bearing the brunt of the blame for government and economic failures during the 1997 riots and political demonstrations, the Democratic Party and its leader, Sali Berisha, were ousted from office the next year. In the wake of a new political demography, the Socialist Party with its 'historical' father, Fatos Nano, won the 1998 parliamentary election and formed a government. Mr Nano held on to power until 2005, when a party turnover occurred. Accusations of corruption and negligence in pursuing reform plagued Mr Nano, clearing the way for a reformed Democratic Party and Mr Berisha, to win the 2005 election. Having lost the election, Mr Nano resigned his position and left the Socialist Party leadership.

After his departure, Nano did not interfere with the new Socialist Party internal election process. Amidst the difficult circumstances that existed for the party in 2005, Edi Rama, a well-known young politician, was elected as the party's new leader. As mayor of Tirana, Mr Rama used his extensive popular support as a means to win the Socialist Party's leadership, and once he assumed that post he promised to change the party with a new vision and political elite.

Although the Democratic Party won the 2005 election, it did not have the necessary votes to form a new government by itself. Hence the party formed a government with its pre-election allies, two then-leftist parties. After assuming the post of Prime Minister, Mr Berisha promised to further reforms, bring Albania closer to the EU, foster economic growth, and fight corruption.

During its four year mandate, the Berisha Government instituted dramatic changes. Mr Berisha worked intensively to strengthen connections with Albania's Western allies. By doing so, Mr Berisha and his Democratic Party accepted advice from Western governments about how to reform and develop Albania economically. With the Western support that Berisha received through party and personal connections with Western

leaders, Albania dramatically changed its international image while Mr Berisha enjoyed more domestic legitimacy.

The Berisha Government implemented many reforms. It started by arresting dangerous criminal groups that had avoided prosecution during Socialist rule. The government received international appreciation for convicting these groups which had enjoyed nearly free reign in the country. The government's action brought about massive Western support and contributed significantly to smoothing the route for the country's integration into the EU.

The Berisha Government reformed the economic system, attracting direct foreign investment. Many (though not all) consider Mr Berisha's first government as the epoch of marketising the economy and greatly fostering foreign investment. In addition, the Berisha Government took advantage of many international grants and loans and made extensive public investments. It built a 1 billion dollar highway that bridged Albania with the centre of the Western Balkans, referred to as the 'route of the nation'. The highway bridged Albania and Kosovo, affording a moment of nationalistic pride, boosted the country's economic growth, and increased public support for the Berisha Government.

In addition, the government implemented a broad privatisation process, which enabled it to make further public investments. As a result, Mr Berisha effectively addressed the issue of the lack of electricity in parts of the country, reformed the education system and created mechanisms to stop corruption, modernised the government's revenue collection system, improved border controls and stopped illegal trafficking of migrants to Italy, increased public sector wages and pensions, and made additional large expenditures on new roads and infrastructure.

Under the Berisha Government, Albania took two major steps in the international context by joining NATO and convincing the EU member states and European Commission to ratify the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with Albania. With respect to NATO, many observers believed that Mr Berisha's close relationship with members of the US Republican Party, combined with the reforms made by his government, facilitated Albania's quick integration into the military alliance. As a result, the electorate's support for Mr Berisha and his Democratic Party government was strengthened. Likewise, the SAA, signed by the EU in acknowledgment of Albania's progress with reforms and state building, forged closer ties with the EU and further strengthened the Democratic Party.

The role of Albania in promoting Kosovo's independence was an important part of Mr Berisha's foreign policy. Mr Berisha made use of partnerships with Western countries to promote Kosovo's independence, while taking a 'neutral' position on the question of establishing an Albanian nation in the Balkans. This was greatly appreciated by other international actors which saw Mr Berisha's Government as behaving reasonably during the building of Kosovo's multi-ethnic state.

In the 2007 local elections the two main contenders conducted tough campaigns. Edi Rama, with the benefit of party pressure, became the Socialist nominee for Mayor of

Tirana, while Mr Berisha nominated the popular Minister of Interior, Sokol Olldashi, as the Democratic Party candidate. Mr Rama led throughout the whole campaign, and won. In hard fought contests, the Socialist Party won ten of the country's twelve mayoral elections.

The election results further empowered Mr Rama as the Socialists' leader. However, although Mr Berisha's Democratic Party lost most of the main local contests, its candidates received more votes overall than Socialist candidates. Mr Berisha thus claimed that the 2007 local elections affirmed popular support for his government and confirmed its legitimacy. Though both parties claimed victory – the Socialist Party won more mayoral offices, while the Democratic Party won more votes – both were also aware that the upcoming 2009 parliamentary election would prove a challenge.

In 2007, when President Alfred Moisiu's term ended, Mr Berisha wanted a President whose views coincided with his own. Mr Berisha had often clashed with Mr Moisiu over the war against crime and whether or not to dismiss the public prosecutor. Mr Berisha thus proposed Bamir Topi, a reformed politician from the Democratic Party, for the presidency. At that time, the President could, according to the Constitution of Albania, be appointed with the support of 75% of parliamentarians. In order to reach that vote, Mr Berisha entered into a secret agreement with four Socialist MPs, and gained the support of the former Socialist leader, Fatos Nano. As a result, Mr Topi received more than the required three-fourths vote and was appointed by Mr Berisha as Albania's new President. When assuming power, Mr Topi followed through on two of Berisha's concerns, namely: the dismissal of the public prosecutor and the appointment of new judges.

The Socialist Party remained rigidly opposed to the Berisha Government during the latter's first four years of rule. Using the *Gerdec Scandal*, Edi Rama and the Socialist Party accused Mr Berisha of being personally engaged in corruption and organised crime. In the meantime, Mr Rama consolidated his power as a leader of the Socialist Party and ousted potential dissidents from the party leadership, including the Nano clique. To that extent, Mr Rama alone orchestrated Socialist opposition while excluding potential voices of dissent. He attempted to forge more links between the party and leftist governments in Europe, an effort that was not altogether successful. Besides delivering tough opposition to Mr Berisha, Mr Rama also worked to change the Socialist Party's membership structure, leading to a reformed party having an almost entirely new elite.

Although the Democratic Party and Socialist Party had a turbulent relationship, they agreed on constitutional reform in late 2008. Both acknowledged that the appointment of the President by a 75% vote of the National Assembly had produced a political crisis, and that a solution was required. In addition, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE/ODIHR) had strongly criticised Albania's electoral system, which had produced the phenomenon of *Dushku*.[2] Hence, the need to reform the Constitution was already recognized.

[2] As a 2009 OSCE/ODIHR put it: 'The previous electoral system and its particular implementation, referred to as "Dushk", had lent itself to the fragmentation of the political system. It allowed the large political parties to maximize their gains by shifting proportional votes to smaller allies, without having to

Together, the Democratic Party and the Socialist Party had enough votes to amend the Constitution. Accordingly, the two parties used their position to gain strength over smaller parties by amending the Constitution to introduce two major changes: the appointment of the President of Republic by an absolute majority vote (50%+1): and the establishment of a regional proportional electoral system. These reforms essentially disengaged small political parties from the parliamentary system. The appointment of the President by an absolute majority vote eliminated the need for the large parties to attract votes from the small parties, while the regional proportional electoral system greatly hindered the ability of small parties to win seats in the National Assembly.

The constitutional reform resulted in a new electoral code which was adopted with Democratic Party and Socialist Party votes in December 2008. The code provided, as required by the constitutional reform, for a regional proportional electoral system with closed lists. The country, according to the new code, was divided into twelve constituencies, with each constituency corresponding to an administrative territorial division of the country having from 4 to 32 seats in the National Assembly. In addition, the new electoral code provided for a threshold of 3% for political parties and 5% for coalitions at the constituency level. The code regulated the distribution of seats among political contenders with the *D'Hondt Formula*, whereas the *Sainte-Lague Formula* was used to distribute the seats between parties in the same coalition.

Small parties, as opposed to the Democratic Party and the Socialist Party, unreservedly opposed the new electoral system. They argued that the high threshold at the constituency level would almost completely remove their presence in parliament and would shift votes to the two big parties. In sum, in the small parties' view the new electoral system would tend to eliminate them while further empowering the Democratic Party and Socialist Party, thus threatening party pluralism in Albania. The 2009 parliamentary elections would confirm the small parties' concerns. The new electoral system did indeed largely oust them from parliament and transformed Albania's political system into one with concentrated bi-partisanism.

Though the new electoral code was highly criticised for concentrating power in the two largest parties, it also incorporated some modern electoral standards. For example, some 40% of the electorate used birth certificates to vote in previous elections, which had led to a widespread corruption. Under the new code, Albanian citizens could vote only if they possessed a passport or an ID card. In just three months, the government issued ID cards to enable citizens to vote. Still, some 300,000 citizens, mainly due to their own negligence to apply for an ID card, did not receive one. The Socialist Party used this as one way of contesting the legitimacy of the elections.

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forfeit the seats won on their own in single member constituencies, and was disadvantageous to political parties that could not shift votes to smaller party allies.' See: OSCE/ODIHR, 'Needs Assessment Mission Report 16-19 March 2009: Republic of Albania Parliamentary Elections 2009', OSCE/ODIHR: Warsaw, 1 April 2009, p5.

Campaign Issues

The President of Albania set June 28, 2009 as election day for the Albanian National Assembly. There were two main contenders in this election: Mr Berisha's Democratic Party and Mr Rama's Socialist Party. In addition to the two big party contenders, the Socialist Movement for Integration, led by former Prime Minister Ilir Meta, was a fairly powerful participant.

The Democratic Party formed the pre-electoral Alliance for Change Coalition, which included sixteen small parties. The Socialist Party formed the pre-electoral Union for Change Coalition, which included five small parties. In addition, two other pre-electoral coalitions were formed, namely: the Socialist Alliance for Integration Coalition, led by Mr Meta's Socialist Movement for Integration; and the Pole of Freedom Alliance Coalition, led by former Prime Minister Aleksander Meksi. In principle, there were two left coalitions and two right coalitions; still, the right-wing coalitions included significantly more parties than the left-wing ones did.

In general, the campaign issues reflected the perceived needs of the public rather than the ideological profiles of the parties. Both major parties presented policy agendas that showed no specific orientation to left or right-wing politics. The parties' agendas were intended more for public consumption than for advancing their ideological goals. Still, the Democratic Party referred to itself as a centre-right party, whereas the Socialist Party imitated a centre-left party. In any event, the electoral programmes of both parties were too poorly developed to be considered very credible. Each made reference only to a general list of points of the kind that any politician would use.

The Democratic Party based its campaign on the achievements of its four-year government. It made corruption at the Socialist municipal level a campaign issue as well, in addition to highlighting the Socialist Party's communist leanings. The Democratic Party claimed that, during its tenure, Albania had taken the most significant steps in its history toward democratisation and economic growth. Mr Berisha claimed that Albania now had more respect than ever in the international arena, which resulted from its joining NATO and signing the SAA agreement with the EU. Mr Berisha also took credit for the public investments made in the country and the economic growth that the country achieved during the 2008 global financial crisis. He further claimed that the rule of law had never been stronger, citing the elimination of a number of organised criminal groups.

The Democratic Party used the support of most European incumbent right-wing leaders as a way to convince the electorate that Mr Berisha enjoyed Western support. Often, Mr Berisha blamed Mr Rama, Tirana's Socialist Mayor, for corruption at the municipal level. Indeed, Mr Berisha and the Democratic Party showed no restraint when criticising the Socialist elite for 'their' responsibility for the actions of the former communist regime.

During the campaign, Mr Berisha's opponents argued that his government's public investments had been excessive and required borrowing large sums of money to fund

budget deficits. Mr Berisha was also accused of using the public administration to direct his electoral campaign.

Mr Berisha made five major promises for his next government: (1) visa liberalisation for Albania within a year; (2) reform of the healthcare system, and increases in wages and pensions for the public sector; (3) fulfillment of most of the Copenhagen conditionality criteria; (4) a huge increase in public investments; and (5) economic growth comparable to that of the most developed economies.

The Socialist Party, in contrast, focused its campaign on the failures of the Berisha Government, and on the challenges faced by Albanian society and the economy. Mr Rama claimed that Mr Berisha had impoverished the country's economy, arguing that Albania was in its worst economic crisis ever. In addition, the Socialist Party accused Mr Berisha of being personally involved in corruption, and characterised his government as a corrupt family. In long sentences, Mr Rama described how the Berisha Government was engaged in crime, and called on the people to vote for a party that would dismiss the Berisha clique. Mr Rama also accused Mr Berisha of making extensive partisan appointments in the public administration, and of using the latter for campaign purposes. Mr Rama further argued that the Berisha Government had relied on foreign loans to fund its excessive public expenditures. He cited indictments brought by the public prosecutor against two Democratic Party ministers to link the government to crime and corruption. At the same time, Mr Rama himself was accused of corruption as mayor of Tirana. These charges played a significant role in voters' decisions.

The Socialist Party offered a poor agenda for a new government, which created scepticism about its ability to effect changes. In programmatic terms, the Socialist Party advocated a socially responsible state whose intervention in the social sphere would be pervasive. From a rhetorical point of view, what Mr Rama spoke about would be considered a strong leftist agenda. Yet, in general, the Socialist Party's programme followed a centre-left dynamic. Mr Rama, among other things, promised to: (1) fight corruption; (2) invest more money in the social sphere (though he did not explain how he would do so); (3) make more rigid rules for market competition; (4) better control the flow of foreign investments; (5) allow for more local government powers; and (6) cut administrative costs. Mr Rama also proclaimed that he would, Obama-style, follow an agenda that was beyond left and right. He did not, however, explain what that actually meant.

Given that Mr Rama was the third term Mayor of Tirana, he could not compete for a seat in the parliament without resigning from his current position. Hence, he chose to keep his position as Tirana's Mayor and abandoned his effort to become an MP. This caused the Democratic Party to argue that Mr Rama was afraid that they would not win. To further this political tactic, the Democratic Party proposed a change to the electoral code to enable Mr Rama to compete for a parliamentary seat while remaining Mayor. Mr Rama viewed the proposal as sarcasm and ignored it. By doing so, however, Mr Rama suggested to the electorate that he was not clear on what would happen if the Socialist Party won the election. When he did try to clarify this, he maintained that he would hold

the positions of the Prime Minister as well as Mayor of Tirana. In response, the Democratic Party claimed that Mr Rama wanted to act like a communist leader, occupying both central and local institutions. This, of course, directed votes to the Democratic Party.

The Results

Following a very hostile and polarised campaign, election day itself was relatively calm with very few problems. Indeed, international monitors concluded that the 2009 Albania parliamentary election was the calmest ever. The first exit polls, released minutes after voting ended, showed the Democratic Party winning the election. The vote counting, however, went slowly, and after 24 hours there was still no declared victor. In fact, the returns were showing a very tight race between the two main contenders, creating tension and conflict in days to come.

Table 1: Results of the June 2009 Albanian Parliamentary Election

	Coalition	Votes	Votes %	Seats
1	Alliance for Change Coalition (Led by Democratic Party DP)*	712,745	46,92%	70
2	Unification for Change Coalition (Led by Socialist Party SP)**	688,748	45,34%	66
3	Socialist Alliance for Integration Coalition (Led by Socialist Movement for Integration SMI)***	84,407	5,56%	4
4	Pole of Freedom Alliance Coalition****	27,655	1,82%	**0**
	TOTAL	**1,519,176**	**100%**	**140**
	Eligible electors	2,992,271		
	Turnout	50,77%		

Source: Albanian Electoral Commission (Komisioni Qendror i Zgjedhjeve), http://www.cec.org.al (The table and the incorporation of data have been prepared by the authors).
* Alliance for Change Coalition, led by Berisha's Democratic Party (DP), consisted of sixteen political parties.
** Unification for Change Coalition, led by Rama's Socialist Party (SP), consisted of five political parties.
***Socialist Alliance for Integration Coalition, led by Meta's Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI), consisted of six political parties.
****Pole of Freedom Alliance Coalition consisted of six political parties.

The counting process was often stopped by Socialist or Democrat representatives, criticising the quality of freedom in the election process and raising questions about its fairness. The preliminary results showed the Democratic Party and its pre-electoral coalition as the winner. However, the Socialist Party had received slightly more votes than the Democratic Party at national level. As **Table 1** shows, in quantitative terms, the

Berisha-led Coalition won 70 seats, the Rama-led Coalition won 66 seats, and the Meta-led Coalition won four seats. In terms of voting blocs, the left and right blocs thus won an equal number of seats in the parliament. Still, the left blocs won slightly more votes than the right ones at the national level. Mr Berisha and Mr Rama were both realistic about the composition of the new parliament and understood that neither could accomplish anything alone.

Having fuelled the fragmentation of the left-wing between Mr Rama and Mr Meta, Mr Berisha and the Democratic Party made an offer to Mr Meta's coalition to form a government. Politically situated between Mr Rama and Mr Berisha, Mr Meta, a stable leftist, decided to join Mr Berisha in a coalition government. Mr Meta's decision badly damaged his relationship with Mr Rama, who decisively rejected the idea of the Socialist Party joining a coalition government. Most political analysts argued that Mr Berisha's ability to separate Mr Rama from Mr Meta made it possible for the Democratic Party and the Socialist Movement for Integration to form a coalition government.

With the Meta coalition, Mr Berisha had 74 votes in the National Assembly, three more than the 71 needed to form a new government. Mr Berisha's pact with Mr Meta consisted of three points: first, Mr Meta's Socialist Movement for Integration would receive the ministerial portfolios of foreign affairs, economy, and healthcare; second, they would form a pre-electoral coalition in preparation for the upcoming local elections; and third, they would jointly appoint the President of Republic. Besides an agreement to form the government, Mr Berisha was aware of the need to have Meta's votes when it came to the local elections. Mr Berisha calculated that, with Mr Meta's votes, the Democratic Party could unseat Mr Rama as Mayor of Tirana. This, in turn, would broaden Mr Berisha's victory, and at the same time would dispel the myth that the capital city was a Socialist bastion.

Mr Rama, for his part, called the Socialist Movement for Integration a betrayer of the left, and accused Mr Meta of having entered into a secret pre-electoral partnership with Mr Berisha. Most observers, however, would argue that Mr Rama had to realise that his own inability to prevent the fragmentation of the leftist political parties resulted in a second term for Sali Berisha. Clearly, if the Socialist Party and the Socialist Movement for Integration had formed a pre-electoral coalition, they would have been the unconditional winners of the 2009 election.

The Berisha-Meta partnership represented the first time that a stable left and a right party in Albania had formed a coalition government. Arguably, no one would have expected Mr Meta to join Mr Berisha in a government given that Mr Meta himself had fought with the Democratic Party over the course of nearly twenty years. Nonetheless, the coalition pact reflected little more than the desire to press forward with the process to further integrate the country with the EU. In terms of right and left policies, the pact addressed nothing of substance, which can be seen as a weakness in Albanian party politics.

After the formation of the new government, the Socialist Party claimed that serious electoral corruption instigated by the Berisha government had occurred. Mr Rama

demanded that the National Assembly create a commission of inquiry that would review the vote ballots and investigate potential law violations. Mr Rama argued that the inquiry was necessary to uphold the principle of electoral transparency. The Berisha-led majority soundly rejected the idea of reviewing the ballots, stating that the Electoral College, a judicial body, had already addressed the Socialist Party's claims. The majority argued that what Mr Rama demanded was unconstitutional given that a parliamentary commission could not review a judicial decision.

As a result, the Socialist Party began a boycott of the parliament. At the time of writing the boycott has lasted for seven months, fuelling public opinion of a political crisis in Albania. Although Albania's European allies have attempted to end the 'crisis', Mr Rama continues to organize protests, strikes and other forms of disobedience as a way to demand electoral transparency and push his own agenda.

(Non-)impact of European integration issues

No political contender in the 2009 parliamentary election challenged the basic idea of Albania's integration into the EU. European integration was at the top of the agenda of almost every party during the campaign: the two most important campaign promises being: the promise to liberalize visas with the Schengen Area; and the promise to achieve candidate status for entry into the EU.

Albania signed the SAA in June 2006, and the agreement finally came into force in April 2009. The SAA was cited extensively by Mr Berisha to prove the capacity of his government to bring the country into the EU. One could be convinced of Mr Berisha's claim if one accepted his argument that 27 EU member state parliaments would not have ratified the SAA had it not been for the reforms implemented by his government. This argument, of course, was accepted by the many citizens who voted for Mr Berisha. But the Berisha Government also received a large amount of financial aid under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) that was signed in 2007. The IPA played an important role in promoting closer ties between the Albanian Government and the EU Commission. In the same year, Albania signed a visa-facilitation agreement with the EU, which was followed by a further dialogue between Albania and the EU concerning visa liberalization in 2008. The EU Commission proposed a roadmap for the Albanian visa liberalisation process which, given its importance to Albanian migrant families, received public praise. In April 2009, using the electoral campaign, Mr Berisha officially applied for membership in the EU.

In general, the Socialist Party exhibited a constructive attitude toward the European integration process. As in the case of Mr Berisha, Mr Rama, besides positioning the integration process at the top of his agenda, claimed that the Democratic Party threatened integration. In response, the Democratic Party presented a long list of achievements regarding European integration during its four years of governing. The application for EU candidate status, the positive appraisals received from most of the right wing leaders in the EU, and the promise for a fast visa liberalisation process, all helped Mr Berisha to

come across as the steadier of the two main candidates during the election. Both parties promised that visa liberalisation would occur within the first twelve months of a new government.

From a European party-based perspective, the Socialist Party was helped by the support of the Socialist International, and its chairman George Papandreou, who was a contender for Prime Minister of Greece at the time. In fact, Mr Rama, who enjoyed Mr Papandreou's support for his campaign, agreed to direct Albanian migrants in Greece to vote for the Greek Socialist. Mr Berisha received support from the Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, and the then Greek Prime Minister, Konstantinos Karamanlis. The support of these right-wing prime ministers was very significant for the Democratic Party given that Italy had been the most significant facilitator of the Albanian EU integration process, whereas Greece challenged that process. With this in mind, Mr Berisha made a trade off with Mr Karamanlis: the latter would demarcate the border between Greece and Albania without transparency, while Mr Berisha would receive Mr Karamanlis' support for the Albanian EU integration process.

Recently, in view of the ongoing political crisis between the Socialist Party and the Berisha-led majority in the parliament, Martin Schulz, chairman of the the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D Group) in the European Parliament (EP), and Joseph Daul, chairman of the European People's Party in the EP, negotiated with the two parties in an effort to resolve Mr Rama's demand that the ballots of the 2009 election be reviewed. Mr Schulz and Mr Daul failed to help the parties reach an agreement and gave up after concluding that the crisis should be resolved domestically. The EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton and EU Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Fule criticised Albania's two largest parties for their failure to resolve the crisis, and warned that their behaviour was counter to the Copenhagen criteria which would adversely affect Albania's route to integration. Hence, the election dispute was seriously jeopardising Albania's European integration prospects and significantly undermined its European image.

Conclusions and Future Prospects

While the 2009 Albanian parliamentary election introduced a new era of electoral freedom and fairness in Albania, a serious challenge also emerged. In general, the election further strengthened Mr Berisha and the Democratic Party's position on the political scene. The 2009 election proved that the changes to the electoral system further empowered the two largest parties and resulted in a disproportion between parliamentary seats and citizens' votes. In addition, the election proved that the new system endangered the existence of smaller political parties, and that getting their candidates elected to parliament was now extremely difficult.

The 2009 election brought about a rare coalition between a very stable centre-right party and a very stable centre-left party. Though the electoral campaign was severely lacking in

terms of specific policy proposals, the country's European integration route was never contested and topped the policy agenda of every party.

The Berisha-led coalition and the new government faced rigid opposition from the Socialist Party with respect to the issue of reviewing ballots and election results. Though Mr Berisha's position appeared to be constitutionally supportable, the problem entered the gates of Brussels and started to interfere with Albania's European integration process.

The coalition between Mr Berisha and Mr Meta may bring them new victories at the local level, especially in the capital city of Tirana. Meanwhile, the Socialist Party can be expected to further position itself as the only serious left party whose direction will never serve Mr Berisha's aims. Overall, the Berisha-led government can be expected to remain stable given that the break between the Socialist Party and the Socialist Movement for Integration is so severe that there is little or no likelihood of reconciliation.

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