

Agata Domachowska

Albania after the elections: Edi Rama wins for the third time in a row

New parliamentary elections were held in Albania on April 24. The current Prime Minister and leader of the Socialist Party (PS), Edi Rama, was victorious and will remain in office and, for the first time in the history of Albanian parliamentarism, will be the Prime Minister for the third time in a row. The numerous anti-government protests organized in Albania in 2019 and disappointment among some with the socio-economic situation of the country and its lack of significant acceleration for integrating with the European Union did not translate into increased support for opposition groups.

Over the past three decades, the Albanian political scene has been dominated by two main political parties, the Democratic Party (PD) and the Socialist Party (PS). They have alternately ruled Albania since the fall of communism. The third force is the Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI), established in 2004 by Ilir Meta, a former PS member and now president of the country. In 2009-2013, LSI formed the government coalition with PD, and in the subsequent four years with PS. The LSI is currently headed by I. Meta's wife, Monika Kryemadhi.

27 political parties and independent candidates took part in the parliamentary elections. The biggest opposition party, PD, formed the coalition "Alliance for Change" (Aleanca për Ndryshim) with 12 smaller political parties, while PS and LSI decided to start on their own. It should be noted, however, that PD and LSI reached an agreement in which they agreed that after the elections they would cooperate with each other in order to both rebuild the economy affected by the pandemic crisis and accelerate the process of Albania's accession to the EU. In practice, however, they were united by one goal: removing the Prime Minister Edi Rama from power. Pre-election polls indicated that the competition for victory between the opposition and the government would be even and fierce.

Election campaign. Due to formal restrictions introduced in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic, including restrictions related to the organization of public gatherings, election campaigns largely moved to the Internet. Conducted in a tense atmosphere, there were various incidents and acts of violence. Moreover, the opposition accused the government of vote-buying and electoral fraud.

The Prime Minister consistently repeated that he needed a third term in order to complete the process of transforming the state. Rama declared his intention to continue reforms that were interrupted first by the earthquake (late 2019) and then by the COVID-19 pandemic. In turn, the opposition emphasized the need to remove the Prime Minister from power, arguing that he had "appropriated" the state and was responsible for stopping the process of integration with the EU. President I. Meta was also involved in the campaign on the side of the opposition, pointing out that the elections constituted a referendum on the future of the state. The main topic of the election was the economy. Both the ruling party and the opposition unanimously emphasized the need to rebuild the economy. The Prime Minister promised to focus on investments in infrastructure projects, including the construction of roads, airports, and railway connections. Moreover, E. Rama promised a salary increase for teachers and health care workers.

During the election campaign, PD and LSI emphasized the need to carry out in-depth reforms in the health and education system, strengthen the rule of law, fight corruption and organized crime, and accelerate the integration process with the EU. The opposition emphasized the need to stop mass emigration, including the outflow of young people who leave Albania in search of better living conditions. PD announced their support for changes to the tax system, the fight against poverty, increasing the amount of pensions, as well as the implementation of new infrastructure projects. The Prime Minister also announced the acceleration of Albania's accession process. In recent months, however, he has also frequently criticized the EU for delaying the start of negotiations or for not having enough aid to obtain vaccines against the COVID-19 virus. Moreover, Rama has bluntly accused the EU of meddling in Albania's internal affairs after Mariya Gabriel, EU Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth, attended an online meeting on education in Albania organized by the University of Vienna.

The PD representative also participated in the same event. The European Commission denied the accusations and stressed that it was a meeting on the state of education in the region and had nothing to do with the election campaigns in Albania.

The issue of vaccination was also a focus of E. Rama in the election, and he emphasized the government's contribution to the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and in organizing vaccinations. According to announcements by the Prime Minister, at least half a million people are to be vaccinated by June, and by the first quarter of 2022, the entire adult population. It should be added that some Albanians have already been vaccinated in Serbia, which carries out vaccinations for citizens of other countries in the region. The three candidates of the Vetëvendosje (the Self-determination Movement), the Kosovar political party that has opened a branch in neighbouring Albania, also took part in the parliamentary elections. As a result, the Prime Minister of Kosovo, Albin Kurti, was also involved in the campaign. During the election campaign, Kurti travelled to Albania, where he encouraged support for his party's candidates. Moreover, as he has dual citizenship, he cast his vote in Tirana. Kurti is in favour of reforming the state not only in Kosovo, but also in Albania, leading to a negative impact on his relations with Albanian Prime Minister. Already, these relations were strained. They disagree on the "mini Schengen" plan in the Balkans. Edi Rama is in favour of deepening economic integration in the region in order to bring the Balkan states closer to the EU, while A. Kurti criticizes the plan and emphasizes, above all, the need to strengthen bilateral relations.

It should also be added that in Albania people suffering from COVID-19 could not vote. The members of the Albanian diaspora were also deprived of this right. Moreover, on April 19, a 14-day quarantine was imposed on travellers from Greece and North Macedonia due to the poor pandemic situation in both countries. Opposition parties and the president criticized the decision, saying that the government wanted to prevent a significant number of Albanian emigrants from voting in the elections.

Election results. The Socialist Party won the elections, gaining under 49% of the votes and 74 seats. PS, therefore, obtained a similar result to that of four years ago. The coalition of the Democratic Party (59 seats) secured approximately 10% less support, while the LSI, less than 7% (4 seats). The election threshold was also crossed by the Social Democratic Party (PSD, approx. 2.25%) – 3 seats.

Compared to the 2017 elections, the Socialist Movement for Integration turned out to be the biggest loser, having secured 19 seats at the time. By contrast, PD has rebuilt support over the past four years and gained 16 seats, but the poor performance of the LSI will prevent it from returning to power after eight years in the opposition. The SPD's better result compared to 2017 is somewhat of a surprise. However, the scale of the PS victory is sufficient enough to allow it to exercise power on its own without the need to form a coalition. The leader of the Social Democratic Party, Tom Doshi (accused of corruption offenses), who announced his resignation the day after the elections, probably counted on an invitation to co-create the new government. Even before the elections, the US ambassador to Albania, Yuri Kim, appealed to Albanian institutions to prevent the emergence of Doshi.

Conclusions. Holding free and fair elections was essential for Albania to assess its progress as part of the EU integration process. Albania has had problems organizing democratic elections more than once in the past. The assessment of their course will be important for the EU member states deciding when the intergovernmental conference, which is crucial to start accession negotiations, will be organized. The OSCE has already indicated that the vote-buying procedure remains a problem that the Albanian authorities have to deal with.

The new government faces many challenges, including economic issues (combating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic), social issues (mass migration, poverty), as well as the fight against corruption, organized crime, and unfinished reforms of the justice system. The numerous protests and mass emigration, especially of the younger generation of Albanians, mean that Albanian society is tired and disappointed with the current situation in the country and is demanding real change. Of key importance will be the issue of gaining political consensus, which remains a challenge for the strongly divided Albanian political class.

The victory of E. Rama is a problem for Albania-Kosovo relations. The direct involvement of the Prime Minister of Kosovo in the election campaign in Albania undoubtedly cooled the relations between these two politicians even further. At the same time, Albanian-Macedonian relations can be expected to develop (Prime Minister Zoran Zaev encouraged Albanians living in North Macedonia to vote for the PS). Due to support for the idea of the “mini Schengen” by President Vučić, Prime Minister Rama, and Prime Minister Zaev, it can be assumed that Serbia, Albania, and North Macedonia will – at least in the declarations – strive to deepen regional economic cooperation in the “mini Schengen” format.