

## The centre-left government in Albania – a new beginning?

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On 15 September, the centre-left government led by Edi Rama won a vote of confidence in the Albanian parliament. A grand government coalition was formed on this basis, where the Social Democratic Party (PS) led by Edi Rama and the Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI) led by Ilir Meta are the dominant groupings. The coalition won 57.7% of the vote and 84 parliamentary seats out of 140 in the election in June this year. The Democratic Party of Albania (PD) led by former prime minister Sali Berisha, which has governed the country since 2005, moved into opposition. Berisha resigned as the party head. PD received 39.9% of the vote and 56 seats in parliament. The turnout reached 53.5%, which was significantly higher than during the previous election.

### Commentary

- The takeover of power by Edi Rama's coalition put an end to the political career of Sali Berisha, who had played a key role in Albanian politics since 1992 and had had a strong impact on the nature of Albanian democracy. The last years of his rule were marked by his use of state institutions for his own purposes, the predominance of people linked to PD in the economy and the worsening conflict between the governing PD and the opposition PS. The dispute between the parties paralysed state institutions (the parliament, the Central Electoral Committee and the Supreme Court), which was the main reason the process of integration with the EU was being held up. The opposition also used non-parliamentary methods in its political struggle, thus exacerbating the state crisis (e.g. boycotting parliament in 2009 and endless demonstrations). In this context, the fact that PD has accepted the result of the election and has relinquished power to the opposition in a peaceful manner gives hope that state paralysis could end.
- The change in government does not mean there will be a redefinition of priorities in foreign or domestic policy. PS and PD have similar agendas: they put an emphasis on EU integration, co-operation with their NATO allies (Albania joined NATO in 2009), close relations with the USA and other countries in the region (Kosovo). Edi Rama has promised a conciliatory style in politics and comprehensive state reform, above all, building an independent judiciary and administration. These goals, though, may be put at risk by the alliance with LSI (this party won 18 seats), since their leader is suspected of extorting bribes.

- One of the challenges the government will have to face is the need to improve the tough socio-economic situation. Albania is one of the poorest European countries (with a GDP *per capita* of 30% of the EU mean of 2011). Although it has seen economic growth for more than a decade, this growth has recently visibly slowed down (3% of GDP in 2011). The national debt is around 60% of GDP, and the unemployment rate is 14%. Corruption, the lack of infrastructure and unstable legislation have discouraged foreign investors and this leaves Albania practically no chance of closing the gap with EU member states.
- The EU twice rejected the accession application submitted by Albania in 2009. Brussels's requirements included democratic elections and also reforms in the public administration, judiciary, parliament, property rights, etc. Paradoxically, gaining EU candidate status could be the easiest task for the Rama government, since EU institutions have expressed positive opinions on the election, and the Albanian parliament in late May adopted three of the acts required by Brussels (on the Supreme Court, parliamentary regulations and Civil Service).