

## Escalation of the political crisis in Albania

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On 24 June, Albania's Electoral College announced that the local election would be held as planned on 30 June this year. It thus supported the decision of the Central Election Commission (CEC) that the decree of President Ilir Meta cancelling the local elections is invalid. When making this decision, the president claimed that there were no necessary conditions for true, democratic, representative and all-inclusive elections due to the protests underway in Albania since February. The opposition Democratic Party (PD) led by Lulzim Basha, which organises the protests, has accused Edi Rama's government of close links with criminal groups and irregularities during the parliamentary election in 2017. It insists the government should be dismissed. The demonstrations have been extremely violent and often end in attacks on public utility buildings and clashes with the police. MPs representing the PD and the small Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI) from which the president originates have relinquished their seats in parliament and have been boycotting the parliament's work. Opposition parties have announced that they will boycott the election, and election materials have been destroyed in the communes governed by the opposition. A new wave of protests was triggered by the publication of recordings in the German newspaper *Bild* in June this year suggesting that politicians from the governing Socialist Party (PS) had collaborated with criminal groups in order to buy votes in 2017.

### Commentary

- The governing PS wants the election to be held as planned in order to strengthen its position in the country, and is using the institutions it controls to achieve this goal. On 14 June, the parliament rejected the presidential decree on the cancellation of the election on the initiative of the PS. It is unclear whether the parliament had the right to invalidate the president's decision, but the Constitutional Court which might have resolved this dispute is paralysed. The reform of the judiciary system being implemented by the Edi Rama government under pressure from the EU and the USA includes the vetting of judges. As a consequence, numerous judges have resigned or have been dismissed. There is no required quorum at the Constitutional Court since only two of the ten positions are currently manned.
- The boycott of the parliament's work and the violent anti-government protests have become a constant political practice in Albania. Accusations are currently being made against the PS that it uses corrupt practices and public institutions to ensure support during elections; these accusations were also targeted against the PD, though, when it

governed the country. Political parties, despite having similar goals in foreign policy (enhancing co-operation inside NATO and EU accession), are unwilling to compromise and co-operate, even if this adversely affects the process of Albania's accession to the EU. The unstable situation in Albania is not directly linked to meeting the formal requirements which the European Commission set Tirana, but it does nevertheless have an influence on political decisions in the EU and is used as an argument by those opposed to enlarging the EU. In June, the Council of the EU once again postponed its decision to launch accession negotiations with Albania until October, and some countries have entirely ruled out this option. This, in turn, makes Prime Minister Rama less inclined to find a solution to the dispute with the opposition.

- It is impossible to hold a democratic election amidst a turbulent political crisis. The opposition threatens that it will make efforts to prevent the local election being held on 30 June. This means that, despite the pressure from the EU and the USA, violent clashes between the government and the opposition may be seen while the election is underway.