

FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH REPORT

*Findings from public opinion research in Albania
Conducted December 1 to 6, 2014*

MARCH 2015



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Research Objectives

- Identify citizens' priority issues to help political and civic leaders shape policies that respond to those concerns
- Examine citizen attitudes on the performance of government institutions, and roles of political parties and civil society
- Explore citizen views of gender equality and women's political participation, and
- Solicit citizen recommendations for political parties, civic organizations, and state institutions



Focus Group Locations



Research Methodology

- Period of fieldwork: December 1-6, 2014. Continuation of annual focus group research conducted in October 2012 and December 2013.
- Ten focus group discussions in Shkoder (2), Tirana (2), Fier (2), Elbasan (2), and Korçe (2). Cities selected based on population, size, and geographical location.
- Participants recruited randomly using pre-set criteria and pre-screening procedures to ensure demographic diversity in gender, age, urban/rural dwelling, income level and employment status.
- Focus group research is qualitative, not quantitative. Its findings are indicative of public sentiment but not statistically reflective of public opinion. Findings cannot be extrapolated to the general population.
- The research was designed by NDI, including the development of the discussion guide in consultation with IDRA and political party and civil society partners.

Focus Group Participant Profiles

Nr	Age	Gender	Urban/Rural	Employment	Location
1	18-40	Female	Semi-Urban	Employed/Unemployed	Tirane
2	36-65	Male	Urban	Private Sector	Tirane
3	40-60	Female	Urban	Pensioners/Employed	Shkoder
4	22-40	Male	Rural	Unemployed/Private	Shkoder
5	18-40	Female	Semi-Urban	Unemployed, Young People/ Employed Private	Elbasan
6	41-65	Male	Urban	Employed	Elbasan
7	40-65	Female	Semi-Urban	Unemployed/ Private	Fier
8	22-40	Male	Urban	Private/ Public	Fier
9	18-40	Female	Semi-Urban	Young People/ Employed Public institutions	Korce
10	41-65	Male	Rural	Unemployed/ Private	Korce

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General Public Mood



- High unemployment
- Economy - increase in energy price, increase in education fees, tax increases for small business and others
- Use of force and selectivity in law enforcement and the speed of reform
- Politics - lack of meritocracy and persistent corruption

Wrong Direction

- Education - closing of private universities is positive, but fee hikes are negative
- Healthcare - positive signs in general administration, but long-standing issues with corruption, lack of medicine, etc. remain

Mixed Views

- Law enforcement, including increased citizen awareness of the need to obey the law and its enforcers
- Demolition of illegal constructions
- Initiative to curb losses in electric power
- Local infrastructure development

Right Direction

General Mood Positive, but Deep Economic Concerns

A majority of participants sees Albania generally heading in the right direction. They cite the government's efforts to enforce payment of energy bills and curb energy theft; demolition of illegally constructed buildings; and investments in infrastructure projects as evidence.

Others have mixed or negative views of the country's direction. Unemployment and the poor economy, topped by price increases in energy and food, as well as higher education fees and taxes, lead a considerable number of participants to believe that the country is moving in the wrong direction.

"I can't clearly say what it is, but the general vibe is good. I think we are in the last phase of transition, but everything needs time." (Male, Fier)

"I can say that things are currently going in the right direction, but time will show how things will really go...In order for a state to function properly, taxes need to be paid, as in any other country. But normally, the burden falls on those suffering with unemployment. The energy price increase... has its benefits because the state collects the money and thus will use it to invest." (Male, Shkoder)

"I think things are going in the right direction. I believe illegal constructions should definitely be demolished, despite the fact that my son's store was also demolished." (Male, Tirana)

"Taxes are much higher, especially for those of us who own small businesses. We can't make it any longer. Taxes are higher than they used to be." (Female, Elbasan)

"I think the public order and the demolition of illegal construction show that the country is going in the right direction. Positive changes are made in the public order. Also for example, taking measures towards those people who do not pay electricity, or other issues of this kind." (Female, Korçe)

"Political fights still continue and the burden falls on the citizens. For example, with employment, when the government changes everybody is removed from jobs, even the cleaning person. These are the consequences." (Female, Shkoder)

Better Law Enforcement, though Unevenly Applied

Participants cite **better law enforcement** as a main reason behind their positive perception of the current situation in Albania. Many see increased awareness among citizens of the need to obey the law. There is an overall perception that institutions are responding to citizens' needs in better fashion.

Similarly, government **demolition of illegal construction** and efforts to **curb losses in the energy sector** by cutting illegal connections and enforcing bill payments, drive many participants to believe the country is heading in the right direction.

Some are concerned by what they see as **selective and zealous law-enforcement**, i.e. well-connected or wealthy individuals flouting the law with impunity while ordinary citizens are convicted of lesser offenses. They say little attention has been paid to how reforms affect ordinary citizens.

“For the moment people have started to understand that the law is the law, and they are obeying it.” (Male, Tirana)

“We didn’t know the laws before, that’s why we did not respect them; we would violate them, avoid or pretend not to notice...Since every country in the world respects the rules, we are starting as well to understand that we need to respect and follow the rules.” (Female, Elbasan)

“It is not a good solution from the state to take ordinary citizens to prison. They are ordinary people, are unable to pay and hardly live with 3000 lek (~\$25) from social assistance, but they are the first who face the law; even prior to businessmen or other wealthy people who do not pay a thing for [electricity].” (Female, Shkoder)

“Today people are afraid of those who implement the law, rather than law itself.” (Male, Fier)

“It’s not good to do it so fast [the implementation of the reforms]; they should be undertaken more gradually.” (Male, Shkoder)

“The state has mobilized and it is doing its job, but people did not expect such a hard turn. We were used to being free for 23 years and when they try to strictly implement the law on us, we feel suffocated.” (Male, Fier)

“Let’s say that we support it [the action for demolishing the illegal buildings]. But what I see is that this is done selectively, demolishing the building of this person, and not of this other.” (Male, Fier)

Economic Struggles Feed Negative Sentiment

While the economy was listed among the main priorities in NDI's research last year, along with corruption and healthcare, this year it surpasses other concerns by far. **The poor state of the economy and unemployment are top issues** for a considerable number of participants who see Albania heading in the wrong direction. Lack of jobs – especially among youth, increases in electricity and consumption prices, and insufficient personal/family income to cover basic necessities are specified problems. Many businesses, especially small or medium-sized, claim their profit margins have decreased considerably due to recent tax increases.

Participants hold the government responsible for the poor economy and expect more reforms in line with its previous electoral campaign promises.

"I agree with what the others have said about unemployment. Our children have nowhere to go after they are done with school. Businesses will hire them for a few days and then let them go. There are no government-owned factories." (Female, Fier)

"Employment has decreased. Plans have changed. DP [Democratic Party] people are gone, and now those from the SP [Socialist Party] are here. Public order is a bit better according to me. But not the economy." (Male, Korce)

"What I see is a poor economic situation that is constantly getting worse, and that is why I'm pessimistic about the future." (Male, Tirana)

"Unemployment has increased a lot. The government is responsible because it is not creating new jobs." (Female, Fier)

"We can't sell our products, we don't have food. Where are we going to work? You don't have enough money for your children to go to school. You can't give them what they need." (Male, Korce)

"Taxes are much higher, especially for those of us who own small businesses. We can't make it any longer. Taxes are higher than they used to be." (Female, Elbasan)

"There should be development in agriculture and tourism and new jobs should be created." (Male, Shkoder)

Mixed Views on Healthcare and Education

Education and healthcare are issues that participants bring up frequently when discussing whether Albania is moving in the right or wrong direction. Participants are divided.

All participants seem to agree that the **education sector requires urgent reform**, with many listing the closing of private universities, which are seen as providing degrees for purchase, as positive. However, an equal number believe reform in education is slow and complain of hikes in public education fees. Participants are concerned by the general quality of education.

Similarly, participants note progress in healthcare, particularly in **better hygienic conditions** in healthcare centers and **more responsive medical staff**. However, long-standing issues of corruption, as well as **lack of medicines and equipment remain**.

“In my opinion, the one thing that is going in the wrong direction is education. Some believe it is actually improving, but in my opinion it is deteriorating. The fees for master studies have increased whereas admission quotas have tightened. Now we have to pay a fee of two million lek [~\$2,000].” (Female, Elbasan)

“Reform of the education process is a good thing. [The Prime Minister] closed down certain universities which would give degrees to students who didn’t even need to read anything to graduate. Many students failed this year because they were used to the test being released before the exam, whereas this year he changed things.” (Male, Tirana)

“...Edi Rama promised that tuition in universities would either be free or lower, but he is increasing them. This is wrong. Also, part-time study programs have always existed, and now they are being closed down. Why?” (Male, Fier)

“For Fier, I would like to raise the issue of hospitals. I think a good job has been done recently since we have a new director. I went to the hospital a few weeks ago and I was very satisfied, starting from the ambulance which came in five minutes, to the good quality service that I received. Before, they wouldn’t even touch you unless you put the hand in the pocket, whereas now this does not happen.” (Female, Fier)

“[What is going in the wrong direction?] Healthcare. Many promises have been made—even free healthcare. They said that there won’t be any lack of medication, but that is still an issue.” (Female, Korce)

“There is no difference in healthcare. They said there will be free legalizations, that energy prices will be lower. [The Prime Minister] didn’t keep any of these promises. That’s why I’m saying nothing major has changed.” (Male, Korce)

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Unemployment, Cost of Living Top Concerns

The economy tops the concerns of participants this year by far. The majority sees economic conditions as dire. Most see **unemployment as the main challenge**.

Average income is generally considered insufficient to cover living necessities (food, utilities), and often puts parents in difficulties to provide for their families, including proper education opportunities for young people.

Some participants believe that, with proper stewardship of public resources, the economy has room to expand.

A few participants express concern that **the gap between the rich and poor is widening**.

“I am married. My husband and I are both unemployed. I am 25 years old and he is 28 years old. Every day it is just getting worse. We both have an education and we just wait. So the situation is worse than one year ago.” (Female, Elbasan)

“The economy is worse. We had high hopes, but the price of energy and food has increased, as well as unemployment. We will not be able to pay for them.” (Female, Korce)

“I believe the inequality gap is a big problem. I think there is a huge distinction between the social levels in Albania in terms of income.” (Female, Tirana)

“There are many problems, such as the decrease in consumption, investment problems, both foreign and local, government investments, government spending, and problems with imports and exports. All of these lead to a GDP which is not where it should be. The Albanian economy has the potential to perform 20% higher than it is currently.” (Male, Fier)

“Unemployment and low wages are a problem. I have tried to get a job here but it is impossible; you need to know people.” (Female, Korce)

“The difference between the middle class and the lower class is increasing. Unemployment is a very big concern. For instance, it is very difficult for those of us who have a social science degree to get a job in the public administration. I would rather be employed in the private sector because I know I would gain more experience.” (Female, Tirana)

“There are issues with the management in different levels. There are huge problems when it comes to economy and healthcare. In 2014, anyone who is an economist can see that the economy has worsened. There are some efforts to pass the crises but they are being done in a partisan way. These efforts are not undertaken by the right people.” (Male, Fier)

State Expected to Play Stronger Role in Economy

Unemployment, job insecurity, and low wages are raised by almost all participants as major concerns, citing insufficient government efforts. Most participants see the government as the main actor to provide public sector jobs and to encourage private sector hiring.

- **Many believe the government should open new factories** in their respective communities in order to guarantee increased employment, especially among women and young people.
- A number of participants think the **government should provide financial incentives to private businesses**, such as reduced taxes or low interest loans, which would allow them to employ more people.
- A few participants complain about a **lack of government oversight of private companies** to prevent abuse of workers' rights.

"[Is there anything that could be done to improve the situation?] New jobs should be created. Private business, with the help of the government should create new jobs for the unemployed." (Female, Elbasan)

"There is a fear that because of the economic crisis there can be job cuts. Banks are cutting jobs owing to the economic crisis, not that the government should be blamed for this." (Female, Korce)

"Unemployment is very bad. People only think about how to leave this country as soon as possible, because there are no jobs here." (Male, Elbasan)

"The government should not deal with what was done before, but should instead focus its efforts on opening factories, and creating new employment opportunities for young people." (Female, Fier)

"I agree with the support that the government is showing for shoe and textile companies [in Elbasan factories], because in this way they give people employment opportunities." (Female, Elbasan)

"Private companies will hire you, just so that it looks good on the papers for the government. Then they keep you for one month, and after that they fire you, without even paying social benefits." (Female, Fier)

"If the government opens up large businesses, so that many people can be employed, then everyone will most likely be better off. " (Female, Shkoder)

"I heard that a new factory was recently opened in Elbasan, and about 250 people were employed. That is why I think that is the right solution to look for." (Female, Elbasan)

Price/Tax Increases Erode Standards of Living

Participants view the government as responsible for the **increase in prices of food and energy, higher taxes, and higher education fees** – often referring to those as failed electoral promises.

Participants claim that price increases, combined with low wages, have worsened the living conditions of vulnerable groups throughout the country, such as the unemployed, pensioners and others.

Several small business owners complain that their income has decreased as a result of tax increases.

“Government performance is between positive and negative. It has made a lot of promises but has not kept them.” (Female, Tirana)

“Taxes have increased, especially for the small businesses. We are hardly making it. Taxes are higher than they used to be.” (Female, Elbasan)

“The government should reduce taxes and the VAT as promised [during the 2013 election campaign].” (Male, Shkoder)

“The situation in Shkoder is going down and many families are considering emigration as the only solution. As I mentioned, our children finish the university and stay home. We don’t have money to pay for jobs.” (Female, Shkoder)

“The government is responsible, because it said that it would reduce the price of electricity but they raised it instead; they said they would reduce the taxes but they raised them. Where are the promises that you made?” (Male, Tirana)

“We are worse off compared to last year, because wages remain the same, but the price of water, electricity, food, and clothes has increased.” (Female, Tirana)

“Taxes are always on the rise. I live with my family, and my father is the only one who works. We have a private business but we do not make as much money as we used to before, mostly due to high taxes.” (Female, Elbasan)

“The situation today is worse. We hoped it would get better, but the price of electricity has increased, as well as the price of groceries. Soon we will not be able to pay them. Unemployment has also increased.” (Female, Korce)

“New jobs should be created, as well as financial support for families in need.” (Female, Korce)

Women Want More Jobs and Better Food Safety

The majority of participants believes **the poor economy affects both women and men alike**. A handful of participants, especially women, think that women are those who suffer more from the poor economy. Though a few women discuss challenges to finding employment, they largely describe how the poor economy affects their households, as they are usually responsible for managing family incomes and carrying the burden of domestic chores, like providing for food.

For the first time in the three years that NDI has conducted focus group research, several – mostly female participants – voluntarily raised **food safety as an issue of concern**. A number of participants include food safety among their three priority issues due to a perceived lack of adequate regulation over food products.

“Both sides are equally affected by this economic crisis. The whole family is equally affected in a crisis.” (Male, Elbasan)

“[Does the crisis affect more females or males?] Mostly females. Mostly females, because they are the ones who take care of the economy within the household.” (Female, Elbasan)

“My husband is often away in Greece, and I am left as the head of family, managing things in the house. The money we try to save we end up spending for food. I also have to take care of what my kids need. Only a woman knows what’s wrong at home.” (Female, Fier)

“Women have become ‘desperate housewives’. Men can find jobs more easily [than women], they can work as waiters or whatever. On the other hand, women can’t do just any kind of job.” (Female, Korce)

“I think there should be much more control regarding our food. This is very important because we consume uncontrolled products every day.” (Female, Tirana)

“There isn’t very much food control and the quality is low. There is no control on food. They manipulate the expiration date.” (Female, Fier)

“Food control is also a problem. There is no food control here.” (Male, Elbasan)

Subsidies Needed in Agriculture

For rural participants, the lack of proper infrastructure and a shortage of government subsidies needed to guarantee profit from agricultural production remain pressing concerns.

The government is expected to regulate the market, provide subsidies to domestic producers facing competitive imports, and facilitate market accessibility and infrastructure.

The government is also expected to better manage the import of agricultural products in the country. Farmers consider the large quantity of imports in the country as unfair competition that damages their chances of selling local products in the market.

“We can’t sell tobacco anymore... It used to be around 10,000 or 15,000 lek [\$100-150] per kilogram. Now it’s 1,000 to 2,000 lek [\$8-15]. We grow tobacco and we can’t even break even [as sale prices have plummeted].” (Male, Shkoder)

“[Why is it that you can’t sell your products?] Because of the products coming from outside the country [imported by the state]. It doesn’t pay off. I can hardly cover my production cost with what I make at the end.” (Male, Korce)

“There’s a lot to be done. In-country production should be supported. The state should help and encourage farmers to work in agriculture because the lands are barren.” (Male, Elbasan)

“[The government] promised us they would decrease the price of gas. You need 12,000 lek [\$100] per acre to work your land. It is hard to get the fertilizer we need.” (Male, Korce)

“I am from Dishnica. Our roads are just like the ones in town. Our water supply depots are all functional. People from the cities are going there and building their houses. All we need is the price of gas to decrease and a market for our products. We also lack water for irrigation.” (Male, Korce)

“The state should give subsidies and give priority to domestic production.” (Female, Korce)

“There is no production. Fields have been abandoned and working your land has become very expensive. When there is no production there is no market. The state should intervene and play a regulatory role in this aspect.” (Male, Fier)

“In my opinion, the state should act and take control over this issue of the prices. When the Prime Minister was in the village he promised to help us market the sage and chestnut products.” (Male, Shkoder)

Healthcare Advances Although Problems Remain

In previous research, **healthcare** has been listed among top concerns. However, this year's participants readily **acknowledge positive developments** in the field, mainly related to a higher level of hygiene in care facilities and more responsive health workers, which they tie to perceived improvements in quality control.

Corruption remains a concern, though some believe it reduced. Some believe citizens are responsible for corruption. Others think increased wages for medical personnel would help curb corruption. Participants widely agree that better management could bring about positive changes.

Inadequate service provision, such as a lack of medical instruments, medicine, and ambulances, as well as poorly trained physicians are the main concerns when it comes to quality of care.

"There is an improvement in the quality of the service provided in hospitals. In Elbasan alone there are two new scanners, which is something positive." (Male, Elbasan)

"The lack of medications in the hospitals is a very bad thing. We [nurses] often have to ask patients to buy their own medicine elsewhere." (Female, Korca)

"I think the situation has changed for better, but as others said before me, we tend to spoil them [health workers] ourselves. We do that because we think they will do a better job if we give them something. Let's try not giving them money for once, so that the doctors realize that it is their duty to help us." (Female, Elbasan)

"I think healthcare is still at the same levels, but proper management is what can improve healthcare somehow." (Male, Fier)

"If you happen to go to an emergency room at midnight while the doctor is sleeping, he will be rude to you, even though you may be sick." (Female, Korca)

"The problem with our hospitals is that there are no ambulances still. If you call an ambulance it most likely won't come to you. Maybe they do come in the cities, but not in the rural areas. You have to have a private car." (Female, Korca)

"There are no instruments for dialysis. A lot of people need them. We have to go to Greece or Macedonia to do the treatment." (Female, Korca)

"It doesn't matter, if it's you or me, if you don't give something (such as bribes) in education or healthcare, you would be in the middle of the street." (Female, Tirana)

Government Should Tackle ‘Informal Employment’

Throughout all focus group discussions, a number of participants raise “informality,” mainly understood as **the failure of businesses to comply with labor laws, leading to poor labor market conditions, far too many unregistered workers, and evasion of required contributions for employees’ social and health benefits.**

They also believe informality fosters an environment permissive for corruption and abuse of power.

Participants mostly refer to **informal employment, lack of control over businesses to respect workers’ rights, bad management/abuse of public resource and corruption.**

They argue these issues are endemic and go beyond a single government mandate.

“The main issue is informality which is seen everywhere, starting from the issuance of official documents [through personal connections instead of following regular procedures] to the fact that there is no official data on how many Albanians live in Albania. In order to increase salaries and social assistance, the state should function properly, and in the last 20 years it hasn’t.” (Male, Elbasan)

“Informality is persistent in the factories - they tell you that they pay the insurance but they don’t. Nobody cares if you have an accident or you are left without a job.” (Female, Fier)

“My social insurance are deducted from my salary but are never paid to the tax offices. My social insurance booklet is blank. When the tax office specialist come to our factory, my boss pays them bribes and they never check if she pays social insurances for her employees or not.” (Male, Korce)

“Where do the problems come from? There are problems with public investment since 1997 and this is a problem of mismanagement. Here in Albania, when there is a new government, they remove all the staff from work no matter whether or not they are trained.” (Male, Fier)

“I work in the energy sector and I can assure you that this is not about theft, but corruption and bad management. The directors are corrupt, most of them don’t pay electricity bills themselves and are debtors including their staff. So, this [energy losses] is about management.” (Male, Fier)

“Another problem is control on medication. Abroad you can’t even think of having medicine without prescriptions. Here, it’s like a medicine storage.” (Male, Elbasan)



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Expectations of European Integration

Perceived Disadvantages

Rising prices
Adoption of the common currency
(euro)
Economic crisis (Greece, Italy, etc.)

Perceived Advantages

Better living standards/increased wages
Better employment opportunities abroad
More education opportunities for youth
Greater EU-level monitoring of
government performance
Increased foreign investments/EU
assistance

European Integration: Positive Expectations

Participants generally remain **supportive of EU membership** and mainly expect the process of EU accession to bring about better rule of law, access to the European labor market and education opportunities, as well as economic development.

As in previous years, participants expect **European integration to lead to political stability and improved rule of law** mainly due to an expected increase in supervision and monitoring by European institutions. For a number of participants, **membership in the EU is expected to provide higher living standards and wages**. Many believe EU integration will lead to freedom of movement, increased employment, and education opportunities, particularly for young people. Some believe that EU accession will bring more subsidies in the agricultural sector.

“The EU is imposing conditions on the state so that it can become a candidate country. We also benefit from this. Through the candidate status we will be accepted in Europe. We will fight corruption and informality.” (Female, Fier)

“Membership would bring economic development because we would have the same rights as other countries, such as Germany and Italy. We would have employment, higher wages, a more advanced healthcare, education, and justice system, all of it.” (Female, Fier)

“EU integration means people will be free to move, without current limitations. If we are to become members, we would have the right to live and work in other EU countries.” (Female, Elbasan)

“I consider the fact that we are looking west as a good thing at this time. Europe has proved that it knows how to build a state, and that is what I am interested in. I would like to follow these models. I see this process as positive.” (Male, Elbasan)

“I think there will be economic development, political stability. That is why I support membership in the EU.” (Female, Tirana)

“Normally, EU membership will bring an increase in living standards, because you have to meet certain criteria to become a member. If there will be a rise in taxes, of course you will have an increase of income. Even corruption will be minimal.” (Male, Shkoder)

“The candidate status is a success. Do you know how much Albania will benefit until 2020? 670 million euros. It is quite a lot.” (Male, Korce)

“EU membership will provide for the opportunity to focus more on agriculture and development in general.” (Male, Tirana)

European Integration is a Long Process to Meet Appropriate Standards

Similar to NDI's research last year, participants are aware that the **country's progress towards EU membership goes hand-in-hand with the need to achieve certain standards.**

They see it as a long-term, transformative process of fundamental change.

Participants view EU standards as being **consistent with their stated desires** with respect to economic opportunity, higher living standards, and equal treatment before the law.

"...there are rules on being a candidate. And you have to abide by them. You have to achieve a few things on public order, lowering unemployment, raising wages. You cannot enter with the wage level we have." (Female, Korce)

"Standards will be higher because if you do not meet the conditions on higher standards, you don't become a member to start with." (Male, Shkoder)

"I believe it is a good thing that we are approaching countries that we have dreamed about...but what you are talking about takes time." (Female, Korce)

"Membership take time, it's like the tree that you plant today, to only bear fruit in four or five years." (Male, Tirana)

"You have to prove yourself to move forward. If you do not prove yourself, you don't get there." (Male, Elbasan)

"You are a candidate, but if you do not meet the criteria they do not accept you. We need to fight corruption, and if we don't fight corruption as a state, they don't accept you." (Female, Fier)

"The EU generally favors large markets that have high potential, but we also have some good natural and human resources, as we have a relatively young population and standards in education. But it takes a lot of work [to obtain EU membership]." (Female, Fier)

"In my opinion, having candidate status means that a country has to fulfill certain standards to become part of the EU. There are many standards, but the most important ones according to me are the adaptation of the legal framework, and the unification of the markets." (Male, Fier)

European Integration: Possible Downsides

Unlike in NDI's 2012 and 2013 focus groups, this year, a **handful of participants point out more disadvantages to EU membership.**

Some participants worry that EU membership will lead to an increase in prices and taxes, which are believed would further negatively affect their personal financial situation.

The introduction of the common currency (euro), which many believe will be introduced as soon as Albania becomes a member, is seen as one of the major disadvantages. They believe the euro will make everything more expensive and lead to an economic crisis, such as in neighboring Italy and Greece.

"I think we will not have any benefits from membership in the EU, if we are still left with these wages and these economic conditions." (Female, Shkoder)

"I am actually a bit afraid, because if you become an EU member, taxes will be the same as in other countries. I rarely watch news, but if we are to become equals to other members, we will not be able to support ourselves with our current economic situation." (Male, Shkoder)

"In my opinion being a candidate country doesn't mean anything. I think EU membership, at least in my opinion, will not bring anything good for Albania. It is too soon for us to meet the requirements set by Europe. We still don't have jobs, no welfare. If you aim at the EU it means you will have to change your currency, and what will people do then?" (Female, Korce)

"I am absolutely sure that [EU membership] will be an additional burden for everyone, because we will have to pay more taxes. We will have to pay many more bureaucrats abroad." (Male, Elbasan)

"Membership in the EU will lead to a poor economy, because prices will rise, and the euro will be adopted." (Female, Korce)

"I am against membership in the EU. I know you will judge me, but take the case of Italy, which has been a member in the EU for years, and is currently trying hard to get out of it. Italy currently has a devaluation of money, and has gone through big economic problems." (Female, Tirana)



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Government Performance



Selectivity in implementing reforms, discourse of fear and force, and inequality before the law

Increase of energy prices, taxes, oil and education fees

Poor economy, high unemployment, and lack of social dimension of reforms

Government initiative to curb down loss in energy sector

Demolition of illegal construction

Closure of private universities

Government Performance: Several Positive Initiatives Registered

Across regions, gender, and age groups, participants are **generally positive on government performance**. Most participants support recent initiatives as necessary and overdue.

As highlighted in previous sections, government initiatives to curb losses in the energy sector, demolish illegal constructions, and close private universities are supported by the majority of the participants.

A few participants mention improved public order and the implementation of anti-smoking legislation as positive.

“I think the demolition of illegal constructions, and the action to cut losses in the energy sector are positive things.” (Female, Korçe)

“I like the initiative for reform of the energy sector. I am also happy with public order, and the reform in education. The justice system is also on the right path.” (Female, Korçe)

“I think that everyone should be equal in front of the law, and everyone should pay what he owes. Even retired people pay their bills in time, whereas some businesses don’t.” (Female, Fier)

“We all live in this country and we all know the challenges we face, but we have to say that the situation was as bad as it could get. The government is showing its power by demolishing illegal constructions, avoiding abuse of electric power, and closing down universities which were practically worthless. These universities would give you a degree just so you could have a piece of paper.” (Male, Elbasan)

“I think closing down private universities was a positive thing. I was terrified at the idea that students would come out of those places and could not write or speak Albanian. At the end, they would even get a law degree, or become nurses.” (Female, Korçe)

“The anti-smoking law is also a positive thing. One year ago you could not enter a bar from all the smoke. Now everyone is afraid to light a cigarette.” (Male, Elbasan)

“The part about the demolition of illegal construction is also a good thing, because there was no room for people to walk on the sidewalks.” (Female, Shkoder)

“The support for vocational education is also a good thing. Not everyone will turn out to be a lawyer or economist. There is also the need for other professions. This has been a thing before, but the current government has given more priority to it.” (Female, Elbasan)

More Transparency and Equal Treatment Needed

Some participants are **skeptical of government actions in the demolition of illegal buildings and curbing theft in energy.** They see double standards in government selection of targets in implementing these reform initiatives, and see enforcement authorities prone to accepting bribes or making decisions based on politics.

A number of participants claims that government actions against energy theft target the general public and the poor, in particular, and not businesses or the elite.

Others disagree with the government's approach to these initiatives, which they characterize as using or threatening force and fear.

There is a perceived lack of government attention to the disproportionate effect that building demolition and electricity cuts have on vulnerable groups.

"I think the [government] performance is positive, but it would have been even more so if everyone would be seen as equal in front of the law. Even though there have been changes, I think in Shkoder not everyone is the same in front of the law. Those who support the SP are privileged." (Male, Shkoder)

"I like the idea that the law is being implemented, but I don't like the idea of double standards. If I am a supporter of the right...they will provide privileges to the supporters of the left." (Male, Korce)

"I do not support the demolition of illegal constructions. They take down 10 buildings, and leave two standing, and I know of actual cases where they have accepted bribes. I used to support the demolition of illegal constructions but I do not like this kind of differentiation." (Male, Elbasan)

"I only partly agree with the government's performance being positive. It started with the accreditation process for some universities. Some of them were closed, and then reopened again. Some of those who had a bad reputation change their names to something else and they were reopened." (Male, Fier)

"In principle we agree with the initiative against those who steal electricity, but we do not agree with the increase of prices. If these people would not have stolen, there would have been more income for the government, and thus no price increase. Huge losses have led to the increase of price." (Female, Shkoder)

"I agree with the demolition of illegal constructions but not this way, because there are families for which these businesses are their only source of income. To me, it is not right, and there should have been a demolition plan." (Female, Tirana)

Local Government Reform Generally Welcomed

Many participants are supportive about the new Territorial Administrative Reform, which consolidates the country's municipalities from 373 to 61. They see the reform **reducing public sector spending and reducing local corruption and mismanagement.**

Although participants seem aware that such a reform is being implemented, few know of its specific content, and much of what they profess to know is incorrect and incomplete. While most think current local government services will remain as they are, a small number of participants express concern that services would be less accessible.

Very few participants raise concern that the reform was generated by partisan motives for electoral gain.

"Many communes are not capable of managing their population, so that they will have more opportunities to do so when they are unified in a bigger unit, as well a bigger budget." (Male, Tirana)

"It was something which needed to be done because the heads of communes were starting to feel like princes in their areas. In my opinion though, there should have been no more than 40. Unification brings strength, and administration employees will not just stay there and do nothing." (Male, Fier)

"The reform is a very good development. I am a teacher in Dajc and I see 16 commune employees who don't do anything and stay at the bar all day. They get paid for nothing." (Male, Elbasan)

"Blendi Cuci [Minister of Local Government] has organized several meetings with communes and municipalities in this areas, but I haven't participated in any of those." (Female, Fier)

"The reform is being done so that services are brought closer. Bringing some communes together in one is the best thing that can be done." (Female, Fier)

"We do not have enough information on the administrative reform, but I believe corruption will decrease. Because by unifying all of them, they will avoid prior abuses." (Female, Korce)

"The commune of Bradashes will join Elbasan and it will be considered as a neighborhood. I think this will bring in more benefits because a large number of businesses are located in this commune. The taxes they pay will not go to the commune but to the municipality and therefore, there will be more investments here in Elbasan." (Female, Elbasan)

"I think that this reform is done based on political calculations." (Male, Elbasan)

Demand for Meritocracy in Public Administration

Participants generally hold **negative views about public administration** and believe that little or nothing has changed. Political bias, nepotism, and corruption are among the greatest deficiencies noticed.

Although participants in NDI's 2013 research called for merit-based hiring in public administration, participants in 2014 see no improvement and question the existence of fair competition and meritocracy in public administration appointments.

A considerable number of participants are particularly skeptical of open hiring calls, especially in the education sector.

"The [public] administration is not as political as it was in the last four years during the last government. But at the same time, meritocracy has not been a standard, as it was promised during the campaign." (Male, Fier)

"The public administration is the same. Nepotism has always existed here, but one of the electoral promises was that they would get rid of the unqualified ones. And yet, they again appointed unqualified personnel." (Male, Elbasan)

"Appointments in the public administration are still done on the basis of political contribution." (Female, Shkoder)

"Public administration is the weakest point. Many public offices are headed by party militants and not experts in the field." (Male, Shkoder)

"I think even the education thing [recruitment of teachers] that is supposedly done based on competitions is a façade. The people who will be employed are clearly designated." (Female, Elbasan)

"Competitions are fake, it's all about money and friendships." (Male, Korce)

"Public administration requires qualified professionals. Until now, this has not been the case, because they have all been [party] militants." (Female, Korce)

"Many attempts have been made to improve public administration, but they haven't been successful so far." (Female, Tirana)

"Two years ago I was removed from a job when I was working at the prefecture as an economist. I was removed within one hour and with the new system nobody took me back." (Female, Fier)

Police Generally Seen as More Responsive

When asked about the performance of the state police, participants generally express positive opinions. Participants are mostly **satisfied with higher levels of professionalism shown by police officers** on the ground.

The recent involvement of police in the fight against illegal drugs raised participant confidence.

- Many believe there is increased responsiveness by police, and some argue there are signs of less abuse and corruption in the force.
- The increased number of female police officers is seen as positive.
- A few argue that the powerful remain untouched by law enforcement.

“The performance of the Albanian State Police is very positive, starting from its first initiative in Lazarat [a village notorious for marijuana production, long considered untouchable until the government’s crackdown this year].” (Female, Fier)

“It used to take six years to solve a murder case before, whereas now they put people in handcuffs in five minutes.” (Male, Shkoder)

“[The Albanian State Police] have done a good job against illegal drugs, traffic accidents, and traffic management.” (Female, Fier)

“I support the decision to have one police officer for every neighborhood, so that when you have a problem you address it to the police officer.” (Female, Elbasan)

“When they started the war against illegal drugs, that’s where you could tell they are willing to impose the law.” (Male, Shkoder)

“In my opinion the Albanian State Police has changed, and I like the fact that they have recruited women, thus making steps toward gender equality.” (Female, Elbasan)

“Regardless of the big fines it has imposed and which I don’t think are right, I think currently many people are more careful because of the state police. It has imposed order, and I like order.” (Female, Shkoder)

“The powerful still rule, if I don’t have a fancy car but I have all the documents, the police can pick on something, but if I have a fancy car that is not mine then things are different.” (Female, Tirana)

Anti-Corruption Tied to Economic Opportunity/Fairness

Unlike NDI's 2013 focus group research, **corruption was not listed among participants' top priorities in 2014.**

A number of participants see improvements in fighting corruption. Participants are able to list, at that time, several cases of public officials accused of corruption covered by the media. Nevertheless, a **considerable number of participants remain skeptical and point to pervasive corruption in many sectors.**

When asked, participants list healthcare, the justice system, and education as the most corrupt sectors. Similar to last year, corruption is seen as preventing participants from employment opportunities.

Participants believe that economic development and meritocracy in employment would help alleviate corruption.

"There are some efforts, but no results yet. At least the corrupted ones are sent in front of the courts now. This is different compared to what has happened before, because he [former prime minister] was more powerful and would not send his people to court." (Male, Elbasan)

"I think there have been a few cases of corruption caught here in Elbasan as well. Also an education director was caught who we saw on TV. I think things are going well, because there have been two or three people caught lately." (Female, Elbasan)

"Corruption has been hit hard. We are seeing directors of educations which are on their side [governing majority], before courts. Corruption has been a priority." (Male, Shkoder)

"We can not call it a success in the fight against corruption, but there are indeed improvements. Corruption can not go away unless the living standards are raised. There is a saying: problems breed corruption, they keep it alive, and corruption will end when there are no more problems." (Male, Elbasan)

"The lack of a considerable change in the fight against corruption is dissapointing. From what we hear, there is a lot of corrupion in justice. Even in healthcare they say it is the same." (Female, Shkoder)

"The government has theoretically started its war against corruption, whereas practically it has its ups and downs." (Male, Tirana)

"I do not think so [that the government doing a good job in fighting corruption]. Even when you think about these competitions in the education sector, I think they are fake. I believe the people who will be employed have already been decided." (Female, Elbasan)

Judiciary Seen as Corrupt, Not Independent

The majority of participants **supports reform of the judiciary system.** Participants believe the system is tarnished by corruption and political influence.

Participants expect reform to improve the judiciary's independence from political influence, raise public trust in state institutions, fight criminality, and lead to equality before the law.

Some participants doubt that reform will actually happen soon, owing to battles over competing political interests.

Others consider reform efforts mainly in terms of superficial replacement of judges when government power changes hands.

"The justice system is the most corrupt, all other sectors are just a consequence. If the judges do a good job, the rest do not get corrupt." (Male, Elbasan)

"We expect the judiciary to be independent from the governments. Then we can claim we have a decent state." (Male, Elbasan)

"There are initiatives to reform the judiciary, but they [political parties] are having a lot of trouble coming to a mutual understanding." (Female, Fier)

"They have said there will be a reform almost everywhere, so of course there will be a reform in the judiciary. Some judges will be replaced with others." (Female, Shkoder)

"[What will a reform in the judiciary mean for you?] If you knock on a door after the reform, you know that if not in 100% of the cases, at least in 70% of them someone will help me, even if I'm an ordinary citizen. Whereas today, you immediately start worrying about how much money they are going to ask from you." (Female, Tirana)

"Judiciary reform will bring more safety, because the law will be implemented." (Female, Shkoder)

"We have heard a few things about a possible reform in the judiciary but it is very hard to be independent in Albania." (Male, Elbasan)

"[What should the reform in the judiciary focus on?] This reform should replace the old judges and appoint new ones." (Female, Fier)



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Parliament: Mudslinging Rather than Debate

Participants across gender and age groups **express little interest in following parliamentary discussions.** A lack of debate culture among members of parliament (MPs) and an overall sense of disappointment with politics and politicians are the reasons given for participants' low interest.

Participants are very vocal about the lack of ethics in parliamentary debates among MPs from across the political spectrum. According to the participants, MPs often use **offensive language** and focus on personal traits of their opponents rather than on addressing citizens' concerns and offering solutions.

Participants **do not see the parliament as an open institution, and show little interest in accessing parliamentary information.** Most participants currently rely on the media as a source of information about the parliament.

"I used to be interested in following discussions in the parliament, but I am sick of all of them now. You don't see anything but fights." (Female, Shkoder)

"I have no interest in the parliament to be honest. I am not interested because they rarely do anything for us." (Male, Shkoder)

"I don't follow discussions in the parliament, because everything has become boring. All they do is talk about each other." (Female, Tirana)

"Most of the time they fight with each other rather than deal with the citizens' problems." (Male, Shkoder)

"Members of parliament should have proper communication ethics, and accept their mistakes." (Female, Tirana)

"They [MPs] always fight with each other. It is a shame to listen to them." (Female, Korce)

"MPs start going at each other until the point where they don't cooperate with each other to solve the people's problems anymore. All they do is they talk about each other's families, which is not of interest to us at all." (Female, Fier)

"The problem is that not everyone is aware of the sites where they can look for information on the parliament. The majority are neither informed nor interested." (Female, Elbasan)

"[Which information would you like to access?] The laws they approve. They are out in the Official Gazette, but you have to go and see for yourself if you want to know what is happening." (Male, Korce)

Parliament: Lack of MP Contact with Citizens

Most participants claim that it is **difficult to reach MPs outside of election campaigns**. Several participants point out the lack of constituency offices as one of the problems for accessing MPs. Many do not know how to contact the member of parliament representing their district.

Similar to NDI's focus group findings in 2013, a few participants question the closed-list voting system and suggest that they would **prefer a system which would allow them to vote for individual candidates**, in a so-called open list system.

"[What do you expect from an MP?] He/She should keep in contact with his/her electorate." (Male, Elbasan)

"I don't know where the office of my MP is in order to go and complain." (Male, Tirana)

"These MPs only show up during the campaign, they get their votes and then you don't see them anymore." (Female, Elbasan)

"Contacting MPs is difficult. You can't see MPs unless they are in the opposition." (Female, Shkoder)

"The MPs will give you their phone number, but when you call them they will never answer." (Female, Elbasan)

"They should come to keep contact with the electorate, because they never show up to ask about the problems of the neighborhood." (Male, Elbasan)

"It is very difficult to meet them [MPs]. This happens only during the campaigns. We don't even know where their offices are." (Female, Shkoder)

"We meet them [the MPs] only during the election period." (Male, Korce)

"In my opinion, the right people should be in parliament. I do not like how MPs are decided by the party." (Female, Fier)

"It should be regulated by law and constitution that the lists should be open, because in the parliament we have people who are elected by the party leaders." (Male, Elbasan)

Women in Parliament Seen as Productive

The **performance of women MPs is seen as slightly more positive to that of their male colleagues.** There is a general perception among participants that female members of parliament are more active, as well as more articulate when raising issues during plenary sessions.

While **many participants are aware of the Alliance of Women Deputies (Alliance)** - the women's caucus in parliament - in comparison to NDI's 2013 focus group findings, they are **not cognizant of its activities**, which might be explained by the opposition's boycott of parliament that prevented most Alliance activities. The idea of having such an Alliance, however, is largely supported, as it is seen as a mechanism for improving communication between opposing political forces.

"I think women in parliament are very active, maybe because they are fewer. If the number of females was equal to males then maybe we wouldn't have noticed them." (Male, Korce)

"I think females are active in parliament. We were always used to having men in the parliament, now we have women, they are less in number but personally I like them." (Female, Shkoder)

"Women always calm the situation. If we had had two women arguing the debate wouldn't be that heated." (Male, Elbasan)

"[Have you ever heard about the Alliance of Women MPs?] As far as I know, this is related to women's issues, violence and whatnot. There are women both from the DP and the SP. It's a good thing." (Male, Korce)

"Last year they [the Alliance] gathered in the main square, this year they gathered for breast cancer awareness." (Female, Shkoder)

"[Have you heard about the Alliance of Women MPs?] There are MPs from both sides. Mesila Doda is the head of this Alliance." (Male, Elbasan)

"They should be more organized and they should organize as many activities together as they can." (Female, Fier)

"In my opinion it [the Alliance of Women MPs] is something good because it is a good way to have more communication between sides." (Male, Elbasan)

More Women Needed in Politics

A considerable number of both male and female **participants call for more women in politics**. They hail the increase of the number of women in the parliament and government, and **perceive women to be more responsive to citizens needs** and more hard working and determined in pursuing specific policy issues, when compared to male MPs.

Women politicians are generally perceived as better at promoting cross-party dialogue and more able to have constructive discussions than male colleagues.

While a majority of participants **does not often see gender as an influencing factor when voting**, they do not see gender as an obstacle either.

"I think there should be more women in the parliament..Women are more ethical than men." (Male, Elbasan)

"Women are more honest and direct, they do not make compromises. Both in terms of behavior and eloquence women are far more superior than men." (Female, Fier)

"I think more women should be in the parliament. This is a very good thing. They should become powerful like Angela Merkel." (Male, Korce)

"Women ministers are closer to the people. They show more devotion in their work in the field." (Female, Elbasan)

"Women ministers do a better job. They are calmer and they do not use inappropriate language." (Male, Korce)

"I think women ministers are more successful and more prepared. A good thing has been done by increasing the percentage of women ministers. Now we'll see how this will turn out." (Female, Tirana)

"I would prefer a woman mayor because women are by nature more organized. In general, I personally have a very positive opinion about women." (Female, Fier)

"It does matter to have a woman mayor because women work more." (Female, Tirana)

"I know some of the women who are in the local council. They are really serious and skilled. Women are more honest, calmer, and better communicators." (Female, Fier)

Political Parties: Actions Needed, Not Promises

As in NDI's focus group research conducted in 2013, **participants list "keeping promises" as, by far, one of the biggest expectations of political parties** and express disappointment that they often fail to do so. Participants' disappointment with the overall negative political climate and mistrust of parties and political leaders carries forward from research findings of the past two years.

Some participants expect political parties to have a clear electoral platform which should address citizens' main concerns, mainly related to the economy and employment.

"Political parties should keep the promises they made when they got our votes. At least some of them." (Male, Shkoder)

"I vote for the party that makes the best promises. Then I just hope it will deliver on them." (Male, Korce)

"Political parties should keep their promises and be in close contact with the people, and not only show up during campaigns." (Female, Fier)

"In order to win my trust, a political party should deliver on promises made during the campaign." (Male, Tirana)

"Every party should have its own platform and, come the campaign, it should present a good economic plan, and not something just for show. It should clearly state what it promises to citizens as well as set deadlines needed to deliver on those promises. Until now, no party has done something like that." (Male, Elbasan)

"We are so disappointed with these political parties that we do not even have a proper opinion about them anymore." (Female, Elbasan)

"The party should draft a very clear platform, and it should have people who the public can trust." (Female, Korce)

"Normally, political parties should have a realist platform, where most important issues for people should be addressed. Most of all they should be realists." (Male, Fier)

Viable Platforms and Quality Candidates Needed

While **some participants claim their voting behavior is influenced by political conviction** (support for a particular party), a particular candidate, or party platform, **a number of participants list family and personal interests as decisive in choosing for whom to vote.**

Similar to last year's research findings, some participants **disapprove of political parties serving as *de facto* employment agencies** to secure jobs in return for votes and support.

Many participants consider political parties as the most efficient source of employment for their supporters and family members or the means to ensuring jobs and other material benefits for citizens.

"Before elections were held, a candidate from one of the parties approached me and promised me a job. Of course I voted for him." (Female, Elbasan)

"[I would vote for a party if it represents] people's interests, but they [political parties] cannot keep their electoral promises as long as most of them pay to get votes." (Male, Shkoder)

"Before I vote, I discuss it with my parents, and we vote for the party which could bring some benefits to my family, or for one that does not bring down their business." (Female, Elbasan)

"In my opinion, if a party manages to improve employment, hospitals, education, etc. then my demands are met and I will vote for that party." (Male, Elbasan)

"I always vote for the candidate, regardless of whether I like the party." (Female, Shkoder)

"I always vote based on my family's interests." (Female, Korce)

"[What influences your choice when voting during the elections?] Securing employment for the people." (Male, Elbasan)

"A party should keep its promises if it wants me to vote for it again the next time. I always vote based on the party program and the quality of the candidate." (Female, Fier)

"Political parties here are simply employment agencies and have nothing to do with politics." (Male, Elbasan)

"[What influences your choice when voting during the elections?] ...to get a job. I see what personal benefit I get for the future." (Female, Elbasan)

A Dim View of the Opposition Parliamentary Boycott

The opposition's nearly half-year **boycott of parliament, which ended in December 2014, engendered strong disenchantment among a majority of participants**, across gender, age, and geographic groups.

Participants believe that the **opposition should play a crucial role in holding the government accountable, cooperating with the government on issues of importance to citizens, and presenting alternatives to government legislation and policies.**

Some participants support the opposition's initiatives against the increase of students' fees. The opposition's initiative to denounce public officials with criminal backgrounds is also generally supported.

"The boycott is very wrong, that is not why we have voted for them. If you were elected as a representative of a certain area, how can you boycott? Do you just want to take the money and do nothing? It is really interesting, when you look at the plenary sessions, and you see the room is empty most of the time." (Male, Tirana)

"They are doing the same thing as the previous opposition. Today's government did the same thing once in opposition." (Female, Elbasan)

"I think that they [the opposition] should do their opposition in parliament, and not in parks or in the streets. You can't accuse the government that has been in power for one year, for something you have not done in eight years." (Female, Korce)

"I honestly don't know what the reason behind their boycott is. But by not going to parliament they are not able to make their voice, or the voice of the citizens they represent heard. A strong opposition will make the government be more careful." (Male, Tirana)

"A healthy opposition creates a better environment for the majority. The current opposition is not doing its job, because it is not checking on the government's performance. You sit down and you talk about each sector based on numbers, and the current opposition is not doing that." (Male, Elbasan)

"To oppose the decisions of the government that they do not agree with in the parliament. That's what they [the opposition] should do instead of organizing protests. The protests should be the last option." (Male, Shkoder)

Low Interest in Political Involvement

Participants of both genders express **relatively low interest in getting involved in politics**. Women participants often list lack of time, the burden of numerous family obligations and societal expectations, and the perceived masculine nature of politics as reasons for not engaging in politics.

Both male and female participants also claim that the perception of politics as 'dirty business' makes them reluctant to consider joining a political party.

Some participants also claim the risk of losing employment upon rotation of political power as a reason for not engaging politically.

Mostly women participants mention a lack of education and skills as obstacles, and older women list their age as a reason to not get involved in politics.

"You have to be devoted and not involved in other things. It [politics] takes you away from your family because you have other obligations." (Female, Elbasan)

"I am retired, and I don't have the energy or time to do it. You have to be an activist, you need to have time." (Female, Fier)

"Being involved in politics requires devotion. Politics is very hard. I don't have time." (Female, Fier)

"You should be skilled in order to be part of politics. Plus it requires traveling a lot, I personally prefer more staying with my family." (Female, Tirana)

"No, because I am not a flexible person. I am very honest. I just can't justify the wrong." (Female, Tirana)

"I can't commit myself to any party. When you enter politics the most successful person is the one who is a better liar." (Male, Shkoder)

"I have thought about it, but I haven't done it because political engagement takes you away from your family obligations. Secondly, if you are part of a political party you risk being unemployed when parties replace each other." (Female, Shkoder)

"If you are working and the government changes, you are going to be replaced. It is better to be neutral." (Female, Korce)

"We aren't free because politics has an impact on your job. " (Female, Shkoder)



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Low Levels of Civic Engagement

Similar to previous years, participants in the focus groups report **low levels of civic engagement**. Very few claim to engage in activities aimed at helping their respective communities, such as involvement in joint cleaning initiatives and small infrastructure projects in their neighborhoods.

Participants raise lack of time, economic constraints, and lack of support as the main obstacles to community engagement.

There is some awareness of organizations helping communities in their respective regions. Some participants are able to list a few NGOs whose work includes providing assistance for the poor, orphans, Roma communities, and women. However, overall, participants are generally unaware of the presence of civil society.

“I am the person responsible for the building where I live, without being rewarded for it. When I first moved in I saw it was in a bad condition, but now I have fixed most issues.” (Female, Elbasan)

“The only thing we do is clean the building. Besides that we can’t manage to organize anything.” (Female, Fier)

“[Are you active in your community?] Yes. When we have to address a common concern, we get together and figure it out in the building.” (Male, Tirana)

“Sewage often gets clogged and we have to deal with it ourselves. Even though the municipality takes care of the waste, some of it is still left, and we have to deal with that.” (Female, Fier)

“[Are you aware of any groups or organizations in Elbasan working to improve the life of the community?] Yes. World Vision. It provides aid for families, mostly in rural areas. It also helps orphans.” (Male, Elbasan)

“The ‘Lady of the Good Council’ [religious organization] is also one of these organizations. They help too.” (Male, Elbasan)

“I have been in contact with some organizations which work in Elbasan. I could mention the Center of the Roma Community. It is doing a good job. Organizations in Elbasan usually help the community and citizens.” (Female, Elbasan)

“You need economic possibilities in order to be engaged in helping the community. The willingness to be engaged in community services would have been bigger if we had more economic opportunities. Your initiative should be supported by someone.” (Female, Shkoder)

Albanian Public Television

Albanian Public Television (TVSH) is rarely the first choice in terms of television viewing for participants. They see TVSH as politically influenced, and thus unable to produce objective content. They also state a lack of quality programming.

Some participants, however, see TVSH as slightly improved in terms of quality of content, compared to previous years.

Participants watch TVSH primarily to follow Albanian National Team football games (especially for male participants), the National Annual Festival, and some news programs.

“[What do you think of TVSH?] Not where it should be. As long as it is public it should not be under political influence. Practically, it is not.” (Male, Elbasan)

“We mostly watch news, so that we are able to make the comparison from one TV channel to another. TVSH used to be biased before, but now it is better.” (Female, Fier)

“We watch TVSH when the national team is playing, because it is free.” (Male, Fier)

“[Do you watch TVSH?] Yes. Only for sports. Otherwise it is useless.” (Male, Korce)

“[What do you watch on TVSH?] We watch the National Festival. Mostly things other channels won’t broadcast.” (Male, Korce)

“[Do you watch TVSH?] We watch national team games when we are at home.” (Male, Shkoder)

“[Do you watch TVSH?] Not a lot. It is mostly a politically influenced television.” (Male, Tirana)

“TVSH only reflects the politics in power. Good programs/content are very rare.” (Female, Tirana)



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Local Government: Social and Economic Priorities

Although a number of participants across the regions often mentions an increased investment in local infrastructure as a positive development, they also raise a set of common concerns when it comes to the work of local governments.

Many participants express **concern over insufficient infrastructure investment, urban planning** (mostly related to illegal construction), **lack of green space, inadequate waste management and environmental pollution.**

Most participants expect local governments to have a more proactive approach when it comes to creating jobs, lowering taxes, and supporting business. Similarly, they encourage local officials to have open doors to citizens.

“In my opinion, the local government did well in the first four years (of its two terms), but recently it has not done anything worth mentioning.” (Female, Elbasan)

“The worst thing about the local government according to me, is that they do not have an urban plan yet.” (Female, Elbasan)

“Compared to before, the municipality has done some obvious good things in reconstructing kindergartens and schools. It has also set up two or three homes for the Roma Center. Overall, it has done a good job.” (Male, Elbasan)

“The local government where I live has done a good job. The head of the local government is a Democrat but he has to try and do his best for his people regardless of whether they are Socialists or Democrats. It is not important.” (Male, Shkoder)

“Many things in Shkoder have changed for the better. People don’t recognize Shkoder when they come.” (Female, Shkoder)

“The municipality has not done any investments- not in school, kindergartens, streets, or trash bins. I don’t know what they do with all the money.” (Female, Tirana)

“The municipality has not done much. There are many streets in terrible conditions, especially in neighborhoods.” (Male, Fier)

“They have problems with lighting. They collect taxes for this purpose but there are still many streets in the dark.” (Female, Korce)

Local Government: Need for Citizen Participation

When asked if they have any influence in the decisions taken by their respective local authorities, many **participants do not believe they have any influence on local decision-making**, although few have participated in council meetings.

Conversations with friends and family remain the most common place for participants to exchange views on social and political issues. Direct contact with public officials or institutions is rare, and participants perceive efforts to be futile as they expect their voice not to be heard.

“We have representatives in the communes, but it is all a formality. No one asks you anything.” (Male, Korce)

“Normally our voice is not heard, because if they did listen to us, there would be more trash bins in the streets.” (Female, Tirana)

“I think it is useless to express your opinion as nobody would take into consideration what you say.” (Male, Elbasan)

“They [local authorities] have never invited us to any meetings. They don’t even care what we think.” (Female, Fier)

“He [the mayor] has employed his friends and relatives. Whoever works for the government will do the same thing. Even I would do the same.” (Male, Elbasan)

“Why should our voice be heard? Those who are in power act without taking into consideration our opinion.” (Female, Tirana)

“They [local authorities] make decisions based on their interest. They ask only the people around them and if they dare to object, they send them home, fire them. They don’t want to inform us because their goal is to organize small meetings and make no fuss about it.” (Male, Shkoder)

“[How do you usually express your opinion on social matters?] I usually do that when I sit down for a cup of coffee with my friends.” (Male, Tirana)

Local Issues

Environmental pollution and waste management are the most topical issues for participants in Elbasan and Fier. Pollution caused mainly by construction along the Gjanica River and oil pollution worry the most participants in Fier.

Participants in Shkoder raise public safety. Those from rural areas raise the dropping prices of sage and tobacco as the most important local issues, as sage and tobacco products are income generators. They want tax relief for companies processing tobacco and sage.

Farmers in Korce cite the lack of market for their products driving down their living standards. For many, the import of products (mostly apples), from neighboring countries has limited their ability to compete. They also raise issues of infrastructure to access markets, as well as the issues of irrigation and subsidies.

“Pollution in Elbasan is only getting worse, much worse.” (Female, Elbasan)

“I happened to be part of a discussion for trash collection in Elbasan, and I think that is the most important thing to be figured out here.” (Male, Elbasan)

“Gjanica has been there for 20 years, and nothing has been done. The people in Fier are getting sick from the oil which is spilled from the oil refinery.” (Female, Fier)

“Nothing has been done for Gjanica. So many years have passed and the situation in Gjanica is still the same. It is bad. It poisons people.” (Male, Fier)

“The police are also not doing their job properly. There are many break-ins, murders.” (Female, Shkoder)

“There are hazelnuts where I live. This year it was a bit better because an Italian company would come and take them, where they were taxed by the commune. If you place a high tax for transportation on these companies, who is going to come and take the products?” (Male, Shkoder)

“Agriculture is getting worse. I am from Devoll. Ninety percent of the apple production wasn’t sold due to the lack of a market. There are no custom controls, and the foreign market is on the loose.” (Male, Korce)

“Since we mentioned agriculture, my sister works the land, and she has no income. She can’t sell her tomatoes or other products anywhere. They are hard working people, they work hard. But the government doesn’t help them at all.” (Female, Korce)

Advice to Mayoral Candidates

"I would have suggested for him to come and meet people more often. That is how I could have suggested things to him." (Male, Shkoder)

"He should have an honest and a professional staff." (Female, Shkoder)

"[What would you suggest to the new mayor?] I would suggest to clean the city and make it a role model in Albania and also increase the green spaces." (Male, Elbasan)

"I would advise him to do something about the steel plant and also open the door to citizens and listen to their concerns. If he does these two things he would be fine." (Female, Elbasan)

"First of all, I would tell him to improve the infrastructure of the neighborhood because the streets are really bad and muddy." (Female, Fier)

"He should create new jobs for young people." (Female, Fier)

"I would tell him to do something for the cars that pass in front of the schools because it is very dangerous and difficult for the children who cross the road." (Female, Fier)

"I would suggest him to do something about the street dogs." (Male, Korce)

"I would ask him to come and check the factory where I work, as the owner tells me that I am insured, but I'm not." (Male, Korce)

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