

# Election Watch for the Digital Age

## Albania

Preelection assessment

*Parliamentary elections set for April 2021*

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Albania will hold its April parliamentary elections under a newly amended electoral code. Passed in October 2020, the changes include a reduced vote threshold for parties to enter parliament, a restructuring of the Central Electoral Commission (CEC), and alterations to the way coalitions put forth candidates. The United States, European Union, and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) initially supported for electoral reforms but criticized the ultimate outcome and the exclusion of the opposition from the process. A [joint opinion](#) from the Venice Commission and the OSCE/ODIHR described the procedure as “extremely hasty” and “against the most basic rules of democratic law-making.” The opinion also called for further reforms after the April parliamentary election.

Albania has a record of generally competitive elections, despite criticism of the CEC for its lack of transparency and concerns about vote-buying and corruption. The PS and the Democratic Party (PD), the main opposition party, dominate the political landscape, while numerous smaller parties have little opportunity to gain power. April’s parliamentary elections are under additional scrutiny following the PD’s boycott of the 2019 local elections and 2017 parliamentary elections. The media environment is highly concentrated, and owners use outlets to push narratives supporting their political and financial interests. Intimidation, including pressure from the government, leads many journalists to self-censor, and efforts to pass harsh anti-defamation legislation in 2019 and 2020 reinforced concerns about government hostility towards independent media.

Freedom House has identified the following as key digital interference issues to watch ahead of election day:

- **Arrests and prosecutions:** Numerous laws allow users to be punished for online speech, including criminal penalties for defamation, which is frequently used against journalists and media outlets. Authorities have made multiple arrests in recent years for “knowingly [distributing] false information with the intention of spreading panic.” In 2019, Xhuliana Aliaj was detained for three days for Facebook posts asking the government assess damage caused by an earthquake and urging people to leave the area for their safety. The case against her was dropped after 11 months. In 2020, an online media company, Nova Media, was reportedly referred for prosecution for causing panic related to the pandemic. This pattern of legal interventions sets a worrying precedent for how the Albanian government can limit politically sensitive speech, particularly as the government’s pressure on media has ramped up more generally.

- **Blocking of websites:** The Albanian government has shown greater willingness to block online content. In April 2020, the Audiovisual Media Authority required ISPs to block several websites, including the entire Medium.com domain. The Medium block was reportedly in response to a copyright complaint and was reversed after less than a week, but the decision to block the entire site, rather than only the relevant content, raises concerns about the proportionality of restrictions imposed by the government. After the 2019 earthquake, the Electronic and Postal Communications Authority (AKEP) blocked an online news outlet's website and the Facebook page of another. In addition, the proposed anti-defamation package included a legal mechanism for blocking websites.
- **Cyberattacks:** Online media and the Albanian government have occasionally fallen victim to cyberattacks in recent years. A malware infection in April 2020 rendered Exit, a news site, inaccessible to users and administrators for 24 hours while a malware infection attempted to delete content. Though the website was restored and no content was lost, the incident represented a worrying escalation against an independent media outlet that has faced threats and legal harassment in the past. Also in 2020, an attack on Albanian intelligence, believed to be perpetrated by Turkish authorities, compromised the personal information of hundreds of people. Similar breaches ahead of Albania's election could negatively impact the election environment, including by obstructing access to information or interfering with elections infrastructure or personal data, and even unsuccessful attacks could fuel doubts about electoral integrity.

Albania has a score of 68 out of 100, with 100 representing the least vulnerability in terms of election integrity, on Freedom House's Election Vulnerability Index, which is based on a selection of key election-related indicators. The score reflects a generally strong environment for political rights despite challenges to rule of law and free expression. The country is rated **Partly Free** in *Freedom in the World 2020*, with a score of 67 out of 100 with respect to its political rights and civil liberties and as a **transitional or hybrid regime** in *Nations in Transit 2020*, with a score of 47 out of 100 for the country's democratic progress. To learn more about these annual Freedom House assessments, please visit the Albania country reports in [Freedom in the World](#) and [Nations in Transit](#).