

Final Internship Report
Democracy and Human Rights: Towards Fair Electoral Practices in Albania

I worked this summer in the city of Tirana, Albania for an Albanian-run NGO called “Elections to Conduct” Agency. “Elections to Conduct” Agency (ECA) is a non-governmental organization established with the aim to promote and advance sustainable democratic electoral practices in line with the OSCE/ODIHR (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights) and international human rights treaties. In view of these goals, ECA is among the NGOs that play an important role in implementing the *human dimension* commitments that the country’s emerging pluralistic democracy has pledged to adhere to. These commitments describe a set of norms and activities related to human rights, democracy and the rule of law which are regarded as safeguards against conflict and instability. Advancements in this area are crucial for enlisting Albania as a developing European country with respect for human rights and democracy and increasing stability in the region.

With its team of legal and social policy experts, ECA conducts national surveys, gathers data and prepares electoral practice recommendations directed to Parliament, Central Elections Committee and participating political parties. Besides attempts to affect governmental change towards fair and democratic elections, ECA also conducts research and increases sensibility to issues of human rights with respect to marginalized ethnic communities, increased participation of women in social and political life, lack of a functional voting system for emigrant voters as well as youth emancipation projects. These issues reveal gaps in the electoral system in Albania which are indicia of a wider inability to implement international standards of democracy and human rights.

My work this summer focused on three ongoing projects of the agency: Roma community, emigrant voting, and youth mobilization. I was very fortunate to be able to work on these projects at a time when the country was preparing for the upcoming summer 2009 parliamentary elections and was undergoing vigorous political debate in the face of new electoral legislative drafting.

I am immensely grateful to the International Human Rights Program for offering me the opportunity to work on human rights issues I had long wanted to address. I certainly had an amazing experience at every turn of my Internship!

Roma Community

Probably the most rewarding and challenging part of my Internship in Albania was working with the Roma Community. The Roma community in Albania is a linguistic/ethnic minority group scattered almost all over the country’s territory. The greatest number of Roma population is settled in Tirana where they live in stark poverty and face a multitude of problems such as unemployment, school dropout and child begging. Currently, a number of domestic and international NGOs are working to address their economic and social situation as the root cause of their living conditions.

ECA works with the community to increase Roma participation in policy and decision making at the central and local governance levels. This summer, my work was aimed at educating the ethnic community of their constitutional rights and the importance of exercising the right to vote. I travelled to their communities; distributed informational pamphlets; and tried

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to learn more about their participation in elections, their local registration, as well as their faith in the government's ability to foster change in their living conditions. My meetings with them were some of the most enriching experiences and I departed with a strong sense of the reality of their living conditions as well as with the firm belief that change was in sight only if the Roma people were to have active and direct participation in decisions that affect them.

Out of Country /Emigrant Voting Legislation

Albanian legislation does not provide for out of country voting. Eligible voters residing abroad can only cast their ballot in their municipality of origin in Albania with supplementary voter identification requirements. These provisions are clearly discriminatory and in response the government is looking at proposals to implement a functional emigrant voting system. My agency was one of the participatory organizations in political roundtables working to propose a legislative draft.

As part of this project, I researched the various out of country electoral systems of countries all around the world in order to evaluate their qualifications for external voting. The most important point of contention between legislators was implementing the right to vote to a body of persons who may no longer have a direct interest in their home country. This becomes also more important when we are dealing with a country like Albania, with a relatively small population and a relatively large number of expatriates who have no intention of permanently returning to their home country. From my research I created a report of various countries qualifications for external voting and noticed that the qualifications for the right to vote vary enormously from country to country and there is no single "correct" way of deciding who should be allowed to vote externally. The qualifications are highly contextual and in this respect, the debate is ongoing in Tirana. The research report I prepared is used by ECA as they meet with political representatives and other agencies in roundtables on emigrant voting.

Youth Mobilization-Young Voters

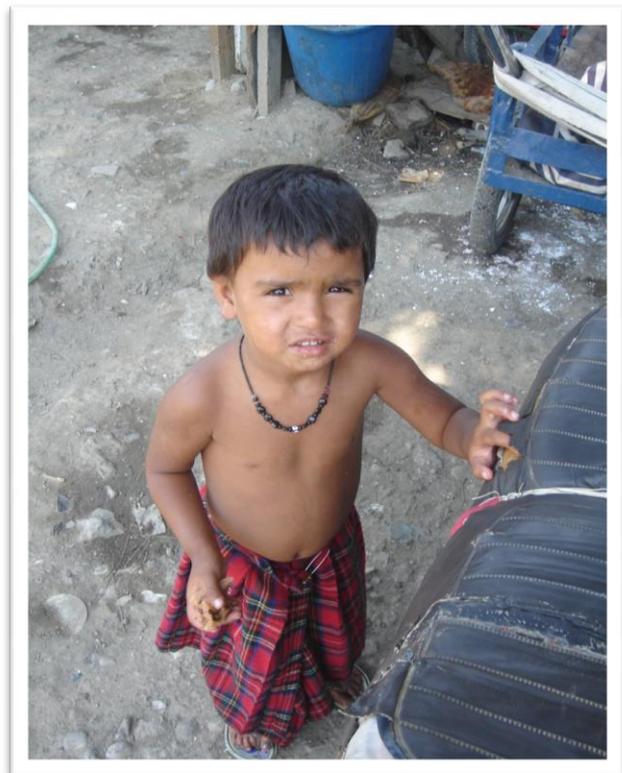
The other project I was intensively working on is the preparation of an Informational Booklet on the upcoming parliamentary elections to be distributed to 7 university cities during electoral workshops with the youth. This is part of the project "Democracy in Action" that ECA in partnership with "European Movement in Albania" is working on. The booklet will target young and first time voters in the hope of enlisting a participation which has steadily decreased over the years. This informational booklet is to serve as a mini course in human rights and democracy outlining the link between basic human rights and voting rights; the role, responsibilities and rights of voters; the relationship between elections and democracy and the conditions necessary for democratic elections; secrecy of the ballot and the impact of vote on public accountability. The booklet also outlines the features of the new electoral system applicable in the parliamentary elections for summer 2009 as well as its method of operation. We have judged this information useful in order to empower a youth who has long felt disregarded by the country's politics.

Independently creating and designing the informational booklet has been a challenging as well as a rewarding part of my project and I am happy to have contributed towards the successful implementation of this project.

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¹ Arjeta and a co-worker meeting with the Roma in Tirana

² A Roma child in his house



³ Roma living conditions