



Why everyone is sick of #Albania

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Jun 14th 2011, 16:25 by T.J. | TIRANA

RUNNING into a senior European Union official recently, I mentioned I was going to Albania. He muttered something I cannot repeat here and walked off, apparently irritated even by the mention of the country's name. You can understand why. On May 8th the country voted in municipal [elections](#). Over a month later we still don't know who the mayor of Tirana is. If Albanians can't even hold a local vote without the risk of [violent disruption](#), think Eurocrats, they should not expect any love from Brussels.

Edith Harxhi, Albania's deputy foreign minister, concurs. "For me it is extremely depressing," she says. "The election was the best we have had so far, and there were only minor problems." (The opposition Socialists would not agree with this rosy assessment.) The net result, says Ms Harxhi, is that "EU integration has stopped for now."



Here is a simplified summary of what happened in Tirana. People in the Albanian capital voted in four separate elections: city mayor, city council, and the same again for their own part of town. [Edi Rama](#), leader of the Socialists, has been mayor of Tirana since 2000 and was seeking re-election to the town hall (pictured on the right of the image above).

As the counting neared its end, it became clear that the result was extremely close. In the end Mr Rama emerged ten votes ahead of his rival, [Lulzim Basha](#), from Albania's governing Democratic Party.

The Democrats said that several votes in the ballot for mayor had been cast in the wrong box; if those votes had been counted, they said, their man would have won by 81 votes. The rules seemed unclear. Ballot-counters had been told not to count voting papers placed into the wrong box, but there are no rules in the electoral code covering such cases. Yet the election authorities indicated that Mr Basha was the winner.

The Socialists appealed to the Electoral College, the highest electoral court in Albania. Their case was rejected, but last night another was, partially, successful. Their case rests on the claim that the election authorities changed the rules during the counting, and that under the new court there appear to be more votes in some boxes than there were voters.

Aldo Bumci, chairman of the Democratic Party, describes the Socialist manoeuvring as "artificial manipulation". If the authorities decide in favour of Mr Rama, says Mr Bumci, "we will accept it," but he says the party will not concede victory otherwise. "We want every vote to count and Mr Rama does not. That is the difference."

Mr Rama, for his part, thinks the Democrats are indulging a habit of stealing elections last seen in the 2009 parliamentary vote. "It is daylight robbery," he says. Albania is stuck because "it does not have free and fair elections."

As the Tirana vote suggests, Albanians are split down the middle on the issue. Whoever becomes mayor of Tirana will be seen as illegitimate by half the city's population. And Albania's stalemate will continue.