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VOTER TURNOUT – A CRUCIAL TOPIC FOR THE ALBANIAN SOCIETY

The ACEEEO annual conference held this year in Tirana, Albania, deals with one of the most important topics related to the election organization and implementation, that is the voter turnout with special regard to the first time voters.

Voter turnout is an important issue for all democratic countries, as related to the legal aspects as well as to the democratic and social development.

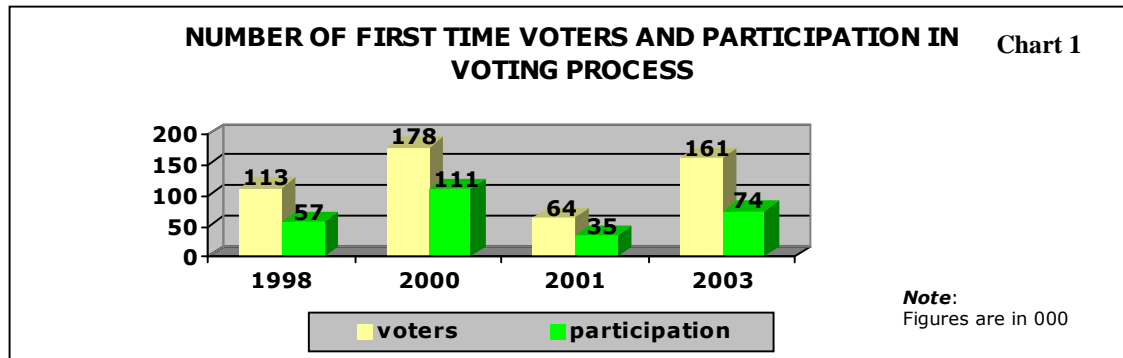
Taking into consideration that youth play an important role in assuring democracy in the long run, it is extremely important to build bridges of dialog with them also during the electoral processes. This means the necessity of drawing strategies both in the framework of the formal education and in that of the informal one.

It is important that education of young people begins as early as possible with special attention to the democratic values, starting from the families, small communities, schools, etc. It is also important finding patterns to attract young people in all political processes, by means of education, entertaining activities, social activities and other instruments. Thus young people would feel more responsible for what is going on around them and inside the society they live in.

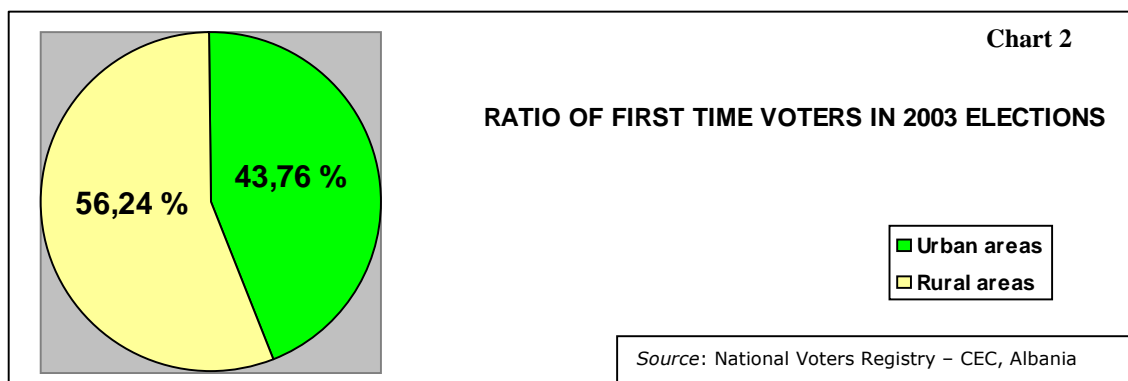
According to the Albanian electoral legislation the right to vote is accorded to all citizens that have reached 18 years old.

Albania has a quite young population of an average age of 26,5 years old. Each year a big number of young people that have reached the age of 18 are registered on the voters' lists. The registration is made automatically as the Albanian legislation provides for the first phase of the preparation of the voters' registry to take place on the Civil Status Offices, which keeps the basic registers of the citizens, from where the data for the voters' registry is taken.

According to the data owned by the CEC Albania, the number of the first time voters is increasing, while their participation in the election is decreasing (chart 1).



The number of first time voters registered for the local elections of 2003 was 154.700, the most part of which were inhabitants of rural areas (chart 2). Only 74.000 of these first time voters went to cast their vote during the Election Day. The above-mentioned figures and the comparison with the figures obtained by the previous elections shows a drastic decrease of participation by this group of voters.



The situation is already known to the state authorities, which have fully understood the importance of this issue. Promotion of young people participation in electoral processes has been listed among the main objectives of the Albanian institutions in the framework of the implementation of youth addressed policies. On this regard the “National Youth Strategy” dedicates an entire chapter to the importance of participation of young people in the electoral processes.

The main reasons for the low participation of young people in electoral processes are to be attributed to:

- The low interest shown by this age-group toward politics, which doesn't seem able to provide for satisfactory alternatives of development (as long as the ballot-paper does not provide for a space where people can express their will to abstain, non taking part in the voting process can be interpreted as an individual protest against politics),
- Gaps in the civic education of young voters.

- The lack of necessary information for young voters, related to voting procedures or other electoral related issues.

In order to contrary the phenomena of non-participation it is much important that all political, institutional and social stakeholders show a general engagement to operate in a coordinated manner. All the above-mentioned stakeholders must become active actors to prevent the abstaining of youngsters from the political life of the country.

All these actors must understand the importance of the topic and undertake concrete steps, which would aim at:

- Higher level of trust towards politics by youngsters;
- Higher confidence of youngsters on the power of their vote as an instrument to provide changes.
- The involvement of youngsters in the process of drawing strategies and development policies.
- The creation of the necessary spaces for youngsters to participate in the political life.
- The improvement of the information related to electoral matters and the instruments to transmit such information.
- The promotion of integration of the educational programs within the state educational system.

Actually the voters' education in Albania is being implemented only by the Central Electoral Commission and some NGOs.

The activity of the CEC Albania refers to the Albanian Electoral Code, which according to the 29th article, states that the CEC among other duties should "...implement educational programs for the electors".

2003 ELECTIONS EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM

The educational program implemented by the CEC Albania on the framework of the local elections of October 2003 was an important initiative addressed to different groups of population, among which a special attention was paid to first time voters. This informal education program was supported financially by the Albanian government and international foundations as well.

The aim of the education program has been to raise the voters' awareness to participate on the voting process and to express their will on the governing system.

A special target group has been the Albanian citizens that currently live out of Albania. Addressing to Albanian citizens abroad has been a small part of the education program, nevertheless CEC has applied also addressing to this group taking into consideration the fact that 500.000 Albanians live abroad and the only possibility for them to cast their votes is to come by themselves at the polling stations.

To implement the education program CEC has used the classic instruments:

- TV & Radio spots (there were 23 local and national TV stations and 4 national radio stations involved in the campaign);
- Ticker adds;
- Articles in the written media (16 newspapers, two of which published abroad were involved);
- Posters, which were placed in the main streets and squares of all the Albanian cities;
- Leaflets, which were distributed by voluntaries to schools and public places;
- Banderols, which were placed in the streets of the main cities of Albania;
- Promotional items (pens, blouses, caps, plastic bags) with logo;
- Educational video on voting procedures;
- CEC web page, which during the electoral period was visited by 96.324 web navigators;



A peculiarity of the program was an imaginary character named “GISHTO”¹, who was used to identify the entire campaign. This character is very popular in Albania so it has been used to facilitate the communication with the target groups.

CEC has involved in the implementation of the education program local government, schools, local media, youth organizations, etc.

We think that formal education remains a very potent mean in addressing youngsters. In the Albania educational system should be operated the proper interventions so that elements of the electoral process could be included in the framework of the actual academic curricula’s or newly approved ones. CEC Albania is moving into this direction with the intent to draw a project where the Ministry of Education of Albania will also be included as a partner.

A special attention will also be paid to the informal education. We think that combination of entertaining, social and cultural activities with elements of informal education is the key, which would let to naturally enter in the youngster’s community and to bring them near the electoral processes.

Making use of popular and sportive events, exhibitions, concerts and other such activities would make possible that our messages could be easier to understand by youngsters.

¹ “Gishto” means “finger”. The name derives by the shape of the character, which if seen in profile looks like a finger.

To conclude, I want to say that it would not be of surprise that CEC Albania identifies the education program for the next elections with a slogan such "If you say to them (youngsters) you have to vote, if you want to attend the concert, **THEY WILL VOTE**".