

EUROPE & EURASIA

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

by Lisa N. Blonder and Adriatik Mema

Over its 15 years, IFES has a proven track record of deepening new democracies by building local, professional associations of election officials. Examples of these successes include the Association of Central and Eastern European Election Officials (ACEEEO) and the Association of Election Officials in Bosnia and Herzegovina (AEOBiH). IFES is now collaborating with the Albanian Central Election Commission (CEC) to create an association of election officials to professionalize electoral processes in Albania. These institutions are effective because they promote open and transparent elections while concurrently fostering civic participation and professional development at the local level.

Although significant progress has been made in the administration of elections in Albania, particularly at the CEC level, problems at the local level continue. International monitoring reports on the last parliamentary and local elections identified local commissions as the primary source of administrative problems, mainly political party pressure on local commissions. This partisanship, which has obstructed the electoral process in the past, demonstrates a lack of training and will to adhere to CEC decisions and instructions.

In the IFES 2001 Nationwide Survey of Zone and Local Government Election Officials, 84% of more than 3000 interviewed officials felt that an association was necessary in Albania. Their positive responses and readiness to participate highly encouraged IFES and the CEC to fully support the establishment of the association.

The association promotes the principles of independence and impartiality of election commissions and their members; integrity, public service and commitment to democratic processes; and civic participation by citizens, political parties, candidates and non-partisan organizations in order

to ensure free and fair elections in Albania. Professional development at the local level coupled with discussion and information about election law, administrative procedures, technologies and voter education are among the mechanisms used to promote public confidence in the election process and in election results.



The association's first newsletter, *BOTA E ZGJEDHJEVE (Election World)*, was distributed to 3,800 local officials through the twelve Prefecture-level association branches and has been well received. Articles discussed IFES Albania, the structure and activities of the CEC as well as its strategic plan for the local elections in 2003, and international organizations like OSCE and ODIHR. A special section highlighted such international practices as the UK's centralized counting process and Bosnia's association for election officials, AEOBiH.

Political party interference delayed the launch of the first national meeting, underscoring the essential need for an independent, non-partisan voice in the electoral process. The opposition party resisted participating, realizing that an association would mean less direct influence over the actions of its party representatives on local commissions. It was exactly this type of impasse that IFES sought to overcome. The shifting political climate in Albania, towards cooperation between the majority and opposition parties, can only have a positive impact on this initiative.

It is clear that the future political development of Albania depends on the professional development and training of commission members, so that they realize that their duties to the democratic process take precedence over party loyalties. It takes time, but it is not impossible.

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February: U.S. rescues Mexico's economy with \$20 billion aid program.

September: Israelis and Palestinians sign interim agreement on West Bank and Gaza.



November: Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin is slain by Jewish extremist at peace rally.

November: Nigeria hangs writer Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other minority rights advocates.



December: Combatants sign Bosnia peace treaty.

1995

IFES establishes joint venture with IRI and NDI to create CEPPS, USAID's Consortium on Elections and Political Processes.

IFES develops a poll-worker handbook in Russian and trains 93,000 poll workers throughout the Russian Federation.

IFES provides assistance to Haiti's Provisional Electoral Council for the historic elections that followed the restoration of democracy.



IFES launches survey research with public opinion surveys in Russia and Ukraine.