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NETWORK

The 2023 local
elections
in Albania:

WOMEN REPRESENTATION IN THE DIGITAL MEDIA

Tirana, 2023

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1.
INTRODUCTION

The Internet and social media have become integral parts of our lives and have a crucial impact on the information we receive and disseminate. The Internet is the dominant source of information and social media is the main communication channel, particularly since the 2021 pandemic situation created by the COVID-19 novel coronavirus. However, social media channels are not only important tools of communications. They often influence, reflect and reinforce gender stereotypes, particularly toward women in the public sphere.

Gender stereotypes are generalized views or preconceptions about the attributes, characteristics, or roles that are, or ought to be possessed by, or performed by, women and men. Gender stereotypes are harmful when they limit women's and men's professional careers.[1] The Internet and social media, with their lack of regulation and algorithmic-based structure, provide fertile ground to reinforce gender stereotypes and bias.

Gender bias online is as harmful as ever. The gender bias that we see online is a reflection of the gender bias in society. Women in politics are particularly frequent targets of online hate speech, abuse and disinformation, often disseminated through fake stories and decontextualized images. Since the parliamentary elections in Albania in 2021, there have been no major changes in the representation of women in politics, and sexist and derogatory language toward women candidates continues.

Even though the participation of women in politics is governed by quota systems, which require political parties to include at least 30 per cent of the less-represented gender in their candidates' lists, in Albania women remain underrepresented in leadership positions, especially at local levels (out of 61 municipalities, only seven will be represented by female mayors).[2] In such contexts, gender equality is used as a tool to achieve certain political goals.

Previous research has revealed a gender bias in the amount and type of coverage allotted to women candidates in the media,[3] and a high percentage of women candidates have reported that they face slander and fall victim to fake news (55.56 per cent). Online abuse on the Internet and in social media often is followed by intimidation and violence in the physical world, including threats, damage to property and physical violence. Research shows that derogatory language or

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[1] Definition by United Nations Human Rights, available at: https://www.ohchr.org/en/women/gender-stereotyping accessed on June 2023.

[2] Central Election Commission (2023). Results of Local Elections in Albania: https://iemis.kqz.gov.al/results2023/results2023.htm

[3] BIRN Albania (2021). Gender and Politics: Coverage of 2021 parliamentary election campaign in the Albanian online media.

the dissemination of fake news in social media with sexual undertones more often target women in politics than their male counterparts.[4]

The coverage of women in the 2023 local elections in Albania was similar to that observed by BIRN in the 2021 parliamentary elections.[5]

During the campaign leading up to the May 14 2023 elections, news portals in Albania focused on male candidates and political party leaders.[6] Women candidates had far fewer opportunities to be promoted and received less coverage in the media, which mainly focused on the personal life of the candidate as opposed to her professional achievements, and other so-called "soft" issues.[7]

In conclusion, we can state that data show that women political candidates face challenges with their representation in the media and lower rates of general media presence, which affects public opinion. Derogatory language is routinely used on social media towards women candidates. These issues can discourage the political ambitions of women and their participation in the political sphere in Albania. This also negatively affects their chances of being entrusted with positions of decision-making power on the economy, domestic and foreign policy, etc.

Albanian local elections, May 14 2023

Albania held local elections on May 14 2023. The result was a landslide win for the Socialist Party of Prime Minister Edi Rama, which won 53 of the mayoral races in a total of 61 municipalities. Out of 144 mayoral candidates running in these elections, 15 were women. Seven of these women candidates, all members of the Socialist Party, were elected as mayors. The lists for city councils had 23,636 candidates, half of whom, based on the provisions of the electoral code, were women. Voter participation in these elections was lower than in previous contests. Turnout as reported by the Central Electoral Commission was 38.2 per cent of the electorate.

[4] Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination, (2022). Violence against Women in Politics, available at: https://portavendore.al/2022/04/20/studimi-per-dhunen-ndaj-grave-ne-politike-partia-eshte-burimi-kryesor-i-dhunes/ accessed on June 2023.

[5] Albanian Women's Empowerment Network, (2021). Women and Media Coverage During Election Campaign 2021. Available at: https://www.wfd.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/WFD_Women-and-Media-Coverage_Elections-2021.pdf accessed on June 2023

[6] "The campaign was dominated by party leaders", VOA: Women candidates, only 11 per cent of the media presence https://politiko.al/english/e-tjera/fushata-u-dominua-nga-kryetaret-e-partive-voa-grate-kandidate-vetem-11-t-i482361 accessed on June 2023.

[7] Tahsini, I. & Duci, V. (2022). Women and Politics: Coverage of 2021 Parliamentary Election Campaign in the Albanian Online Media. Available at: https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40609-022-00248-5, accessed on June 2023.

Aim and objectives of the report

The aim of this report is to provide a comprehensive assessment of online media and social media coverage of the political discourse and portrayal of women, both as political candidates and as voters, during the 2023 local election campaign in Albania. In this regard, the main two objectives of this research are:

- To assess the online media/social media coverage of women candidates;

- To explore women's portrayal in the online media/ social media as political candidates and as voters, through a gender perspective.

Methodological Note

A quantitative and qualitative analysis of social media was employed for the purposes of the study. Media content analysis was based on the following steps:

To analyze the social media activity of women mayoral candidates in the May 14 2023 local elections, BIRN used Crowdtangle, a tool owned by Meta, the parent company of Facebook. Historical data on the interactions of posts from 14 women mayoral candidates who have public Facebook pages were collected for the campaign period, April 14-May 12.

Fifteen women candidates ran in the local elections. However, Pranvera Rizaj, candidate of the Democratic Party for the municipality of Patos, did not have a public Facebook page. As a result, only the content of 14 pages was analyzed.

The data were downloaded in an Excel database and analyzed through pivot tables. In order to understand the interactions of the candidates' posts on Facebook during the elections, BIRN Albania analyzed 1,276 Facebook posts based on the following metrics.

- Type

- Total page Interactions

- Video views

- Page overperformance score

- Post interactions

- Post overperformance score

On Instagram, 13 public accounts of women candidates for mayor were identified and historical data for the local election period were collected. The historical data for a total of 618 Instagram posts were downloaded and analyzed through pivot tables based on the following metrics.

- Type

- Total page interactions

- Page overperformance score

- Post interactions

- Video views

- Post overperformance score

The data on spending on political ads on Facebook and Instagram by the women candidates for mayor in the local elections were downloaded from Facebook Ads Library.

To analyze the online media, a list of relevant 34 webpages of online and legacy media outlets was identified, including 15 portals, seven TV stations and eight newspapers. The list of all the selected media can be found in Annex I of this report.

Using the online application SentiOne, a full list of articles published online by the selected media during the 30-day electoral campaign (April 14–May 12) was extracted in an Excel database. The article database was further filtered through the use of key research terms on elections and gender, developed by the research team;

The final database, including 5,950 articles, underwent further content analysis, excluding articles that had multiple republications. Major categories and sub-categories of the included articles were derived after several readings of the final articles.

2.
FINDINGS

This chapter summarizes the findings from the quantitative and qualitative monitoring of the online and social media during the 2023 local election campaign in Albania.

2.1. Online and social media coverage of women candidates

This session brings together quantitative findings of the monitoring of online and social media conducted by BIRN Albania during the campaign for the 2023 local elections under a gender perspective. Due to differences in the number and characteristics of the candidates running in this election, the data cannot be compared with the findings of research published by BIRN on the 2021 parliamentary elections. However, they provide important results and data, which can be used to evaluate the situation in future electoral contests.

2.1.1. Online media coverage

During the local election campaign, BIRN Albania monitored 34 of the main online media outlets in the country during the official campaign period, from April 14 to May 12, 2023. The monitored media outlets included the online pages of eight television stations, six newspapers and 20 digital native media outlets, otherwise referred to as news portals.

Through the coding of a random sample of 20 per cent of the articles published by these media outlets related to the election campaign (n=5,950), BIRN Albania evaluated that most of them were related to coverage of the statements of the candidates in the elections or the main political actors in the country (49.29 per cent) and to a small extent they included independent coverage of the electoral campaign by the media outlets themselves (10.19 per cent). The rest of the articles belong to other categories, such as coverage of the electoral process, administrative activities of the central government structures, poll results or televised debates related to the elections, as well as opinions/comments or editorials written by the monitored media outlets.

After coding over 3,500 articles published by these online media outlets on the coverage of political statements and articles that included campaign coverage of the political actors, the data showed a pronounced gender-based disparity. They showed that only 2.52 per cent of political statements covered by the media belonged to women candidates and political leaders, while 97.48 per cent belonged to their male colleagues.

The gender gap in the coverage of election campaign activities by the media itself was slightly smaller, with 5.35 per cent of the articles focusing on female politicians and 94.65 per cent of them focusing on male political actors. However, the percentage of coverage of the women candidates in online media during the electoral campaign is still smaller than the percentage of their representation of in the lists of candidates for mayors (9.7 per cent) and as members of municipal councils (50 per cent).

Chart 1: Percentage of articles on political statements and coverage of campaign activities by gender of the political actor portrayed
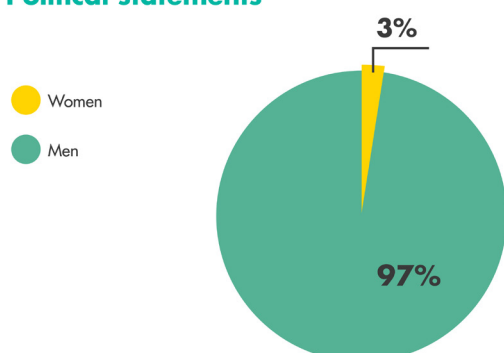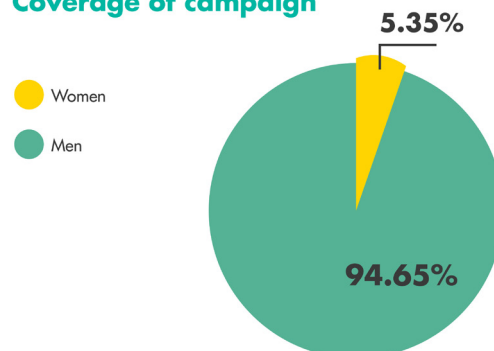
When analyzed in greater detail, by the category of articles monitored, the study data showed changes in the gender gap in reporting between the main groups of online media and specific media.

The most important differences between the types of media are identified in the category of articles on the coverage of election campaign activities; the 20 monitored news portals dedicated 7.42 per cent of the articles in this category to women candidates, compared to 4.49 per cent of articles in the online pages of newspaper and only 1.85 per cent of articles published on the online pages of the main television stations.

	Political statement		
	Televisions	Newspapers	Portals
Women	2.76%	2.10%	2.54%
Men	97.24%	97.90%	97.46%

	Mbulimi i fushatës		
	Televisions	Newspapers	Portals
Women	1.85%	4.49%	7.42%
Men	98.15%	95.51%	92.58%

A bigger variation was observed among specific media in each of the categories, with the proportion of articles on women candidates ranging from 0 per cent to 8.08 per cent in the category of political statements, and from 0 per cent to 17.65 per cent in the category of articles covering electoral campaign activities. Detailed data for each monitored media can be found in Annex I of this report.

From analysis of the political actors covered by online media, it may be noted that an important factor affecting the gender gap in campaign coverage was the heavy concentration of coverage on the leaders of the three main political entities (political parties and a coalition) and their candidates in the municipality of Tirana. They registered more than 80 per cent of the articles on political statements and about 56 per cent of the articles on the campaign coverage during the 2023 local elections.

2.1.2. Facebook campaign

During the campaign for the May 14 local elections in Albania, BIRN was able to identify 14 public pages of women candidates for mayors, which were used to distribute content and messages on political events, meetings of the candidate with the electorate and interest groups or direct communications with voters on policies, programs and other aspects encountered on the campaign trail.

Of the 14 Facebook pages taken in analysis, four were categorized as the Facebook page of a "politician", one as a "political candidate", eight as a natural "person" and one page was categorized as a "digital creator" on Facebook. Ten of these pages were administered by admins located in Albania while for four pages the location of the administrator was not listed in Crowdtangle data.

Eleven of the 14 Facebook pages of women mayoral candidates included either a description of the candidate as an incumbent-political candidate or her political affiliation. The oldest page was created in 2011; most of the pages were created between 2014 and 2022. This suggests that most of the candidates were public personalities before running for mayor in the 2023 local elections. Apart from incumbents, the list also included former opposition MPs running for mayor.

During the 30-day electoral campaign, these women candidates posted a total 1,276 times on Facebook. These included six different formats of Facebook posts, including links to an article or webpage, live video broadcasts, pre-recorded videos, photos, statuses with text and links to a YouTube video. The most recurrent format were photos – 61 per cent of the posts – followed by pre-recorded videos – 28 per cent of the posts – and live broadcasts – 9 per cent of the posts.

During the campaign period, the Facebook accounts of the 14 women mayoral candidates registered a total of 801,477 interactions with their followers. The most interactive type of content posted by the women candidates were photos, with 65 per cent of the total interactions on Facebook,

followed by videos, with 27 per cent of interactions, and live broadcasts, accounting for 7 per cent of the total. In total, the 14 Facebook pages of women candidates for mayors registered nearly 7.9 million video views on Facebook, 51 per cent of which came from live broadcasts.

Interactions

- Link
- Live Video Complete
- Native Video
- Photo
- Status
- YouTube

0% — 1% 1%

7%

26%

65%
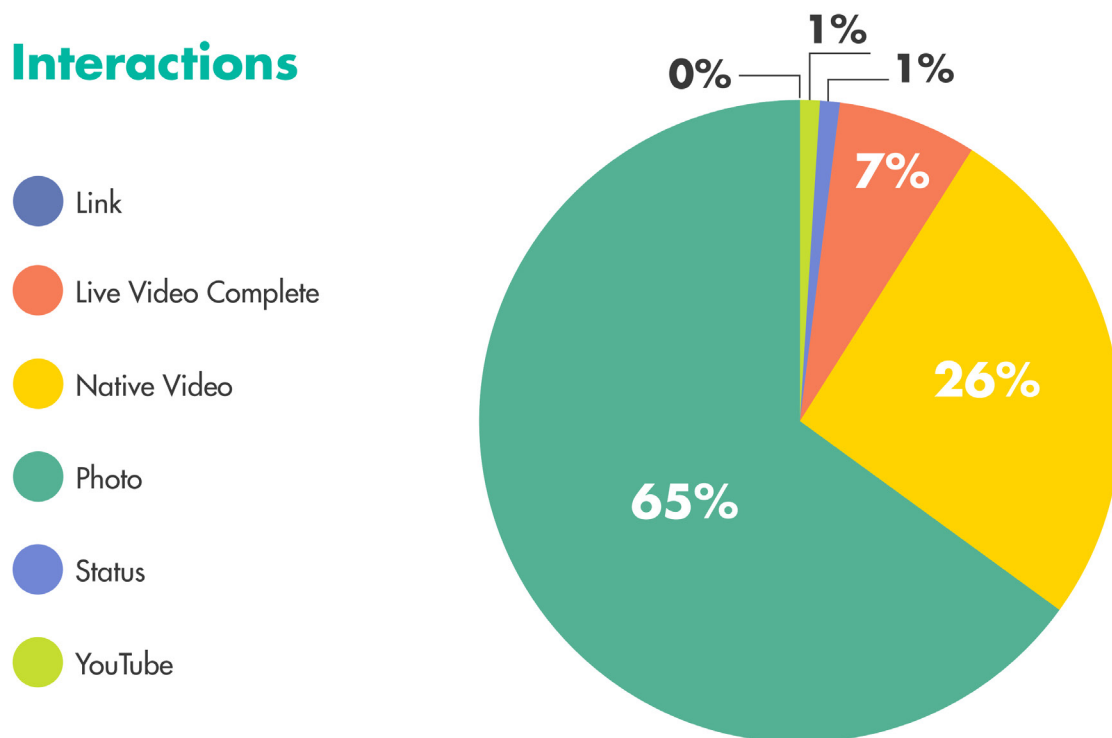
The candidate with most interactions on her Facebook page during the electoral campaign was the mayor of Durres, Emiriana Sako. She registered 30 per cent of the total interactions of the 14 women candidates on Facebook. She was followed by Eriselda Sefa, the incumbent mayor of Lushnja and by Ledina Aliolli, candidate of the "Together we win" opposition coalition for the municipality of Korca. The high cumulative interaction rate of the three candidates was not only due to their own popularity on social media but also to the fact that they were running in large population centres and other mitigating factors. To measure their performance during the electoral campaign on social media compared to their previous posts on Facebook, BIRN Albania also analyzed their overperformance score.

Five of the women candidates' pages had a cumulative overperformance score on their posts that was positive during the election period. Nine had a cumulative overperformance score that was negative. If the overperformance score is positive, it means that their posts during the election period were more interactive than the benchmark set by earlier posts on the page. The candidate with the best cumulative overperformance score was the mayor of Durres, Sako, from the ruling Socialist Party. She had an overperformance score of 290.91, which means that her posts during the elections were far more interactive than the previous benchmark of posts of her Facebook page. The second was Majlinda Shqalsi Cara, incumbent mayor of Kurbin in northern Albania and also a candidate for the Socialist Party. The third was Ledina Alolli.

Sako's popularity on Facebook during the campaign was boosted by the regular presence of Prime Minister Edi Rama, the Socialist Party leader. According to Crowdtangle data, six of her ten most overperforming posts on her Facebook page were cross-posted videos from the Facebook account of Prime Minister Rama, which has more than 1.6 million followers. Meanwhile, Cara's and Alolli's performance was more "organic", generated mainly from the popularity of posts from their pages.

The most popular posts of the women candidates on Facebook during the campaign did not necessarily include political messaging. The top post was a video that received more than 198,000 views and 8.4,000 interactions, published by the mayor of Lushnja, Eriselda Sefa. The video included a kid singing a song of the late Albanian singer Vace Zela while standing side-by-side with the candidate and with Socialist Party MP Taulant Balla. At the end of the video, the two politicians simply say "bravo" and Balla kisses the young artist on the cheek. The second most interactive post was an announcement by the mayor of Durres, Sako, on the agreement signed between the UK football club Manchester City and the municipality to hold a youth football academy in the city. The third most popular post was a brochure by the opposition candidate for the city of Korca, Ledina Alolli, containing her main campaign promises.

Two of the most-viewed videos posted by the 14 candidates were shared live broadcasts of an interview given by Prime Minister Rama on the show "Top Story" on Top Channel TV. The third most-viewed video post was posted by Valbona Kola, incumbent and mayoral candidate of the Socialist Party for the town of Klos in northern Albania. The video was also shared from the Facebook page of the Prime Minister. It shows an electoral event of the candidate with the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister, Belinda Balluku, at which a group of women, dressed modestly and wearing white veils, dance with Rama to the tune of some folk music. Nine out of the ten most-watched videos from women candidates during the election campaign were cross-shares from Rama's popular Facebook page, which is amplified by his supporters. Rama's interaction/video views on his Facebook page have drawn controversy in the past as not being organic and in breach of the social networks' rules. Critics maintain that he artificially boosts their reach by having coordinated shares and comments from his supporters and public administration employees, which are synchronised through an application called "akt1vist".
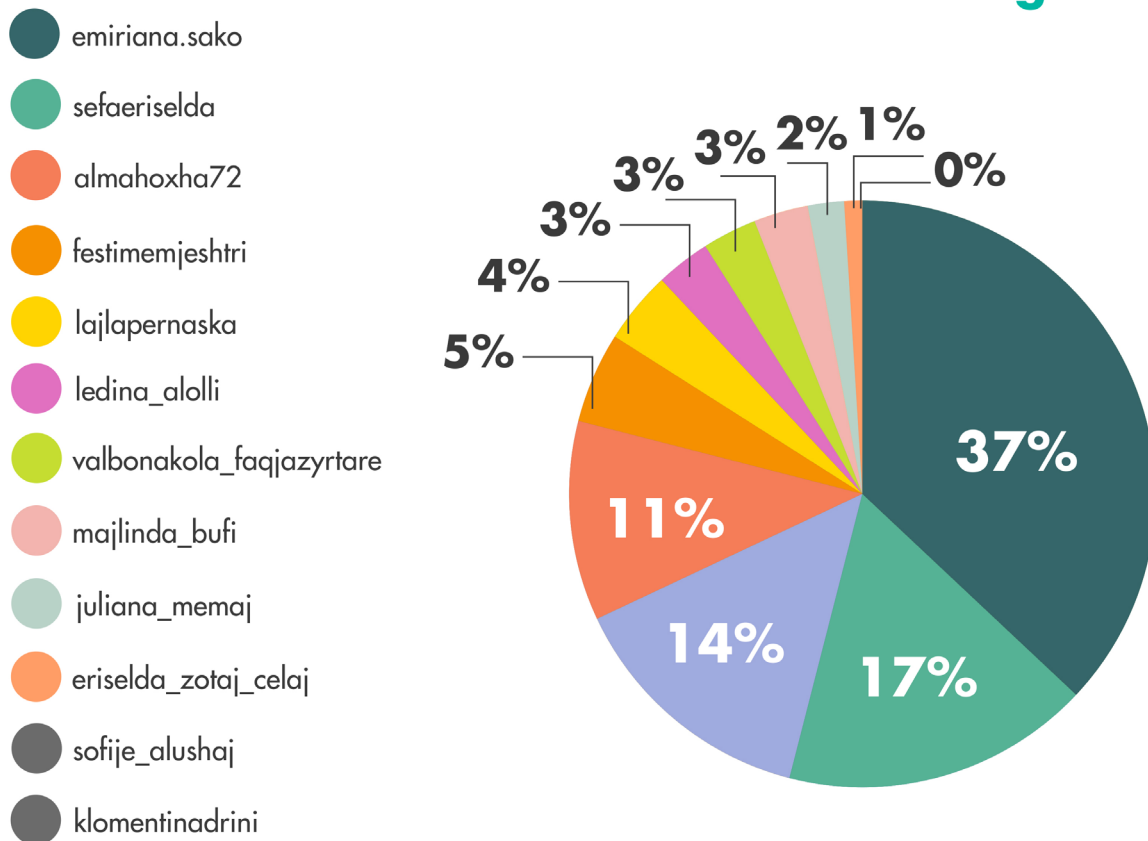
2.1.3. Instagram campaign

Out of the 15 women candidates running for mayor in the 2023 local elections in Albania, 12 used Instagram as a platform to promote their electoral activities and political views. These 12 accounts made a total 618 posts during the campaign, 52 per cent less than on Facebook, which confirms the latter as the primary social network for political communication in the country. On average, the women candidates made 52 posts each during the campaign on Instagram. The candidate with most posts leading up to the May 14 elections was the mayor of Lushnja, Eriselda Sefa, with a total of 118 posts. The candidate who posted least was the Democratic Party candidate for the municipality of Vau i Dejes, Klomentina Drini, who made a total of nine posts.

The 12 Instagram accounts of women candidates for mayor in the local elections registered a total 200,144 interactions with followers on Instagram. According to Crowdtangle data, 68 per cent of the posts were photo albums, 28 per cent were photos and 2 per cent were videos. Albums registered 74 per cent of interactions on Instagram while photos accounted for 28 per cent of the interactions and videos 1 per cent. Crowdtangle does not collect data on Instagram reels.

The account with most interactions on Instagram was Durres mayor Sako's, with nearly 37 per cent of the total interactions registered by women candidates in the elections. She was followed by Eriselda Sefa, with 17 per cent of the total and by the mayor of Permet, Alma Hoxha, with 14 per cent of interactions. Only three out of 12 accounts on Instagram posted videos, with a total of 9,580 views; 80 per cent of these were registered by Eriselda Zotaj Celaj, candidate of the Democratic Party in the city of Fier.

Interactions on Instagram

- emiriana.sako
- sefaeriselda
- almahoxha72
- festimemjeshtri
- lajlapernaska
- ledina_alolli
- valbonakola_faqjazyrtare
- majlinda_bufi
- juliana_memaj
- eriselda_zotaj_celaj
- sofije_alushaj
- klomentinadrini

Apart from the interactions on Instagram, Crowdtangle data were downloaded on the total "overperformance score" of these accounts for the posts made during the election period. Nine of the Instagram accounts of the women mayoral candidates had a positive overperformance score, while three of them had a negative score. The biggest cumulative overperformance score (1,184) was registered by the account of Alma Hoxha, mayor of Permet.

2.1.4. Ad spending on social media

Nine of the 15 women candidates in the May 14 elections ran political ads on Facebook and Instagram during the campaign period. In total, they ran 221 political ads and spent more than $11,456 US, or almost 13 per cent of all the ad spending on Meta by all candidates in the elections. The woman candidate for mayor who spent most was Sako, who ran 87 ads and spent $6,981 US. She was followed by Ledina Alolli who spent $2,312 US and by Lajla Pernaska, from the Party for Unity, Democracy and Integration, who ran for mayor of Tirana with 31 ads on Facebook and Instagram. She spent $1,046 US on these ads.

Ad spending on social media
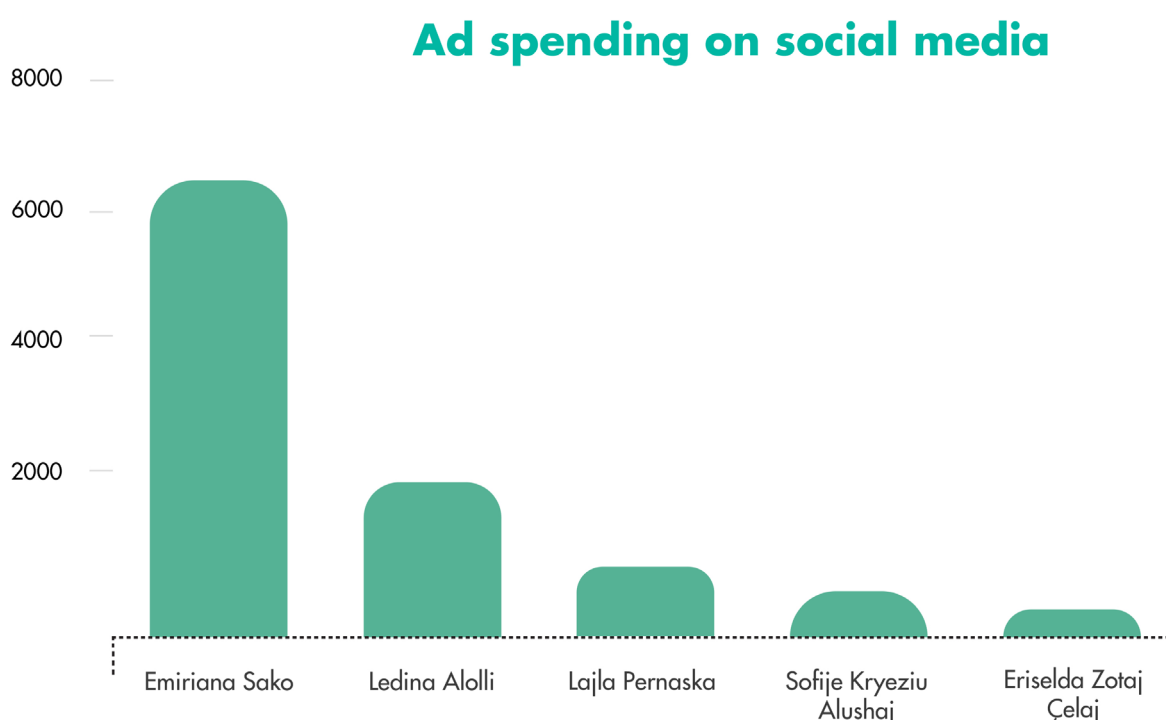
2.2. Portrayal of women political candidates – subject of gender stereotypes

This section summarizes the data from the qualitative analysis of the selected articles on online media and social media posts on women candidates and on women as voters.

2.2.1. Women as political candidates

The narrative of political communication related to women candidates in these elections did not change substantially in comparison to previous electoral contests. The data from the monitoring show that women candidates in the May 14 elections were the subject of gender stereotyping.

Qualitative data show that besides having less online media coverage than men, the narratives towards women candidates still portrayed gender roles and stereotypes.

Women candidates for public office were either portrayed as "strong", with masculine traits, or used the more traditional image, of a fragile woman with more feminine traits, such as caring, sensitivity, kindness, etc.

a. Personal vs political life

As opposed to their male counterparts, very few women candidates in the 2023 local elections were panel speakers in TV political debates and shows. When women political candidates were invited to be part of morning or evening shows, their family status and family relationships were discussed. When discussing a woman candidate, the fact that she is a "*mother and has a privileged role*"[8] was also mentioned.

The women political candidate promoted themselves often as "strong women" while underlining that apart from their role as politicians they also fulfil the more traditional role of a mother: "*Being a mother of four children and in charge of the municipality is a big responsibility…*"[9]

b. Discussions of women political candidates – 'soft' issues

There is sufficient evidence in literature about the association of women political candidates with "soft issues" like health, children, education, etc., as opposed to "hard" issues like justice, crime or defence. Evidence of this gendered orientation of women political candidates was present in the meetings of political candidates where the main issues of concern often related to children's education, youth, health and employment.

From the monitoring of the content of posts on the Facebook pages of the women candidates, a common trend of "*a coffee with women in…*" [10] was identified, where the candidate posted photos of their meetings over coffee with female voters in their area, listening to their problems. Male candidates were rarely photographed in meetings with women and girls; these were often presented as an opportunity to gain some input on their program from the other gender.[11]

It is worth mentioning that violence against women, gender equality, promoting education of

[8] https://www.standard.al/2023/04/27/ledina-alolli-do-bejme-termoizolimin-e-te-gjithe-pallateve-dhe-banesave-ne-korce-ne-fokus-zhvillimi-ekonomik-bujqesia-dhe-turizmi/

[9] https://ata.gov.al/2023/05/15/cuci-fituam-si-alternativa-me-e-mire-per-te-cuar-perpara-beratin/

[10] Facebook post: https://www.facebook.com/100083839698773/posts/210110655126923 accessed on June 2023

[11] https://kohajone.com/kandidati-bejko-takim-me-grate-dhe-vajzat-nenat-kryefamiljare-rimbursim-100-per-kredite-per-strehim/

young girls, received minimal attention from either women or men political candidates, even though they are very concerning phenomena in Albania that affects the life of many women.

c. Women political candidates 'behaving like men'

Voters and political actors expect women and men to behave in a certain way. As was mentioned above, most of the women political candidates organized meetings based on "soft" issues such as tourism,[12] services,[13] and the economic empowerment of women[14] . On the other hand, in one electoral meeting, the Prime Minister described one of the female candidates as "three men".[15] He lauded her aggressive way of leading; as he specified: "She yells before someone says 'Good morning.'" [16]

Leadership is seen as a male domain.[17] This gender stereotype was quite present during the electoral campaign. Eight of the 15 women who ran for mayoral office in Albania won. The dominant headline in the online media was: "Eight 'iron' women won against men in the local elections in Albania"[18]

d. Interaction between party leaders and political candidates

It was common in the electoral campaign for leaders of political parties to present the respective political candidates at meetings with the electorate. Women candidates often were presented as respectful family women who had contributed to their communities and were thus a natural choice/candidate for the party. For example, the leader of the Freedom Party introduced a woman candidate as a "*real lady*" and addressed her using her academic title "*Professor*".[19]

In another example, the leadership of an incumbent mayor in the municipality of Durres was juxtaposed from the Socialist Party leader Rama with her male predecessor, to underline that she

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[12] https://kohajone.com/emiriana-sako-durresi-qytet-i-paster-turistet-e-pelqejne-bregdetin-dhe-qytetin/

[13] https://www.standard.al/2023/04/30/meta-projekti-i-termoizolimit-te-banesave-i-ledina-aliollit-i-sherben-te-gjithe-korces-ul-kostot/

[14] https://www.facebook.com/100061293326784/posts/673913327995105

[15] https://top-channel.tv/2023/05/23/rama-falenderon-qytetaret-ne-lezhe-e-kurbin-jam-i-prekur-per-fitoren-ne-bashki-te-diskutueshme-kemi-pergjegjesi-te-madhe/

[16] https://top-channel.tv/2023/05/23/rama-falenderon-qytetaret-ne-lezhe-e-kurbin-jam-i-prekur-per-fitoren-ne-bashki-te-diskutueshme-kemi-pergjegjesi-te-madhe/

[17] Child Rights Center, (2020). Leadership Seen as a Male Domain – A Stereotype That Ought To Be Broken. Available at: https://www.crc.cnlu.ac.in/post/leadership-seen-as-a-male-domain-a-stereotype-that-ought-to-be-broken, accessed on June 2023.

[18] https://www.gazetaexpress.com/8-grate-e-hekurta-qe-fituan-perballe-burrave-ne-zgjedhjet-vendore-ne-shqiperi/

[19] https://www.balkanweb.com/korca-e-meriton-te-drejtohet-nga-nje-zonje-si-ledina-aliolli-meta-dhe-noka-takime-ne-korce-pune-intensive-per-nje-fitore-bindese/

was tougher than him. In one interview, he called the candidate as "the mayor of the earthquake"[20], bringing to attention that this woman mayor took over the management of Durres municipality after the resignation of her male predecessor in 2020.

At one electoral meeting, the Socialist leader used epithets towards a woman candidate, calling her "a watermelon that has been tested for being ripe", which according to Rama was a reason why citizens should vote for her.[21] In the electoral campaign, offensive language was also used by party leaders towards opponent women candidates, such as "*drugs godmother*".[22]

e. How women candidates portray themselves

The monitoring of online and social media reveals that women political candidates often used terms that emphasized their traditional roles as a wives and mothers. In this way they showed themselves as more emotional, empathic and more suitable to run the municipality. For example, in one interview, a woman candidate said: "*Every woman who becomes a mother, after becoming a mother she can carry even more load and responsibility…*" or: "*I first do it for my children who are born and raised in this city, automatically I do it for all the children of the city…*"[23].

Being unambitious and non-conflictual are portrayed as women's traits. Both these presumed traits were on display in this electoral campaign. "*I had no ambition to become mayor*", was one of the headlines of the online media, taken from a female candidate's interview. [24] Also, in a Facebook reaction[25] to her political rival, one woman candidate pointed out: "*I am not a politician and I have never seen politics as a confrontation between people.*"

In the 2023 electoral campaign, women candidates were portrayed also as being "used" by political party leaders, or by other men political candidates. One woman political candidate was described by an opposition member of parliament as an "*executor of the orders*" of her party leader.[26] The candidacy of a woman for mayor was seen as "imposed" and that her name on the ballot was of interest to the political opponent.[27]

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[20] https://top-channel.tv/2023/04/22/kryebashkiakja-e-termetit-emirjana-sako-rrefen-per-jeten-dhe-per-misionin-ne-podcast-in-e-rames-me-thate-merr-nje-krevat-dhe-fli-ne-bashki/

[21] http://gazetashqiptare.al/2023/04/24/emiriana-sako-eshte-shalqi-prove-rama-nga-durresi-pse-marrim-nje-kumbull-qe-ka-dale-nga-zorra-qorre/

[22] https://pamfleti.net/politike/berisha-akzua-te-forta-nga-fieri-bufi-ndrikull--gruaja-e-kandidati-i169785

[23] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AyVxAEea1YE accessed on June 2023.

[24] https://albeu.com/lajme/nuk-kisha-ambicie-te-behesha-kryetare-bashkie-nga-takimi-me-kryeministrin-te-sfidat-e-politikes-sako-e-zhveshur-nga-kostumi-i-kryebashkiakes/502732/

[25] https://www.facebook.com/emiriana.sako/videos/569238005279822/

[26] https://www.balkanweb.com/sako-ekzekutive-e-deshirave-te-rames-oerd-bylykbashi-fitorja-e-igli-cares-do-te-sinjalizoje-renin-e-rilindjes/

[27] https://boldnews.al/2023/04/20/lajla-pernaska-djathtistja-qe-anoi-majtas/

2.2.2. Political discourse for women as voters

Qualitative data from online outlets and social media shows a similar political discourse for women voters as in the campaign for the parliamentary elections in 2021. Women voters received attention mainly in meetings with women candidates and discussed issues such as children, migration, employment and other topics related to their future. In this electoral campaign, political leaders saw women as decision makers mostly in their home.

a. Woman equals mother/mother-to-be

Women voters were equated with their role in society as "mothers". Other dimensions of women's lives were addressed rarely during the campaign. Several meetings were posted on the Facebook pages of the women political candidates with other women drinking coffee, with the main focus on "*family protection and children's future*"[28] and referring to them as "*pride of the family*",[29] "*heart of the family*" and "*foundation stone*".[30] The meetings of male candidates with women and girls were few, and even in those meetings that took place, importance was attached to their roles as mothers.[31]

Political leaders and candidates addressed women to solicit their votes, assigning them the "power" to influence the votes of other family members. Socialist Party leader Rama at one meeting said that the Socialist Party was one of the most voted-for parties by women in Europe. Women voters are perceived as more reliable than men; one of the Socialist Party declarations said: "*The municipality is like the mistress of the house, not the master of the house, because the master of the house sometimes runs away…*"[32]

It is worth mentioning that political leaders and candidates did not seem to see women voters as independent individuals. Issues like human rights, autonomy, violence, sexism and supporting girls' education in rural areas were rarely discussed in political meetings during the campaign leading up to the local elections.

b. Equal Employment opportunities/ girls' education/ LBT community

A critical issue for women and girls is equal employment opportunities. The main challenges for women in Albania remain high levels of informality, lack of opportunities in the labour market,

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[28] https://www.facebook.com/100089372423327/posts/175648008757612

[29] https://www.facebook.com/100083839698773/posts/206295705508418

[30] https://www.facebook.com/100063954780029/posts/671897384952082

[31] https://kohajone.com/kandidati-bejko-takim-me-grate-dhe-vajzat-nenat-kryefamiljare-rimbursim-100-per-kredite-per-strehim/

[32] https://top-channel.tv/2023/05/23/rama-falenderon-qytetaret-ne-lezhe-e-kurbin-jam-i-prekur-per-fitoren-ne-bashki-te-diskutueshme-kemi-pergjegjesi-te-madhe/

lack of skilled entrepreneurs and access to services and credit.[33] The monitoring revealed a lack of discourse[34] on equal employment opportunities or the empowerment of women entrepreneurship. The candidates in the 2023 local elections provided no platforms on how this issue was going to be addressed.

The education gap between men and women is most significant in rural areas; less than one-quarter of rural women have finished secondary school compared to more than half of urban women.[35] According to an INSTAT survey, violence against women and girls is widespread in Albania, and lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LBT) women are particularly at risk.[36] Data from monitoring the online media and official social pages of the women/men political candidates during the electoral campaign shows that there was no discourse on these issues.

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[33] UN Women Albania: https://albania.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/economic-empowerment-1

[34] https://ata.gov.al/2023/04/28/sako-ne-bizneset-fason-grate-dhe-vajzat-kontributore-te-fuqishme-per-familjet-e-tyre/

[35] Gender perspectives in Albania, Gender analysis Census 2011. Available at: https://www.instat.gov.al/media/1661/gender_perspectives_in_albania.pdf accessed on June 2023

[36] INSTAT (2019). 2018 National Population Survey: Violence Against Women and Girls in Albania. Available at: https://www.instat.gov.al/media/6123/publication-violence-against-women.pdf accessed on June 2023

3.
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The content analysis of the selected articles on online media and social media of women candidates shows that women candidates in the 2023 local elections in Albania were again the subject of gender stereotyping. Besides having less online media coverage compared to men, the narratives towards women candidates still portrayed gender roles and stereotypes.

Women political candidates were associated with "soft" issues like health, children, education, etc., as opposed to "hard" issues, like justice, crime or defence. There was an underestimation of women candidates. Women's portrayed traits, as unambitious and non-conflictual, were visible in this electoral campaign. Women candidates were portrayed also as being "used" by party leaders or by other male political candidates. Offensive language was used by party leaders towards opposing women candidates.

Women voters were equated with their role in society as "mothers". Other dimensions of women's lives were addressed less. Political leaders and candidates did not see women voters as independent individuals but always as associated with their role in the family and society.

There was a lack of discourse in the campaign about equal employment opportunities and encouraging women entrepreneurship. Violence against women, gender equality, promoting education of young girl in rural areas and LBT women also received minimal attention from either women or men political candidates.

Online media self–awareness on gender stereotypes remains very low. Problematics of gender stereotypes during electoral campaigns are not reflected in online and social media discourse. Offensive, sexist and misogynistic language in the comments of social media, against women candidates, is noticeable.

The main recommendations of this report are:

- Online media, editors, journalists, researchers and fact checkers should increase their knowledge and capacity to identify and address the various gender imbalances and gaps in online and social media.

- Online media outlets and social media users should raise awareness of the threat posed by the use of insulting, sexist and misogynistic language.

- Online media articles should encourage and empower women political candidates to take senior positions and guarantee them equal narratives to men political candidates.

- Political parties should be more aware about their narratives toward women political

candidates and platforms toward women as voters, in order to enhance gender equality and social inclusion.

- In the absence of strong digital platform regulation, civil society, activists and experts must rise to the challenge and confront the threat that undermining women leaders poses to democratic values.

- Public institutions should prioritize the problem of gender-based online harassment, abuse and gender stereotypes and act in coordination with the main stakeholders in order to prevent and combat the negative impact of these issues.

- More resources should be devoted to the further understanding of dynamics such as gender stereotypes, online abuse, sexism, harmful narratives, digital rights, etc.

4.
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13. UN Women Albania: https://albania.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/economic-empowerment-1

ANNEX I:

Coverage dedicated to political actors in the 34 online media monitored divided by category of articles and gender

Monitoring period: 14 April - 12 May, 2023

Webpage of media outlet	Type of media	Political Declarations		Campaign activities	
		Women %	Men %	Women %	Men %
55news.al	Portal	0.00%	100.00%	NA*	NA
albeu.com	Portal	0.00%	100.00%	0.00%	100.00%
ata.gov.al	Portal	4.51%	95.49%	17.65%	82.35%
balkanweb.com	Portal	1.71%	98.29%	4.76%	95.24%
boldnews.al	Portal	3.85%	96.15%	0.00%	100.00%
cna.al	Portal	1.39%	98.61%	0.00%	100.00%
dritare.net	Portal	0.00%	100.00%	NA	NA
gazeta-shqip.com	Portal	5.26%	94.74%	NA	NA
hashtag.al	Portal	1.28%	98.72%	5.26%	94.74%
javanews.al	Portal	4.05%	95.95%	0.00%	100.00%
kohajone.com	Portal	1.02%	98.98%	1.02%	98.98%
lapsi.al	Portal	0.00%	100.00%	NA	NA
liberale.al	Portal	2.04%	97.96%	12.50%	87.50%
noa.al	Portal	0.00%	100.00%	NA	NA
opinion.al	Portal	0.00%	100.00%	NA	NA
politiko.al	Portal	3.30%	96.70%	0.00%	100.00%
shqiptarja.com	Portal	8.08%	91.92%	20.51%	79.49%
standard.al	Portal	4.76%	95.24%	5.26%	94.74%
tiranapost.al	Portal	0.00%	100.00%	NA	NA
tpz.al	Portal	0.00%	100.00%	7.14%	92.86%
fjala.al	Newspaper	1.61%	98.39%	0.00%	100.00%
gazetadita.al	Newspaper	0.00%	100.00%	NA	NA
gazetatema.net	Newspaper	6.76%	93.24%	4.00%	96.00%
panorama.com.al	Newspaper	0.00%	100.00%	5.00%	95.00%
sot.com.al	Newspaper	2.63%	97.37%	5.26%	94.74%
telegraf.al	Newspaper	0.00%	100.00%	NA	NA
a2news.com	TV	0.00%	100.00%	NA	NA
euronews.al	TV	5.13%	94.87%	0.00%	100.00%

faxweb.al	TV	4.55%	95.45%	0.00%	100.00%
oranews.tv	TV	4.00%	96.00%	0.00%	100.00%
syri.net	TV	2.42%	97.58%	2.67%	97.33%
top-channel.tv	TV	3.57%	96.43%	4.76%	95.24%
tvklan.al	TV	0.00%	100.00%	0.00%	100.00%
vizionplus.tv	TV	3.57%	96.43%	NA	NA
TOTAL		**2.52%**	**97.48%**	**5.35%**	**94.65%**

*Data are not available for media which have produced a small number of articles under this category.

The 2023 local elections in Albania:

WOMEN REPRESENTATION IN THE DIGITAL MEDIA